Possession

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Possession

by Nana_41175

Summary

"I seem to be suffering from delusions of being a vampire." Dr. John Watson has a new patient in hand. It seems like a straightforward case, or is it? Vampire!Sherlock/Psychiatrist!John AU fic.
Part I First Impressions

**Chinese** translations available, courtesy of **Yutrans54**, at [221D](https://www.221d.org/) and at [MT slash](http://www.mtslash.com/) (registration required). Also at [Baidu](https://www.baidu.com/).

**Italian** translation courtesy of **Ellipse**, at [EFP fanfic.net](http://www.efpfanfic.net/)

Fanart by the very talented **qunhyskoa**

Thanks so much, ladies! You're awesome!

~~~@~~~

Hello. I am new to the BBC Sherlock fandom, and this is my first fic of Sherlock and John. When I began watching the series, I thought the setting of **The Unicorn Tapestry** (part of **The Vampire Tapestry** by Suzy McKee Charnas—a classic; definitely one of the best vampire books ever published, and which will inspire the events in this story) very aptly reflected the dynamics and chemistry between Sherlock and John. I do hope you will enjoy reading this story.

~~~@~~~
**Possession [puh-zesh-uh-n]** n. Ownership; the act or fact of possessing. Control over oneself, one's mind, etc. Domination, actuation, or obsession by a feeling, idea, etc.

Origin:

1300–50; Middle English -Latin possessiōn- (stem of possessiō) occupancy, act of occupying. Past participle of possidēre, to have in one's control, occupy (and, in active sense, past participle of posīdere, to seize upon)

(Definition from www.dictionary.com)

"Why, John Watson! Is that a smile I see on your face?" Dr. Sarah Sawyer sounded disbelieving as she surveyed her friend and colleague from across the sofa in the doctors' lounge. "It's a smallish smile, but a smile nevertheless."

John cleared his throat, lowered the cup that he had been raising to his lips. He tilted his head, apparently considering the matter seriously. "I suppose it is, yes," he said after a moment.

Sarah smiled, relief clearly written on her face. "About time, too," she said. "What's brought it on? Someone new I haven't heard about?"

"Come on. Do you really think you would not have heard of anything before now if it were someone new?"

Sarah threw up her hands, laughing. "All right, all right. New case then?"

John sighed, his smile widening just a little bit more. "I know I said I wasn't going to take in new patients for a while, but remember that phone call I got from my old mate, Mike Stamford?"

"Yes. He's the dean of that college in Manchester?"

"Yes, the very same one. Well, we got to lunching a few days back, and he wanted me to take on a colleague of his as a personal favor," said John. "Well, I got a phone call this morning from said colleague to set a possible date for our first consultation, and guess how he phrased his dilemma."

"I'm all ears."

"He said, 'I seem to be suffering from delusions of being a vampire'."

"Oh, my God. He did not!"

"His exact words, I swear."

"I can see why you're keen to take the case. Thank goodness for that." Sarah paused, then in a more subdued tone: "I'm glad to see you smiling again."

John looked down at his cup, his smile thinning out. "Yes, well. There's really nowhere else to go but up, I suppose."

"John…"

"I know. I know. It's been more than nine months now, and I am finally coming around. I've stopped the medications more than a month ago. They really weren't helping."
He looked up, mouth set into a determined smile this time. "Work ought to be a better alternative," he said bracingly.

Beats of silence, then: "Sherlock."

"I'm sorry?"

"His name is Sherlock Holmes. The patient, I mean," said John. He looked at Sarah, a slight frown creasing his forehead. "Is that even a name?"

Sarah laughed. "Strange name for a strange case," she said. "Sounds like it can lead to something. An interesting diversion, at least."

John looked away. "Nothing happens to me. At least, nothing interesting. You know that."

"I don't know that, and neither do you."

"Well, we will find out soon enough," said John as he made to stand up. "He's set an appointment for one o'clock tomorrow afternoon."
Chapter 2

In the coming months and years, John Watson would think back on that day and marvel at how normal it had all been.

Bright afternoon sunshine poured in from the tall windows of his office at Baker Street, flooding the room with the light of early autumn. John had lunch at his desk (a sandwich and salad from the deli just below the clinic) and was finishing off his notes on Catherine Riley, his appointment before lunch break.

The new patient was early. Already, John could hear Mrs. Hudson's voice through the door, her usual cheerful tones becoming a bit more animated as she talked the patient through the preliminary round of chart filling and the laying down of personal information in his file. John glanced at his watch: 12:45pm.

His intercom buzzed. "Dr. Watson…"

"Yes, Mrs. Hudson. It's quite all right," he said. "Show Dr. Holmes in, please."


"Umm, where is he?" inquired John, glancing up from the empty chart toward the direction of the empty doorway.

He came in then. A tall, slender man with curling dark hair and white skin. The long dark coat that he wore seemed to flow gracefully along with his movements. He took a step into the office, and then another, the pale afternoon light catching at and illuminating his features.

He was not classically handsome, but the sharp planes and angles of his narrow face ensured that he had an interesting—even an arresting—visage. It was his eyes, though, that one was drawn to almost immediately- those pale, slanting eyes that seemed almost unearthly in their cold intensity.

He turned his head a little and murmured a soft "Thank you" as Mrs. Hudson passed by him, smiling, and quietly shut the door behind her. When he turned back to John again, John was at least ready.

"Ah, Dr. Holmes," he said, advancing with a smile and an outstretched hand.

"Sherlock, please." His grip was firm, the touch of his hand cool. John had heard his voice on the phone yesterday, of course he had. Nevertheless, the sound of it now, out here in the wide spaces of John's office, was surprisingly deep, resonant.

John gave himself a mental frown, resolutely pushing down the urge at self-analysis over the startling reaction that his new patient had elicited in him within the first few minutes of meeting.

You are far more out of practice than previously thought, he told himself grimly.

John gestured to two armchairs at the center of the room. Sherlock shrugged out of his coat, sat down with fluid ease on the chair allocated. His gaze raked through the room, at the bookshelves, on John's desk, and finally back at John as he sat down opposite Sherlock.

"I'm Dr. Watson, you can call me John if you like. As you know, Dr. Stamford recommended this consultation. Now I want you to relax, be yourself. Just tell me everything in your own time."
John saw the slim, elegant fingers of a white hand lift slowly from the wooden handle of the armchair, saw the fingers land softly back on the wood, tap tap tap. Then the low, rumbling voice drawled out, "I imagine Dr. Stamford has already filled you in with what happened in Manchester."

"Yes," John said, meeting Sherlock's gaze. "He did, to a certain extent. And you provided a bit more from your call yesterday. Perhaps you would like to begin from there?"

Sherlock opened his mouth and promptly launched into the episode surrounding his "dilemma", as he had called it.

He was not originally from Manchester; he was on loan from his college in Oxford, as part of the dream team of neuroscientists that Mike Stamford had assembled for his Neuro-Psych project. Sherlock had a PhD in neurochemical research, a job at once demanding and exhilarating, requiring long hours in the laboratory.

It was only supposed to be for a year, but Mike had somehow managed to get additional funding and the project was extended for another year. The long hours in the lab began taking their toll; he was becoming exhausted. He was not known for his interpersonal skills, was rather a perfectionist (i.e. difficult to work with), and was thus not equipped with a social circle from which he could find some respite from the pressures of work.

The first incident that apparently set off his blood hunger had been an accident in the workplace—a colleague had been careless with the scalpel and he had managed to slice a portion of his thumb off along with the specimens for dissection.

The wound had bled and bled, and it had not been enough to simply elevate the hand and press a bandage to the wound. In the end it had required stitches; but during all that time he had been helping to give first aid to his wounded colleague, all Sherlock could think about had been the bright, scarlet blood streaming down his fingers and how it would have tasted in his mouth.

John broke in: "And did you? Manage to taste or drink blood, I mean?"

A corner of Sherlock's lips twisted into a smirk. "No," he said. "You must realize, Doctor, that animal blood does not have any appeal for me. The lab specimens won't do. I wanted…"

He slid his gaze away. "I wanted to drink from a living, breathing human being," he said, voice dropping to a whisper.

John nodded, pen flying across his pad as he made notes.

Sherlock made a helpless, forlorn gesture. "From then on, it was all I could think about. I tried to quell it down and act normally. It would have turned out all right too. I was able to suppress the thoughts for hours, and even days at a time. Then the woman came along."

She turned out to be a neurologist affiliated with the University of Manchester, smart and attractive and funny. She had been assigned to the lab for a month. It was her lively intelligence that had drawn Sherlock to her, and the inevitable had happened: he had tried to act out his fantasy on this warm, beautiful woman and had been repulsed.

He had been mortified, had fled, disappeared. With that rejection, something had broken down within him. He could not be contacted for weeks. He could not bring himself to answer his emails or his phone. It was only later, much later, that he began considering the consequences of his disappearance and the impact of how things had looked. Not good was a light way of putting it. At the very least, he could be seen as a rapist, an assailant. His career, the only thing he had ever cared
about and to which he considered himself married to, would be in ruins.

"Did this woman press charges?" John wanted to know.

Sherlock shook his head. "I don't think so, no. Otherwise I would have heard from Mike."

"At the time of your…encounter, were there any witnesses?"

"I…I wasn't sure. I didn't notice."

And so he finally got in touch with Dr. Stamford, who was only too willing to take him back, provided he had his little breakdown examined and a clean bill of mental health issued. Mike had a colleague in mind who could help out, and so here he was.

"Right," said John as he finished scribbling. "And now? How will you describe the urge to take in blood now?"

"I've got to admit the entire episode at Manchester has dampened it a bit. But it's still there. I can feel it, deep down inside, ready to rear up and possess me, consume me."

John said nothing, continuing with his writing. Finally, he said, "Let's attend to the other details then, shall we? Tell me about your past history. Were there any incidents of mental upsets, any accidents, head trauma? Seizure episodes?"

None to all the above.

"Any history of depression?"

None.

"Medical history? Past surgeries?"

Nothing remarkable. Fit as a fiddle. Never operated on.

"History of smoking or alcohol or drug intake?"

He used to smoke, currently trying to kick the habit via application of nicotine patches. He drank on occasion. Drugs, back when he was younger but never anything hard.

"The drinking. How occasional is that?"

Sherlock hesitated. Then: judging from his lack of a social life, very occasional indeed.

"You keep mentioning your social life—or lack thereof. Does it bother you?"

No.

"Surely you have friends, people you hang out with."

Except for the rare office get-togethers, not really.

"Friends, then?"

Well, he supposed he could consider Mike Stamford as a friend, but it did tend to get awkward to have your boss dropping in regularly and inviting one to a pint after work, didn't it?

"Okay. How about a girlfriend?"
No. Not really his area.

John looked up. "Oh. Right," he said. "Boyfriend, then?"

Sherlock leveled him a glance from the corner of his eye.

"Which is fine, by the way," John hastened to say.

"I know it's fine," said Sherlock just as quickly.

"So…"

"No."

"Okay, so you're unattached," said John. He added reassuringly: "It's all fine."

Sherlock nodded.

*Here's the part that's not so fine*, John thought. "So there hasn't been any sexual activity for some time?"

The answer was readily given: No.

"And how do you feel about that?"

He did not think he had to feel one way or another about it.

"Was there any history of abuse—physical, emotional, sexual— as far back as you can remember?"

No.

"Tell me about your family. Where did you come from?"

He was born and raised in Oxford, to an academic family. Parents had passed away from natural causes. No other surviving relatives. No history of mental illness in the family, as far as he could remember.

It went on and on until time was up.

"One last thing," said John. "Are you sleeping well?"

"Not very," said Sherlock.

John dashed off a prescription.

"Aren't you going to give me something stronger, Doctor?" asked Sherlock as he took the piece of paper.

"As of now, no. I'd prefer that we talk some more before I prescribe anything else."

Sherlock let out a shaky sigh. "I'm not… going insane, then."

John smiled. "No. But it's very clear that you need rest. Let's just take it slow, get to the bottom of things."

Sherlock nodded.
"One other thing," said John as he checked off a series of lab tests in a request form and scribbled a referral for a physical examination. "Let's get you tested, make sure we rule out any physiologic causes to the symptoms you're experiencing."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Sherlock as he stood up and made to slip on his coat and tie his scarf around his neck.

"I'll see you next week, then," said John as they shook hands.

"Yes."

It had gotten colder outside. Stepping out of the clinic, Sherlock stood still for a minute as he let the tension drain away from him. There was a subtle shift in his posture as he straightened. His gaze sliced across the street as he turned the collar of his coat up, then started down the pavement at a leisurely pace. Around the corner was a trash bin.

Perfect.

He took out Dr. Watson's forms, crumpled them into a ball and lobbed them into the bin before hailing a passing cab.
Chapter 3

Author's Notes: The mental state examination (MSE) is an integral part of a psychiatric evaluation. This fic has not been Brit-picked, and I am not really familiar with the way a Psych evaluation is carried out in the UK. This format is based on the American version, and all mistakes are mine. There is a whole lot more to it, but I just pared the exam down to the most essential parts. Sorry if it becomes too technical at times. A glossary of psychiatric terms can be found at the end of the story.

FRCPsych stands for Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Special Thanks: To Tree Peony, for showing me how to work the strikethrough command through certain lines in this chapter. Many thanks, my dear!

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From the notes of John H. Watson, MD, FRCPsych

Mental State Examination of Sherlock Holmes, PhD (a draft):

The patient is a 35 year old male, 6 feet tall, weighing around 200 pounds. Appearance: well-groomed, clean shaven; the only feature that may be considered unkempt: the riot of dark hair which appears to be more out of aesthetic considerations rather than neglect or anything suggestive of an underlying problem. He looks healthy and alert, although there is evidence of physical exhaustion. Appears younger than his actual chronological age. The patient's physique is slim but there is no indication of any significant weight problem. The skin is very pale but otherwise has good tone. No skin lesions or dental erosions noted. Good personal hygiene: nails kept clean and short, no nicotine stains on fingers, no body odor. The patient's choice of clothing is appropriate for gender and age. The patient apparently has given careful thought to his manner of dressing: his coat is obviously expensive and the well-tailored suit, black shirt, dark trousers and well-cut shoes speak of his consideration of conventions; choice of clothes leaning toward understated elegance, not overly fashion-conscious. Apart from a wristwatch, the patient did not wear jewelry. No skin piercings, scars or tattoos on the face and neck area noted although the patient has yet to undergo a complete physical examination.

The patient exhibited good rapport and was cooperative during the initial interview. There was good eye contact and abnormal eye movements were not detected. The patient's gait and body movements were normal, even graceful. Mood: neutral to euthymic. Affect was appropriate, congruent to thought content. He directly approached the problem and exhibited appropriate reaction to certain passages of the interview. The patient did not appear overly anxious. He appears to have good insight: called his "blood hunger" a delusion from the very start. Hesitation was noted on certain parts of questioning, especially when asked about drinking habits. Judgment appears sound.

The patient's speech was spontaneous and articulate. The patient's voice was beautiful, pleasant and well-modulated; pacing was normal although a tendency to quickly ramble was noted upon being asked to describe his relations with co-workers. Thought process likewise was orderly and logical, although there is a tendency toward flight of ideas, given the apparent speed of the patient's thinking.

The patient's thought content was problematic mainly on the one delusion of vampirism, bordering
on obsession; the delusion appears to be mood-congruent. He denied experiencing hallucinations. There was no apparent suicidal or homicidal ideation (the patient spoke of drinking other people's blood, but not killing them), though impulse control is undetermined and it may be necessary to investigate the patient's thoughts on harming people by drinking their blood in future sessions.

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Personal notes (not to be included in patient's file):

SH described chief complaint in more detail and gave personal background information on first interview. Info content generally solid and appropriate. No previous history of mental illness or psychotherapy. Physical health good; finances, housing and attitude toward work all satisfactory. SH is single, never married, no children or family, no religion. Social life strictly work-related, does not appear to desire much social interaction with peers (potential problem? Uncertain at this point if behavior has antisocial or just asocial leanings). Likes to play the violin when he has time. He is clearly very intelligent, and is aware of it. Does not seem to have a problem speaking his mind, has a tendency toward sarcasm. May be a problem for people in contact with him, may need to be explored further.

Also too early to tell at this point, but SH's gaze is not exactly normal. Too intense, watchful (perhaps just wariness on first interview?), seemingly with underlying layers of meaning and emotions not shown up front (clearly a subjective observation and cannot be written down in formal report without factual evidence, but cannot help but feel there is hint of derisive amusement below those colorless depths).

Also uncertain at this point, but a general feeling persists that he is not telling the whole truth regarding his condition/situation. Not exactly lying, but more of deliberate omission of information, which probably will be cleared up in future sessions. Clearly, evaluation for sociopathy may have to be undertaken.

Alarming thought: could he be fabricating his delusion as cover-up of an actual rape attempt in Manchester, with its attendant criminal consequences? Unlikely, as his description of his vampire delusion is probably the most real aspect of entire interview.

But then, Manchester incident and details from interview do suggest sexual repression of some sort but again too soon to formulate judgment, given paucity of actual data. Note to self: must ask Mike sometime regarding what happened to the lady at the center of incident. Based on details gleaned from Mike during lunch: patient just disappeared. No clue as to where SH had gone until he contacted Mike again some weeks later. Mike may not really know underlying details of disappearance. Must ask carefully so as not to give away privileged info.

Overall assessment: SH, despite clearly having some personality issues, appears self-possessed, is extremely intelligent, has good insight and a strong personal drive which (hopefully) will help him overcome his problem soon enough to earn his reinstatement in Mike Stamford's research team.

Note to self: Personal feelings regarding the patient? Irrelevant to the case, but may become a problem if not handled immediately: Why this instant fascination with him?

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Glossary of terms: (source: Wikipedia, which also carries an explanation for the performance of the various aspects of the MSE)

Affect –is described by labeling the apparent emotion conveyed by the person's nonverbal
behavior, facial expressions, and mannerisms (anxious, sad etc.). Affect may be described as appropriate or inappropriate to the current situation, and as congruent (in agreement) or incongruent with the patient's thought content.

Delusion - defined as "a false, unshakeable idea or belief which is out of keeping with the patient's educational, cultural and social background and held with extraordinary conviction and subjective certainty".

Euthymic - normal non-depressed, reasonably positive mood.

Flight of ideas - A form of talking where a person continues to switch from subject to subject while talking, making it difficult for others to follow the train of thought.
"Hello, John? John, can you hear me?"

"Yes. Mike, hello."

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, no. I just finished my rounds here at Bart's. I'm heading over to Baker Street now," said John, holding his phone to his ear in one hand and shifting his coat and bag onto the other as he made his way out of the hospital lobby.

"How are you?"

"Good, I'm good. And you?"

"I'm fine. Listen, I just wanted to know whether Sherlock has been to see you."

"Yes, yes he has. First consultation was last Friday, and I will be seeing him again later today. Three sessions a week."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Now that he's in your hands I can safely tell everyone here that he's on leave until further notice. The work backlog is just horrendous, but Anderson will just have to deal with it as best as he can. Personally I don't think he minds that much, so long as Sherlock's out of his hair."

John said nothing, merely laughed softly into the phone. Then: "Mike, speaking of Sherlock and his co-workers, can I just ask you about his relationship with them?"

"Spotted some trouble with your antennae already, have you? Yeah, working with Sherlock's not exactly a walk in the park, but I can't complain as he churns out the most output out of the entire team. Brilliant data, absolutely amazing. You ought to see his publications at PubMed."

"Right. Erm, how many people did he work with in the lab, exactly?"

"Well, let's see. There's Dr. Anderson. And Dr. Donovan. Those two mostly. Of course there was Irene, but she's gone."

"Gone?" John slowed down, stopped walking. "Gone where?"

"Oh. Well, Dr. Adler was recruited to Rockefeller University in New York. She was only in the lab for a month to catch up on the latest techniques just to make sure she was up to scratch."

"And she's left for New York?"

"Yes. About a month ago."

"I see. Was she there when Sherlock…disappeared?"

"Yes, she was still here then."

John paused, unsure of how to proceed. Finally, he asked, "How did the team take his disappearance, by the way?"
"Oh. You know how it gets. Sherlock could drive himself to the ground, working flat out for days. Then, there would be times when he would not show up in the lab for a few days and not offer an explanation when he did. I understand and respect his methods. But it's not like him to take off for an entire week, and when nobody's heard from him for another week more, of course people started to talk. So now I've got to quell the wagging tongues up here by telling them he's been through a rough patch and seeking help. How long do you think it will take?"

So, nothing at all from Dr. Adler, and she's safely away...

"I don't know, Mike. I mean, I've just met him. We haven't even started any sort of therapy yet. I will need to get back to you on that one."

"All right. Do keep me posted. And John…"

"Yes?"

He could hear Mike expel a gusty breath at the other end of the line. "Listen, mate. About Sherlock, I can see from the way you're not complaining—yet- that he's actually behaving around you, for once."

"And what does that mean?"

"I mean he hasn't pulled his usual trick on you yet. He does it to everyone he meets, so all I'm trying to say is, just be prepared when he does it."

"I don't think I understand, Mike."

"Sherlock's got this trick of looking at people and telling them their life stories. Nobody knows how he does it. You can imagine just how popular he is with people after he's told them who they slept with the night before and such, but...anyway, just a heads-up your way."

"All right," said John. "I'll keep that in mind."

"And do hurry up, if you can. I don't think I can stand to let Anderson waste my funds with one failed experiment after another."

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"I don't know, Dr. Watson," sobbed the young woman who was his one o'clock appointment. "I don't know why. He wouldn't say, but he just didn't want to see me anymore."

John stared at his patient who was sitting across him and wisely said nothing. If he allowed himself to speak his mind, this was what he would like to say: Oh I don't know, Kitty. Based on what you've been telling me for the past fifty minutes, perhaps it may have had something to do with the fact that midway through your first dinner date with him, you suddenly jumped onto the table at the pizzeria and started that belly dance— the one you thought was sure to get him off. Instead, he said, "Have you been taking your medications as scheduled?"

Kitty's head snapped up. "Of course I've been taking them on time, Doctor!" she cried. "Why do you immediately suppose that I haven't been taking them, instead of asking whether they're working properly or not?"

John checked her chart. Just off lithium for a month, oh God, he thought with a weary sigh. "Okay, fine. Here's what I'm going to do. I am going to add a new pill that you will take together with the
old one in the morning. All right?"

After Kitty left, John found himself rubbing his face with his hands. God, these bipolar cases. If you saw one, it's like seeing ten mental patients all at the same time, especially when they were cycling from mania to depression as rapidly as Kitty, with mixed episodes of dysphoric mania thrown in.

His next patient was Sherlock Holmes.

John found that he was actually looking forward to their session. He could see that Sherlock had shed off quite a bit of the initial reserve he had had when he first came in last week. His tread when he stepped into the office was less hesitant, though still catlike, careful.

"Sherlock," said John in greeting. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, Doctor." Sherlock draped his coat over the back of the chair but did not sit down. Instead, he made a slow circuit around the room, his hands behind his back, his gaze gliding by the bookshelves, and finally stopping in front of John's desk. John had to crane his neck just to see where he was standing.

"We can do the consultation over by my desk, if you would prefer it," offered John.

"No, that won't be necessary," said Sherlock as he turned back to face John. In that same careful tread, he walked back toward the armchairs, passing by the windows, and deposited himself in the chair opposite John.

"I meant to ask," said Sherlock. "Will you be furnishing Mike with detailed reports of our sessions?"

"Not without your written permission," said John. "Of course, I shall be sending him a report at the end of our therapy, but it will merely contain a gist of your condition, the final diagnosis and your response to treatment."

Sherlock nodded. "Good. I really don't think I can bear having to reveal this problem to anyone in more detail than is absolutely necessary," he said.


"May I ask you regarding your view about my case so far, Doctor?"

"Well, we haven't really started delving into the problem yet, but I think we can work things out. I cannot say when that's going to happen, it will really depend on our sessions."

"But you are optimistic."

"Yes," said John. "I am."

"Does that mean that you will accept me as a patient?"

"Yes, of course."

"I'm glad. I also wish to proceed with therapy with you, the sooner to get back to Manchester and the lab with that bill of health that Mike needs."

"All in good time. Now, let's see…" John took up Sherlock's file and flipped through his notes. "Right, have you had your physical and the lab exams done yet? I don't think I've gotten the
“Yes, about the lab exams and the physical,” he said, “I just remembered I got those done in Manchester two and a half months back. If it’s all right with you, Doctor, you can just request a copy of those files from Mike, as they are fairly recent.”

"Right. I can do that,” agreed John amiably. "It's just that they were done before your breakdown and I would really like to see if you're quite all right afterward."

"Oh." Sherlock settled back farther in his seat.

"Shouldn't be too hard,” continued John cheerily as he took in Sherlock's shuttered expression. "We've actually got a mini-lab upstairs, and you can easily get an appointment with one of the internists downstairs."

Clearly doesn't like not getting his way. Interesting…

"So," said John. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," said Sherlock, once again shifting his weight to lean forward. "I actually felt better after we spoke last week. I was thinking perhaps we can continue with this sort of…talking cure?"

And very clearly likes being in control…okay, let's shift gears then.

"Well, I was thinking, since we had such a smashing start last week, that perhaps we can progress to a different level of talk this time around."

Sherlock said nothing, merely stared at him.

John continued, "We need to get you down and into your vampire delusion, tap into it. Let's see where it gets us and hopefully it will show us what is hidden inside, the core problem around which this delusion is wrapped. From the way I see it, this goes deeper into your past than is apparent on the outside."

Something in his eyes again, and gone just as quickly. What was it?

"When do you feel this urge the most, this blood hunger? Does it come and go? Does it have any trigger factor?"

"Usually when I'm stressed, when I didn't get enough sleep."

"Does that happen often? Your not getting enough sleep?"

"Yes, often enough during the last weeks at Manchester. The experiments just weren't working out. Things were more difficult than usual in the lab. She was there. I couldn't concentrate."

"Close your eyes."

Sherlock's eyes flitted closed.

"Tell me what you see and feel."

"The lab, bright fluorescent lights overhead. She, in it—a splash of color in the drab surroundings. The hunger, rising at the sound of her voice. She's…beautiful, and vital and alive. She made me feel alive. I wanted to take her in, take in that vitality and possess a part of her, her life, and make it mine."
"Do you think she's the key to satisfying this hunger?"

"Yes."

"Do you fantasize about her?"

"All the time."

"Tell me what you fantasize about."

"A bed. Crumpled white sheets. Blood stains on them. Her long hair dark upon the sheets and the blood red against the skin of her throat."

Silence, for a time.

John finally cleared his throat. "You can open your eyes now," he said.

Sherlock opened his eyes to find John scratching notes into his pad abstractedly.

"How did I do?" he asked.

John looked up, his expression unreadable. "Good," he said. "Very good."

Sherlock started to smile.

"Except for one thing…"

Sherlock's smile faded as his eyebrows rose.

John fixed him with a speculative stare. "Why all these lies?" he asked softly.
Chapter 5

"Why all these lies?"

Sherlock stared at John. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Doctor," he said.

John's gaze did not falter. "Yes, you do," he said quietly, definitely. "An intelligent man like you."

Sherlock said nothing but returned gaze for gaze.

"I might have believed you if you spewed forth the craziest schizophrenic nonsense," said John, "but to resort to a textbook Freudian formula…"

He tilted his head to one side, giving Sherlock a reproachful look from under his brows. "Who do you take me for, Sherlock Holmes?" he asked softly.

The smile was definitely gone from Sherlock's face now, but there was a glint in his eyes that John found he did not like very much.

"All this insinuation about your vampire delusion being tied up with repressed sexual fantasies— I admit, I was intrigued to find elements of it in your first interview, but there is such a thing as overdoing it," said John.

He stared at Sherlock, and when Sherlock remained silent, he continued in a bland voice, "You'd think you were a therapist's dream patient, wouldn't you? A classic, easy case. You'd prove me and my preconceived, stereotypical notions of your delusions right at every turn, and flatter my ego. You'd swallow my therapy and be pronounced 'cured' at the end of a few sessions, just so you can get back to Manchester. Well, I'm telling you right now you're not going to get your bill of health by playing me this way."

Sherlock's smile was a complex thing behind those pale blue eyes— sinuous, shifting, a mixture of surprise and…approval?

"So what say we cut all this crap, and start again?" finished John.

Sherlock sat back straighter in his seat and leveled John a look, his gaze steady and alight with something that John could only describe as intense interest.

"You astonish me, John." The deep voice, shorn now of any vulnerability and doubt, sounded dark and rich, as supple as silk.

John willed himself not to look away, even as his heart and head were suddenly pounding at the sound of his first name on Sherlock's lips, spoken for the first time. "No lies now," he said. "Let's begin again. Look at me and tell me what you see."

The smile was on Sherlock's lips now, wide and predatory. "Do you really want to go down that road with me?"

"No lies," repeated John.

"Very well, if you insist." Sherlock put his hands together under his chin and steepled his fingers. "I see an established psychiatrist in his late thirties who specializes in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. He sees a lot of military and paramilitary staff invalided home from the
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is intuitive, thorough and effective, but unable to help in matters closer to home—alcoholism to someone close to him—a family member, probably a brother."

John stared, feeling his windpipe suddenly closing, constricting, making breathing difficult.

"Then there's that other crisis that knocked him off course for a few months this year," continued Sherlock. His words, delivered in that cut-glass accent, were gathering speed so that they were rushing out of his mouth, tumbling against each other, yet remaining clear as crystal. "The suicide of a patient, probably gun-related, which left him doubting his abilities, crippled him so that he's only now beginning to recover and get back on his feet. Right now though, he's still wounded. Deep down inside he's bleeding, hemorrhaging—" his pale eyes flared at the word—"and no amount of peer shrinking or medications will stop the pain completely, or heal the wounds. They're there to stay, and the most that he can hope for is he gets to save a few lives in return for that one life that was lost. But he's lost, too. He's not sure whether he's coming back. He's just taking one day at a time, going through the motions of living and working and not knowing what it's all for."

Absolute silence as Sherlock abruptly stopped speaking.

"I hope there's enough truth in there for you," said Sherlock coldly as he unlocked his hands and placed them back on the wooden arms of his chair.

John's gaze never faltered, and his voice, when it finally came out, was incredibly steady. Of that he was thankful. "That...was amazing," he said.

Sherlock's eyes flickered back to his face.

"Extraordinary. Quite...extraordinary," John said, nodding stiffly, finally feeling the blood rushing back to his head, to his heart and limbs. Anger was slowly blossoming in its wake, but he held it at bay.

Sherlock said nothing, merely regarded John with inscrutable eyes.

"You see a lot, don't you, Sherlock?" said John. "A whole lot more than most people can ever hope to see."

He leaned over from his seat and whispered fiercely, "So why don't you point that high-powered microscope of a brain of yours deep inside yourself and tell me what you see there?"

Sherlock tossed his head impatiently. "Oh please. If this is some cheap ploy to—"

"Talk to me as your vampire self. That other person deep down inside you, the one who's coming out more and more, taking over your life as you know it. As that vampire, what do you do?"

"You wouldn't want to know," gritted Sherlock, his hands gripping the arms of his chair tightly.

"Oh, I think you want to tell me. You want to, I know you do. Here's your chance now. As a vampire, what do you do?"

The words, when they finally came out, were a low growl: "I hunt." The look in Sherlock's eyes was positively feral.

John let out the breath that he did not know he was holding.

There. Out now. The truth, or the closest thing to it in Sherlock's mind. John sagged back in his seat, relieved and dismayed at the same time and still feeling the white-hot fury coursing through
him, making his blood sing. His hunch had been right. The delusion was rock-solid and not made up, even if Sherlock had embroidered lies around it. This wasn't going to be as easy as he had hoped it would be.

"You hunt?" John heard himself say, as if from far away. "What sort of…victims?"

"Prey," corrected Sherlock.

John's eyebrows rose but he found he could not say anything.

As if freed from some imaginary constraint, Sherlock leaned over until his elbows were touching his knees. "Do you really want to know how I do it?" he said. "All right, then: In a city as big as London, there are always prospects, but I can't just settle for anyone. Blood is easily contaminated by all sorts of substances and conditions; therefore I need to rule out people on drugs, alcohol, even those who've just had joints. Sick people need not apply. I can sense all these conditions and more because I can smell them on people. You won't believe just how narrow your choices can become, very quickly. Where to look for healthy, preferably young game? Evening shows, museum galleries, libraries, universities, places where I can approach women without attracting much attention to myself."

"Only…only women?"

Sherlock smirked. "Gender isn't a problem, John," he drawled. "Men too. I can be very flexible when the need is pressing."

A discreet knock on the door. Startled, John's eyes flew to the clock on the wall: their time was up.

"Once I've chosen my prey, I lure them to somewhere quiet," continued Sherlock, his eyes never leaving John's face. "There is a place here, at the junction of neck and shoulder, where the application of appropriate pressure can induce unconsciousness for a few minutes. I feed on their blood."

"That's enough to go on for now, don't you think?"

With that Sherlock stood up and took his leave, and John found that he had to ask Mrs. Hudson to hold off the next patient for ten minutes as he collected himself.

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John did not know how he got through the next three patients that afternoon, but he somehow managed, though he couldn't recall a single moment of those sessions.

After the last patient had gone, John called Mrs. Hudson in.

By this time he was feeling a lot calmer. He had resisted the overwhelming urge to interrogate Mrs. Hudson immediately after Sherlock had gone because he very much feared that he would end up shouting at his receptionist of nearly ten years, and he knew from past experience that there would be hell to pay if his assumptions were incorrect.

So he asked her now in soft, even tones, "Mrs. Hudson, what do you think of Dr. Holmes?"

Mrs. Hudson beamed. "Oh, Sherlock? He's perfectly charming. Such a nice young man." She paused. "Is there really anything the matter with him?"

_You have no idea…_
"You've not, by any chance, been chatting with him about me while he's waiting outside?"

Mrs. Hudson's eyes grew round and wide. "Oh, dear, no," she said. "Apart from the usual pleasantries—"

"What usual pleasantries?" asked John implacably.

"Oh, the weather mostly, and how many patients and doctors there are in the clinic on such and such a day," said Mrs. Hudson, flustered, as she looked into John's eyes. His pupils were dilated to the point that his eyes appeared almost dark.

"You never mentioned anything personal about me to him, did you?"

"Oh, no!"

"Nothing related to my sister, Harry?"

Mrs. Hudson was clearly becoming very confused. "No."

"Or Henry?"

Mrs. Hudson's expression crumpled into one of distress and hurt bewilderment. "What? Henry Knight? Absolutely not!"

John nodded, smiling apologetically. He took in a breath, let it out in a huff. "I'm sure you didn't, Mrs. Hudson. I'm sorry for taking your time. Off you go, then."

John heard her murmuring in dismay as she turned to go: "Oh, I knew there's been a tiff there somewhere with Sherlock, after he left like that."

John shook his head, frustration and bewilderment mixing with the dull throb of anger in his head. Next, he got out his mobile and placed a call.

"Hello, Mike. It's John."

"All right, John?"

"Well, thanks for the heads-up on Sherlock," said John, careful to keep his voice light. "Your warning couldn't have come at a better time."

"Oh, bloody hell."

"Yes. That's one way to put it."

"How are you feeling, mate?"

_How am I feeling? Like I've just been fucking mauled, is how I'm feeling_...

"Everything is under control, not to worry," John said. "It would take more than what he said to throw me off."

"Good."

John shut his eyes tightly, feeling a headache coming on. "Listen, Mike…you didn't tell him anything about me, did you?"
"Other than you're a trusted colleague and a good friend, not a word."

"Yes, well. It's just...he seemed to know a lot. He knew about Harry."

"Oh, John."

And here's the thing that I really don't understand, Mike. How could he have known about Henry Knight when you yourself don't know the details about the incident? I'm sure you must have heard about that hospital inquest into a patient of mine committing suicide, but except for those inquest committee doctors, Sarah, Mrs. Hudson, Louise Mortimer and myself, nobody knew how Henry had killed himself...

"Listen, John. I know it's going to sound mental, but trust me, you're not the only one he's left feeling this way after he's done with them."

"Oh?"

"That's just the thing with him. He's always like that. I told you, he does it to everybody, to some degree."

"And you never thought to refer him to a shrink before now?"

Mike sighed. "I know how it looks, and you ought to hear what Anderson and Donovan call him. But if he's really mental, which I seriously doubt, there is method to his madness."

John let out a harsh laugh. "Because he gets the job done on your research project?"

Mike sighed again, unhappily. "You won't give up on him, will you, John?" he asked after a moment.

"No. But I'm afraid you won't be getting him back for a while."

"I understand. Just take it easy, all right?"

"Okay."

John hung up and stared into space, breathing in and out in slow, measured breaths until he felt his muscles begin to relax.

Well, so much for all those months of therapy with Louise, thought John dolefully. It had taken Sherlock five minutes to strip off all that mental plaster that Louise very patiently had been putting on John's wounds.

Well, he could see now just how stupid his plan had been to lure Sherlock out by diverting his attention to his own person first. It was one of the usual tricks in a psychiatrist's bag and ultimately effective, but it had been stupid of him to ignore Mike's warning and expose himself like this. It's just that, he had not believed Mike's words, not really.

John closed his eyes and pictured yet again those five awful minutes: Sherlock steepling his fingers under his chin in that precise manner; his face a porcelain mask; those ugly words tumbling out of his beautiful mouth— ugly words for perfectly ugly truths.

Chronically depressed and on medication for years, Henry Knight had killed himself by putting a bullet through his mouth a week after being discharged from hospital earlier in the year. John had not seen it coming, had believed Henry to be on the mend. When Henry had shot himself, he may
as well have shot John through the heart. Though he had been cleared of any wrongdoing by the hospital inquest committee, John had not been able to stop blaming himself over Henry's death.

Now, thanks to Sherlock, whatever distance he had managed to get between himself and the incident had been obliterated.

What have I gotten myself into by agreeing to take on this guy?

And all this without even factoring in Sherlock's delusions yet.

Dear God, his delusions…

What are you doing? Refer him to someone else, now! The sensible part of his mind told him. God knows you won't be able to handle him, not when you're a bloody mess yourself.

But even before the thought had fully formed, John already knew that he wouldn't be able to do it.

It was getting late. Mrs. Hudson was long gone by now. Wearily he got up from behind his desk and reached for his coat.

As he made to turn off the lamp beside the armchairs, his gaze happened to fall on the chair usually occupied by the patients.

What the…

At first he wasn't sure what had caught his attention. He frowned as he bent to look at the wooden handles of the chair more closely. Yes, it wasn't just his imagination: the wood had splintered. Reaching out to touch it, a portion of the wooden bar came apart in his hand.

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Chapter 6

John stood and stared down at the broken chunks of wood in his hands for what seemed like a long time. He could feel his tired mind struggling to take it all in, to make sense of it. In the end, he decided he couldn't. All he could think of was Sherlock's hands—those long, elegant fingers tightening around the arms of this chair as John pushed him and pushed him to tell the truth about his delusions...

"Sod this," John heard himself say. He was tired, he was fed up, and he very badly needed to get out of the office.

*That's right. Back off,* that part of him that was interested in self-preservation whispered. *Just back off. Clear a little distance, you're much too close. You're too strung out to put this together now. Don't ask how he did it. Just leave, don't look back, don't think about this until tomorrow. By that time, you're sure to see a perfectly reasonable explanation to all this.*

It sounded like good advice, so John left.

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The only problem was that the situation was nowhere nearer a reasonable explanation in the clear light of next morning as the previous evening.

Arms crossed on his chest, John circled the chair again, and then held the pieces of broken wood to the light as he examined the edges minutely. The break was clean.

*What does that tell you, John?*

John thought and thought, growing annoyed as he answered back at himself: *It doesn't tell me a goddamned thing.*

*Sure it does,* his now-rested mind answered back reasonably. *It means this chair was constructed out of crap materials that give way the moment an excitable patient decides to give it a good squeeze. That's the only logical explanation to it, and you know it. So why even doubt it?*

So John replaced the chair with another one in the waiting room and went about his appointments for the day, firmly refusing to delve on the matter again.

Much more difficult to resolve was his problem in dealing with Sherlock. John could not admit even to himself that he had mishandled him. Yet, perhaps he had pushed at him prematurely. Perhaps he should have gone slower-- he should have given Sherlock enough room to settle down and open up on his own time.

But there had been something there that had raised John's hackles enough to decide that the situation had to be dealt with a firm hand as quickly as possible, and he still believed it to have been the right move, never mind that it had backfired in the most unexpected and shocking way.

As a psychiatrist, John was no stranger to patient violence. It was, after all, one of the hazards of his profession. Of course, that did not make it any easier for a doctor to fend off attacks, whether they were physical or verbal (which was actually much more difficult to deal with), but there were methods to cope. In this case, as with others, John resorted to the usual method of disengagement—crushing all thoughts of his encounter with Sherlock into a small ball and tossing it to the back of his head as he went about his duties.
But it would not be long before he had to fish out that crumpled ball of tangled thoughts, smooth it out in his mind and look at its disturbing contents one more time. Sherlock would be coming in for his next appointment soon and short of referring him to another psychiatrist, John had to formulate a strategy to ensure his patient would not be able to succeed in manipulating him. Resentment of the man had no place in the equation. He was, after all, treating a patient with a sick mind.

Still, John was worried about the strange, heady mixture of feelings elicited by this patient—reactions that were nowhere near appropriate and refusing to submit to John's attempts to subdue and defuse them into safe, workable mind constructs.

What was really alarming was the fact that Sherlock's verbal swipe at John had done nothing to diminish these feelings, but had rather enhanced them. There was anger there now, naturally, and wariness; but there was also curiosity and the need for a thousand questions to be answered. And a rousing interest so strong that it was a bit frightening. John did not care to dissect what that interest really meant, but if Sherlock thought his words had succeeded in throwing John off, then he was very much mistaken.

John ought to have known it would not be easy wrestling control from Sherlock. Twenty minutes before his next scheduled appointment, Sherlock managed to pull the rug out from under John again.

Mrs. Hudson came into the office in the middle of Kitty's session, carrying the office mobile and breathing apologies. She whispered a few words into John's ear, and the heavy frown that gathered instantly on the doctor's brows was something she was expecting, but it could not be helped. Sherlock did say it was an emergency.

"Tell him I can't come to the phone right n— dammit." John grabbed the phone from Mrs. Hudson and excused himself.

He retreated to his desk, his back to Kitty, before lifting the phone to his ear.

"Yes?"

"John."

"Sherlock, I'm in the middle of a session with another patient. Can't you just leave a message with Mrs. Hudson?"

"I can't go to your office this afternoon."

Oh.

"Well, you can always reschedule, again with Mrs. Hudson."

"No. I want to proceed with our session. Today."

"And how is that going to be possible if you can't come to the office?" John was struggling to keep his voice low and level.

"I was hoping you can come out and meet me, say in the park just five minutes from Baker Street. It wouldn't take that long to walk over, and it's a nice day."

*What the hell-?*
"Sherlock, listen to me." John's voice came out as a hiss. "You can't just—"

"Please, John."

John was startled into silence. The deep voice at the other end of the line was quietly pleading.

Put your foot down, John. Show him he can't walk all over you...

But the only thing he could think to say was: "Why should I?"

"I'll explain when you get here. Third bench to your right, by the fountain."

"Sherlock…"

Sherlock had already hung up.

John placed the phone down on the table, put his two fists on the edge of the desk and leaned his weight in for a moment.

That utter bastard!

But John was angrier with himself than with Sherlock.

What the hell is wrong with you, what could you possibly want this badly that you'd willingly bend over backwards for him just because he said 'please'?

Another question to add to the growing pile of self-queries with no answers.

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In a way, John was relieved to be meeting Sherlock outside the office; out in the open, so to speak. He had been mulling anxiously over seeing Sherlock again in the confines of the clinic. After the last, explosive session, somehow, the office had gradually taken on a claustrophobic feel.

And Sherlock was right. It was a nice autumn day.

He found Sherlock by the appointed bench, one long leg draped carelessly over the other, his coat falling elegantly off one side of the bench. He was busy typing into his phone, but nodded at John to sit down.

John remained standing, his expression grim, until Sherlock finally put his phone away and looked up. Before he could even open his mouth to speak, John held up his hand and said, "Let's be clear on one thing: don't do this again. The next time you pull a stunt like this, I will refer you to another psychiatrist. Lying to me is one thing, but manipulation, Sherlock? I can put that into your final report, for Mike Stamford's viewing pleasure. If you're not interested in getting therapy at all, just say it and let's be done with it."

Sherlock said nothing, merely regarded John with hooded eyes. When the minutes threatened to stretch on, though, he finally said, "Sit down, please, John."

But John was determined to refuse. "Not until you tell me how you did it."

"Did what?"

"You know what. That little episode of mind-reading or whatever it was that you did on me last time."
A ghost of a smile: "I'm not a mind reader, John. There is no such thing."

"Then you researched me, is that it?"

"No."

"So how did you know all those...details?"

"I didn't know. I saw: a psychiatrist with an established practice who could afford an office at Baker Street. Your floor-to-ceiling bookshelves are piled with psychology and psychiatry books, with tomes regarding post-traumatic stress disorder arranged closest to your desk at arm's reach. Behind the desk, a smaller bookcase with picture frames of military-looking friends and patients on top, some of them even in uniform. It doesn't take a lot to figure out what particular psych problem you specialize in treating."

John realized that his mouth was hanging open and shut it with a snap.

"You are intuitive, to judge from your impressive ability to see through my...falsehoods; and thorough, as evidenced by the alphabetical arrangement of your books and the way you manage your monthly planner, spread out on your desk: all your daily appointments and the names of people jotted neatly down, every single day. Clearly, you are effective, based on what you did to draw me out during our last interview."

John looked away, his fists clenched. "Go on," he said. "The next parts are what I really want to know about."

"Your alcoholic brother," murmured Sherlock. "That small bookshelf, behind your desk, meant to store things more private, personal. It may as well have been a bookcase of your heart, the contents of which are almost all about alcoholism, a few about alcoholism in the family. You do not look like you have a problem with alcohol, and never had. So it's someone else then. And then there's your monthly planner once again."

"What about my monthly planner?"

"All the names there were written right down to their surnames. But there is one name without any need for a last name: Harry. There is no need for a surname because he's family. Not your father. Could be a cousin, but most probably someone closer if he warrants a special place in your planner and you're concerned enough to be following him up so minutely. Across from Harry are the words Sarah/AA. Sometimes just Sarah, or just AA. You can't be the one to see him because you're too close to him. Hence, the need for Dr. Sawyer to step in—Dr. Sawyer, whose first name is Sarah based on the sign outside her office door, just a few feet away from yours. I don't think we need to explain what AA means."

Before he realized what had happened, John found himself seated on the bench beside Sherlock.

"And Henry?" his voice was barely a whisper.

"The last part about your patient was a bit of a long shot. Everything fit though. In your pictures, some digitally dated just a year ago, you looked utterly different. Round of cheek, bright, happy smile. Fast forward to the present: the graying hair, the new lines about your eyes and mouth not evident from a year ago, the weight loss and most tellingly, the haunted look in your eyes—you are a ghost of the man you once were. Therefore, something must have happened to you. A physical illness? Possible but unlikely as I don't smell anything from you. Psychological trauma then. What sort of trauma will unhinge an obviously caring and empathetic doctor? The death of a patient, not
just by illness as you doctors are probably used to that. Suicide would be the better reason. There is an odd volume in your office, a book that is totally out of place among your other books: one dealing with gunshot wounds. What was it doing among all those psychology texts? For a time, you were obsessed with this patient's death. You couldn't get it out of your mind, leading you down morbid paths to the point that you would read up on how he did himself in by taking on a book about gunshot wounds.

"Even now, you are just recovering from that blow. Your daily patient load in the office is only half of Dr. Sawyer's. You see how useful it is to have a passing chat with Mrs. Hudson, though you mustn't blame her as she practically told me nothing."

John let out a shuddering sigh. Then: "Wait, I saw you stop in front of my desk for just a few seconds the other day. You took all that in— wait, you can read my monthly planner upside down?"

John did not seem to know which detail was more astounding. He stared at Sherlock in open wonder. A heavy weight seemed to lift from John's shoulders. He did not know how Sherlock could do what he did, but it seemed as though there really was no premeditation on his part.

Something in Sherlock's eyes softened as he took in John's gawping expression. His smile, when it came, seemed softer than usual. "Did I get it all right?" he asked.

John shrugged. "Well, apart from Harry being Harriet, my sister, yeah. You got everything spot on," he said, the beginnings of a smile on his face.

Sherlock jerked his head as though startled. "Sister!" he exclaimed. Then: "Well, I wasn't expecting to be right on everything."

At that point, John did laugh, a silent breath. Something seemed to clear from his bright blue eyes when he finally looked up again at Sherlock. "So," he said. "What shall we talk about today?"
"So," John said, "what are we going to talk about today?"

"Whatever you want, John."

"Tell me why this sudden change in venue. You said on the phone you'd explain it to me if I came over. Well, I'm here now."

Knowing Sherlock and his need for control, John was prepared for another tedious round of power play. Because, surely, this was what it's all about. But Sherlock's next words took him by surprise.

"I am being watched," said Sherlock. "Twice, around the corner of Baker Street, by the same man, the other day and today. He didn't see me approach from the other street today and I nipped off before he got a chance."

John's eyebrows rose. Okay. That was rather unexpected, but not surprising. First hint of paranoia. Not really something new. Explore where it may lead to.

"Followed by whom?" he wanted to know.

Sherlock shrugged, his gaze fixed on the trees overhead. Bright red and yellow leaves rustled gently in the breeze.

"A vampire's enemies, no doubt," he said. "Peasants with crosses and strings of garlic, ready to vanquish me with a sharpened stake through the heart and a scythe across my throat. Or worse yet, hack sorcerers who think they've stumbled upon their version of the holy grail in the form of my person, and who will stop at nothing to partake of my flesh and blood."

Sherlock glanced back at John, who was staring at him, wide-eyed.

Is he kidding? John thought. Is he still pulling my leg? No, the feel of this is different from that phony sex-and-death fantasy scenario...

John knew that he was staring straight at Sherlock's delusion right now, and found that he could not quite reconcile his patient's cool, rational thought processes from just five minutes ago to this outlandish declaration of...what? Delusions of persecution, and God only knew what else was lying there waiting for him.

During his residency training, John had had a patient, a former engineering student who could do complex mathematical equations in his head but who could not be released from the locked mental ward due to his violent, paranoid delusions of neighbors-cum-MI6 agents who were bent on pinning some nameless conspiracy on him. Could Sherlock possibly belong to the same category—brilliant but insane?

But Sherlock's eyes—bluer now out here in the red and golden autumn afternoon than John had ever seen them—were clear and intense and serious.

"What do you mean by that, exactly?" John found himself asking, hoping somehow that Sherlock meant it all metaphorically.

Sherlock sighed, whether it was from impatience at John's seemingly inane question or from something else, John wasn't sure. "Even a predator has hunters," he said. "No one stays on top of
the food chain for long."

John cleared his throat, trying to brush aside the sadness welling inside him. To think his hopes of Sherlock's quick recovery had been raised after Sherlock's dazzling display of logical deduction.

Just let him spin out the yarn and let's see how far he'll run with it…

"Right," John said. "The other day, you told me how you…hunted. Tell me more about that."

"What's more to tell?" Sherlock sounded bored.

John paused, thinking. "How many times a day do you have to eat? Feed, I mean."

"Generally one meal will suffice."

"Just one? How much blood do you need to take in every time?" asked John, intrigued despite himself.

"Enough to feel sated," said Sherlock, rather unhelpfully. He read the unspoken question on John's face and said wearily, "If you mean to ask whether I take enough blood to kill my prey, the answer is generally no. Leaving a heap of dead bodies trailing in your wake is not only messy and impractical, but downright stupid. However, I am capable of using deadly force when necessary, and it won't do for me to be kept from my nourishment for extended periods of time."

John's thoughts returned to the broken pieces of wood from the chair in his office, but he brushed it aside almost immediately. It was simply too preposterous to bear contemplation. "Have you ever killed anyone due to the reasons you've just mentioned?" he asked, softly.

Sherlock stared straight into John's eyes. "And what would you do, John, if I said yes?" he asked conversationally.

John found he had to stop himself from leaning away. Sherlock seemed far too close all of a sudden, even though he never moved from his position on the bench.

John could not really find anything to say in reply to Sherlock, was in fact thinking perhaps it would be so much better if he did not really know the answer to that particular question, and so he changed his query once again: "You know, at this day and age, you could simply just buy blood and be done with it. Why go through such a risk as hunting?"

"John, my life is measured in centuries, not decades. If blood banks are not to be found hundreds of years from now, I would still need to feed. I can't afford to lose my hunting skills for the sake of convenience and safety."

John looked away, feeling a bit dizzy. *Oh God, what does one say to something as ruthlessly logical as that?*

"Your prey," John finally said. "Tell me more about how you choose them."

"There's nothing more to tell," said Sherlock, shortly, as though impatient that John would want to circle back on a closed topic. "I take what I can, given the criteria I have already mentioned."

"Even kids?" John's voice was deceptively casual. "They fit all your criteria."

Sherlock stared at John as though he had gone mad. "Have you any idea how loud those things can get?" asked Sherlock in the same tone as he would use to admonish John to use his head just a bit. 
"One hasn't even reached them and they'll start hollering. I have no use for measly little beings with low yield and high risks attached to them."

John laughed, shaking his head and not bothering to disguise his relief at Sherlock's declaration. "So, you go for the grownups. How do you go about deciding which to take in a crowd?"

"There is very little decision attached. Most just happen to be at the right place and at the right time for the taking. And sometimes, I don't have to do the choosing at all; they choose me."

John straightened a bit. He did not know why he should be surprised by Sherlock's latter statement, but it did make sense. They were living in the twenty-first century, after all. And Sherlock was attractive. He could imagine him being approached by men and women, the hunter also being hunted for social purposes.

"Would just anyone do?" asked John.

"It depends on the level of hunger. If it gets too pressing, I get straight to the point. Courtship is reserved for cases when there is time to burn," said Sherlock.

"Or when somebody special comes along," offered John.

A smile curled on Sherlock's lips. "Or when somebody special comes along," he agreed. "Although that's very few and far in between."

"But they do come along," insisted John. "Like the woman you mentioned."

Sherlock raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Perhaps. But they also require more work," he said.

John looked at Sherlock, his eyes bright with interest. "But doesn't that make it more interesting for you? I have a feeling you'd want that kind of stimulation."

Silence as Sherlock regarded John with a look that a professor might bestow on a student who had exceeded his initial expectations. "Astonishing," he finally murmured, and John felt a rush deep inside, and a glow. Most disturbing.

"Define special," pressed John.

Sherlock turned his head away in a sudden, irritated movement, and John thought he was not going to answer the question when he heard Sherlock's voice, low and still: "It's different for different people. I can't define what it is exactly, it's just there in some and not in others."

John pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And have you ever thought about how these people would think and feel about your hunting them?" he asked carefully.

Sherlock jerked his gaze back at John, the expression in those pale eyes fierce. "We're not going there," he said flatly.

John blinked. "Why not?"

"What's the point of it? Do you ask a tiger how he feels about the prey he chases down for dinner?"

"It's not that simple," retorted John. "You're not just an animal, Sherlock."

"Yes, it is that simple, John," replied Sherlock coldly. "Nobody is exempt from the laws of nature, myself included. The day I start considering the feelings of my prey is the day I stop feeding, and that's the day I die. I cannot be bothered by whether my prey approves of what I do or not."
John stared at Sherlock steadily, even as his heart pounded away in his chest. "But you said you consider certain people special," he said. "Tigers don't think that way about their prey, do they?"

Sherlock smiled that little lip curl of his. "How do you know? Have you ever asked a tiger that question?" he said.

John felt time slow down along with his breathing. "What happens to these special people?" he wanted to know.

Sherlock stared at John contemplatively for a moment. "Do you know what it means to possess somebody, John?" he finally asked, his voice pitched low. "Completely? Utterly? To take them into yourself, let them become a part of you so that you are forever one with them? So that long after they've gone, they're still here, deep inside me and with me."

"By that, you mean you take…their lives? You kill them? Drain them of their blood?" John asked, fighting to keep his voice even.

"I'll leave you to your interpretations, John," said Sherlock and with one fluid movement, he stood up and looked at his watch. "You'll be late for your next patient if you don't get going."

John did not know he was staring into space until a knock sounded on his door, jerking him back to the present.

"Come," he called.

Sarah swung the door open and peered in. "All right, John?" she asked, smiling.

John smiled. "Yes, of course," he said, "I thought I could get my patients' notes in order after the last one was finished."

He stared down at the pad where he had intended to jot down his notes about Sherlock. It had remained blank after an hour of reviewing and thinking over what Sherlock had said to him earlier in the afternoon.

"How are you?" he asked Sarah as he hastily set aside the pad on his desk.

"Good," she said, drifting over to stand in front of his table. She stared at him more closely. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a bit peaky. Let me guess, therapy not going so well with your vampire patient?"

John laughed tiredly. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Hmm. Don't let it get to you. Listen, James has to go back to the hospital for an emergency surgery half an hour ago, and he's left me stranded with two tickets to a concert tonight. Care to go with me?"

"And what will James say to your asking an ex-boyfriend out to a concert?" asked John softly, smiling.

Sarah wrinkled her nose, unimpressed. "He was the one who suggested that I ask you," she said wryly.

John laughed. "Okay then. Dinner's on me," he said as he reached for his coat.
This was the reason why John liked Sarah so much. They had dated for a time a few years back, but the relationship had fizzled out into a warm friendship and a close working partnership that were more than satisfactory for both parties. In between relationships and on the occasions that James, Sarah's current surgeon boyfriend, had to abandon her to answer the call of duty, she and John would go out and catch up with each other's lives. It was just lucky that James was not the jealous type, which would partly explain why Sarah was very much in love with him.

Dinner was a pleasant affair in an Italian restaurant, followed by a violin and cello concert at Saint Martin-in-the-Fields at Trafalgar Square. John was not really into classical music that much, but he sat through the soothing, candlelit performance and allowed the music to ease the tensions of the day away from his weary body.

The concert ended early. Filing out of the hall with Sarah by his side, chatting, John let his attention wander. It was a very nice evening, with not so many people in attendance.

Who would have thought he would bump into anyone he knew here, tonight?

But he did. And as soon as he heard that voice drawling out "Dr. Watson" behind him, he knew who it was.
Chapter 8

"Dr. Watson."

John momentarily froze at the sound of that voice, then willed himself to turn around slowly, calmly.

Sherlock stood a few paces behind, hands inside the pockets of his coat, eyes boring into John. He was not smiling—his face was actually devoid of all expression; nevertheless, John could almost feel the cold fury radiating from him in waves.

"Sherlock!" he said, injecting some of the surprise that he felt (and he was deeply and unpleasantly surprised) into his voice.

"Fancy meeting you here, Doctor," murmured Sherlock, his eyes never leaving John's face. "Is this going to be a habit?"

"Ah, well. London's getting smaller all the time," said John, affecting a nonchalance that he was very far from feeling. He turned to Sarah. "Sarah, I want you to meet Sherlock. Sherlock, this is—"

"Dr. Sawyer," said Sherlock, glancing at Sarah and extending a hand. "A pleasure."

"Er…hi," said Sarah, a little uncertainly. She shook Sherlock's hand, and went back to staring at the two men, not quite sure what was going on.

"So…" said John, mouth stretched into a smile. "I didn't know you went to concerts, Sherlock."

An upward tilt of Sherlock's lips as he returned the volley smoothly: "I did tell you I play the violin when I have time, Doctor. It's a passion of mine."

"Oh. Yes, yes you did. Did you enjoy the performance?"

Before Sherlock could reply, a young woman in a dark evening dress bustled up to him. "Okay, I got my coat. I'm ready," she said brightly.

John stared at the petite brunette, trying not to gawk.

"In a moment," murmured Sherlock, sliding his gaze to the girl for an instant before returning it to John, as if daring him to say something. "I just bumped into an old friend."

"Oh," said the brunette in a breathy voice. She turned to John and Sarah and piped in, "We were just going to get some coffee. Would you like to join us?"

"No," said John quickly, perhaps too quickly. He wrapped a hand around Sarah's arm and started to draw her away. "But thank you for the kind offer. We'll be leaving now. I'll see you soon, Sherlock."

The last thing John saw before he turned away was the girl, raising her head to look at Sherlock and saying, "Oh, is that your name? I thought you said…"

Mercifully the rest of the girl's words were drowned out by the sound of evening traffic as they emerged into the street.

"What was that all about?" asked Sarah, intrigued, as they started to walk briskly down the avenue.
John released a breath and shut his eyes for a moment. "A patient of mine," he muttered.

Sarah made as if to fan herself. "Whew," she said, a bit teasingly. "That was pretty intense. I thought something might melt, from the way you were locking eyes with each other."

John merely shook his head, not knowing what to say. He could still feel his blood surging through his veins. He would probably have a headache soon from all this vasodilatation.

"Oh, wait. So that’s Sherlock Holmes," Sarah said as she remembered her previous conversation with John. "The Sherlock Holmes! Your patient with the vampire fixation. How interesting! And to think you were telling me nothing interesting ever happens to you."

John smiled grimly, wanting to tell Sarah there was such a thing as being too interesting to the point of being frightening, and finding that he could not.

Well, he wasn't ambushed sometime during the night, so John went into crisis prevention mode the very next day.

Sherlock’s next appointment was still a day away but he knew he was going to see him anyway.

"If he calls, tell Sherlock I am not going to speak to him unless he comes to the office, with an appointment," John told Mrs. Hudson as soon as he stepped into 221B, fresh from his rounds at Bart’s. "Harden your heart, Mrs. Hudson. We're not doing him a favor by giving in to his every whim."

Mrs. Hudson murmured a worried "oh dear" and proceeded to make John a cup of tea.

In his office, John went to the mini fridge conveniently slotted just under his table and checked his supply of midazolam and haloperidol, mixed the sedatives in a syringe and placed the syringe back in the fridge. Next, the supply of pills, always the first thing to offer an agitated patient. Check.

John remembered once again Sherlock’s hands on the wooden arms of his chair, and the aftermath. He briefly considered calling in help in case physical restraint might become necessary, but finally decided against it. He was going to have to deal with Sherlock by himself.

Mrs. Hudson came in with the tea and the list of patients for the day. One cancellation, from three to four p.m. Perfect. It was as if Fate had intended it.

So now we wait…

At first, John wasn't sure Sherlock would be coming, after all. It was already half-past three.

John sat at his desk, rifling through the clinic's stack of newspapers. After the first one, he proceeded to the second, scanning each page thoroughly.

A flurry of sound just outside his door. Sighing, John set down the papers and opened the door of his fridge to transfer the syringe to the top drawer of his table.

If he allowed himself a second to think, John would stop to wonder at the calm purpose he set about doing things. For months, he feared that he had lost it, this groove— this almost-instinct that would kick in during emergencies, much prized by doctors— the right kind of intuition that would
lead to the right decisions, made at lightning speed. If he stopped to consider, he would be glad to
find that it was coming back.

But he had no time now. Right now, Mrs. Hudson was coming in with Sherlock's file, her face a
study of tension and subdued alarm. Because Sherlock had not even waited for Mrs. Hudson—he
had come striding into the office the moment she opened the door, not bothering to trail in after her.

He paced the floor, to and fro, in front of the armchairs as Mrs. Hudson deposited his file on the
table and glanced at John, that secret glance they shared to communicate whether it might be best
for her to call assistance. But John merely shook his head a fraction, and Mrs. Hudson withdrew.

Sherlock stopped pacing the moment the door clicked shut. "Tell me last night was merely a
coincidence," he said without preamble.

John drew his hands up in a pacifying gesture and readily obliged: "It was all a coincidence."

"I find that hard to believe," snarled Sherlock.

"Sarah had tickets to the concert," John explained patiently. "Her boyfriend had to work so she took
me."

"How very convenient. You might be kind and considerate but I never thought you'd be this
generous to an ex-girlfriend."

John refused to be sidetracked into asking how Sherlock would know about his past relationship
with Sarah, concentrating instead on the important point.

"You think I've been following you," said John, staring at Sherlock as he continued his restless
pacing, his movements as smooth as a shark's underwater. "Nobody's following you, Sherlock."

Sherlock shook his head, clearly not buying it. His gaze was a brand as he leveled it at John.

"Why would I want to follow you?" asked John, the beginnings of despair in his voice.

Sherlock abruptly ceased pacing. "Because I think you're starting to believe me," he said.

John frowned, leaning his head forward a bit as he took in Sherlock's words. After a moment, he
said, cautiously, "What?"

Sherlock tossed his head impatiently. "You heard me. Don't make me repeat myself all the time,"
he snapped.

"I'm sorry: what?" said John, more forcefully. "I'm starting to believe you in what?"

Sherlock nodded at the direction of the newspapers. "Tell me why you're going through the
papers," he challenged.

John looked down at the pile of papers before him and then back at Sherlock.

"What were you looking for, John?" asked Sherlock, his voice deceptively soft and silky. "Some
small paragraph tucked away in the third or fourth page, detailing the finding of some unidentified
female in a black evening dress in some alley somewhere, the victim of a possible homicide,
perhaps?"

John felt his jaw set tightly and painfully. "I thought you don't read minds," he said.
Sherlock let out a short, sharp laugh. "Please, John. If you think you're some mysterious cipher, you've got to set about reworking your routine," he said scathingly.

John dodged the bait. "The girl from last night," he said. "What happened to her?"

For a while Sherlock stood there, his back a straight, rigid line. His eyes were cold and hard, like chips of blue diamonds, as he bit on his bottom lip. John started fearing the worst.

"Sherlock…"

"Nothing happened, you bloody idiot!" exploded Sherlock. He started that restless pacing again. "How could I let anything happen when she heard you say my real name? And now thanks to you, I haven't fed in over 36 hours! I'm starving, John, and I have you to thank for it!"

The relief was so profound that John actually sagged back into his chair. He started to smile, then quickly wiped it away from his face as he looked at Sherlock's desperate pacing.

"Sherlock," he said quietly. "Just…relax. Relax for a minute, all right?"

Sherlock stopped pacing and put his hands to his face. John heard a muffled "Oh, fuck."

"I've got something to calm you down here. Would you like to take it?" John asked, opening his drawer.

Sherlock's hands left his face, raked into his hair. "You started this, John. You've got to put a stop to it," he said.

"I started what?" demanded John.

Sherlock turned to face him, angrily. "Undo whatever it was that you did last night. Before that, everything was fine," he said.

"Sherlock, listen…just listen to yourself," said John, wincing. "I never did anything and you know it. Whatever happened to you, it happened through you and because of you."

A moment of silence, then John said, "All right. Sit down here. Sit. Down. Let's try something."

Hesitation, then Sherlock came over and sat down on the chair facing John's table. John folded his hands in front of him on his desk and leaned forward.

"Close your eyes," said John.

Sherlock let out an exasperated sigh, but closed his eyes.

"Tell me how you feed," John said softly.

Sherlock jerked his head, his lips thinning into a sneer, but his eyes remained closed.

"Ignore the hunger, it's not there," said John, his hushed voice almost comforting. "It's not there because you're already feeding. Right this very minute. Just tell me how…"

Sherlock's voice, when it came, was quiet: "That girl from last night. I would have taken her somewhere where we can be alone for just a few minutes. I'd press that spot at her neck, let her sag unconscious in my arms. I'd draw her hair away from her neck, lean over to lick at her skin, taste the salt on it before I move in. Just a puncture on a vein, as from a needle, smaller than an insect bite. Her blood at last, filling my mouth in a thin stream as I take it in. My saliva has a natural
anticoagulant that will ensure the flow will not stop abruptly."

John felt something tighten in his chest as he watched Sherlock with his eyes closed, watched him as his tongue appeared to slowly lick at the corners of his mouth, watched as he heaved a sigh of relief and satisfaction. "I feed," he said so softly that John almost did not catch it. "The blood…rich and coppery and sweet, on my tongue, down my throat, down…here."

He touched his stomach. His head lolled a bit, tilted to one side as he said, "The warm fullness, that delicious sensation of fullness. In here, at last. I'd stop before she wakes, press a thumb to the area of her neck to stifle the flow of blood, which will stop within seconds. If I take care, there wouldn't even be a bruise to show for it. Once she wakes, I'd invent an excuse: was she not feeling well? Perhaps it would be better if I accompany her home? She would be confused, perhaps even initially alarmed, but a quick check and my continued, seemingly concerned, presence will reassure her that nothing untoward had happened—"

Sherlock abruptly stopped, his eyes flaring wide open as he muttered an oath. "This isn't helping at all, John," he growled as he got up from his seat.

John let out a ragged breath as he closed his eyes for a moment. Oh my God, did I really just hear all that…?

"Okay. Okay. I'm…I'm sorry," he finally managed. Shit. That mind over body technique had been lame. So pathetically lame. If anything, he emerged far more affected than Sherlock was.

He fished around for his prescription pad, clicked on his pen and scratched the name of a sedative on the paper before tearing it off and handing it to Sherlock.

"You've got to take it easy," said John as Sherlock silently took in the prescription and glanced at it.

Sherlock's eyes were ice-cold when he met John's again. "You stupid, stupid fool," he said softly, crumpling the piece of paper in his hand and tossing it away. "All this time, you're still hiding behind whatever flimsy barricade that's still standing between you and the truth. What is it for, John? Some instinct at self-preservation? Do you fear that you might go mad if you stare at the truth head on? Or perhaps you fear that you might turn to stone, from gazing at Medusa's head?"

"And what is the truth?" John returned.

"When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be it," said Sherlock. "I think you've eliminated all the crucial impossibilities about me sometime ago."

He turned away. "This has been a waste of time," he said, "and I cannot contain the hunger any longer. You owe me a meal, John."

With that he left.

John folded his arms on the table and lowered his head on them. He counted to ten, willing his heart to slow down. Why, oh why, must this always happen to him when it came to Sherlock?

He would have wanted to ask Sherlock what he meant by his remark, but Sherlock would probably only say that John already knew what he meant.

Because he really did know what Sherlock meant.

Sometime during their session yesterday, he had already eliminated the possibility of Sherlock
being insane. He had then considered the possibility that Sherlock may well be a serial killer, but then he had to eliminate that today. And now what remained, however improbable, must be the truth: that Sherlock’s delusion of being a vampire was no delusion at all.

Author's Notes: Psychiatrists adhere to a protocol involving the emergency restraint and sedation of violent patients, termed Code Grey, that make use of midazolam and haloperidol, among other sedatives, to calm the patients down in order to make restraint (if needed at all) less traumatic.

The famous quote "When you have eliminated the impossible..." is, of course, from the ACD and BBC Sherlock canon.
So far everything that's happened has been related using John's POV. For this chapter let's take a look at Sherlock's side of things.

This chapter marks the end of part I. Beginning part II, things will get darker. I hope you will continue to enjoy the story!

Please see Author's Notes at the end of the chapter.

Sherlock finally managed to get a blood meal, in a darkened theater showing some obscure, independent film where the viewers were few and far in between. Ignominious, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

He had picked the guy sitting at the very back row all by himself— young, gawky, with glasses, probably an art student. Sherlock had taken the seat beside him and very quickly and efficiently went about his business. The guy didn't even see him lift his hand to press at his neck. It was the work of mere minutes. When Sherlock was done, he let the guy's head loll back gently onto his seat and took his leave.

Outside the theater, Sherlock grimaced as he wiped a hand across his mouth. He had been too much in a desperate hurry to really check what he was in for: the guy was on some sort of medication— an antidepressant, by the taste of it. That would be right up John's alley.

Sherlock's expression darkened at the thought of John.

This was all John's fault. If he hadn't been at that concert, none of this would have happened. Just the memory of John looking at his possible prey for the evening with a barely concealed mixture of alarm, concern and distaste was enough to stoke his fury back to flaming life. John had no right to judge. And he sure as hell had no right to rob Sherlock of his appetite for a good 36 hours.

John owed him that lost meal, at the very least. He would see to it that the man pays up, and soon.

Sherlock turned and headed back to the hotel where he was staying.

His stomach felt heavy, though not in the usual pleasant way. It sat like a hot stone in his belly, occasionally broiling. That, and the guy's medication, was making it imperative that Sherlock lie down for a while. All in all, a superlatively unsatisfying feed. This was John's fault, all over.

Settling down on the neatly-made bed, he took out his new Blackberry and started to check his email. Due to circumstances of the very recent past, everything he now owned was brand new.

He did not know why he bothered checking his email at all these days, considering he was on leave from the Manchester project until further notice. Perhaps it was a habit acquired from work, when his relevant emails would reach past fifty a day and most of them required immediate attention. The only one who would bother to keep in touch now was Mike Stamford, and only because he needed advice on how to steer Anderson in the proper direction with the experiments in the lab. Sherlock had very reluctantly written back with the necessary instructions, along with a hefty dose of caustic sarcasm that he wished Mike all the best over an impossible situation.

Today though, there was a new, unexpected email. It was short and to the point, just as the woman
had always been:

*I heard from Mike Stamford that you have resurfaced. I would be lying if I said I feel relieved that you did not die, after all. You don't have to worry. I told Mike nothing about what went on between us. I have no interest in pursuing this matter concerning you, as I would much rather not be questioned over my sanity, so I am asking you to extend me the same courtesy. Do not come looking for me! You must realize that I have already taken steps to ensure that, should anything happen to me, concrete evidence about you and what you really are shall surface and you won't be able to do anything to stop it, brilliant as you are. The only way you shall be safe is if you leave me alone. You must admit that this is more than you deserve.*

*Goodbye, Dr. Holmes. I shall look forward to not hearing from you or seeing you ever again.*

The email address itself was a temporary construct, probably already deactivated after Irene had sent the message, and very difficult to trace. No matter: it was common knowledge that she had gone to New York, and her Rockefeller University email address would appear in any publication she might churn up. In fact, it would take Sherlock less than a minute to come up with it if he really felt like looking for it. The world was getting smaller and smaller everyday, the scientific and academic world even more so.

Irene Adler.

It was obvious that he had misjudged her. Underestimated her, in fact. How he could have been so careless was beyond him. Even now, she had him in a stalemate. Clever girl.

Was she bluffing when she said she had something— proof of some sort— that she could use against him if he came after her? It seemed impossible. He could not imagine her possessing anything that she could use as a weapon against him. But then again he had also not imagined that she could (and did) use a gun against him during their last encounter.

Sherlock's fingers flew over the small keypad of his Blackberry, erasing Irene's message from his email. He would have to think about this situation further and weigh in on his next move. In the meantime, it would not do to have her message in his inbox, or anywhere else in his email, for that matter. For all he knew, his email address could have been compromised as well, after the rollercoaster ride that had been his life for the past six weeks.

It was astounding how things could go so terribly wrong in that short amount of time. And all because of one miscalculation. The disastrous affair with Irene, then the nightmarish aftermath that followed, only to be saved in the nick of time by that girl, Molly.

It was clear that he had made one mistake too many.

And now here was John Watson.

Was he a mistake too? Sherlock had not been able to control this one factor about seeing the psychiatrist, as Mike had been the one to place this obstacle in his path.

There would be ways to deal with the doctor when the time came. Only, not yet. He needed that bill of health. Obviously, he could have fabricated it and save the time, just as he had fabricated all his medical records, but it would not do to arouse suspicion now. Mike could very easily just place a call to John to ascertain whether Sherlock was attending his sessions or not, and to do away with John so early into the game would be a mistake indeed as it could be traced back to him.

Besides, the good doctor had piqued his interest. Nobody, not even Irene, had seen through his
deception—or at least part of it—as easily as John. How he was able to do so would have to be investigated, and Sherlock was looking forward to the diversion. He had not expected John to be difficult to deal with, and he had been proven wrong once again.

More importantly, he could not get rid of him now because John had provided him with a unique opportunity of finding things out about himself that may explain why all this malarkey was happening in the first place. Obviously, beginning with Irene, something had changed within him, had gone askew. He had somehow lost his equilibrium. The situation was entirely, distressingly new, the consequences were dire, and lacking any tools at introspection, he could not find a way to address it by himself. It was not everyday that he could open up to just anyone about it (well, there was somebody he could actually turn to, but he'd rather not, and they were not in communication for quite some time now). So now here was his chance, his intentions conveniently cloaked as a mental breakdown and the recipient of his confidences bound by the doctor-patient relationship not to let slip any of it.

And finally, John really was a cipher, despite all of Sherlock's sneering allegations to the contrary. There was something about John Watson that puzzled and fascinated and defied all his expectations.

After the way he had thrashed him during one of the earlier sessions, Sherlock knew John would be angry. He had also expected John to demand for an explanation over his seemingly outrageous yet accurate description of the doctor's character and life situations. What he had not expected was John's acceptance and admiring appreciation of his reasoning. John's reaction was certainly nothing he had ever come across before. There was something about John's refusal to take things personally and the objectivity about his appreciation that Sherlock found...appealing.

And the way he dealt with Sherlock. Perhaps it was just his medical and psychiatric training, but Sherlock thought it went deeper than that. That level of calm and even-handedness was difficult to fake; it had to come from deep inside the man.

There was more: throughout their grueling sessions, including the last one just over an hour ago, when he had seen the man go through every emotion possible under the circumstances, he had not seen fear in John Watson. Not even during that final moment of revelation, when he had torn off the last shreds of obtuse denial from John's eyes to reveal himself as he really was. John had been shocked, amazed, deeply affected, perhaps even aroused to judge from the naked expression in his eyes and his state of breathing, but he had not been afraid.

Extraordinary.

And yet, was it wise to reveal himself so fully to a mere man? He had never done it before, so why start now? Perhaps it was because he had wanted to see how John would take it. But why would he want to do that? And after all the peril he had gone through very recently in the hands of some very odious human beings? Sherlock hated not knowing the answers to questions put before him, but it seemed these questions were piling up one after the other these days, especially when it came to John.

As he lay on his bed, Sherlock had a thought, quick and cold and clear as always: naturally, these proceedings could only lead to one definite ending. Something would have to be done about John Watson in the long run. Only not now. Not yet. Not when he was being too interesting.

Sherlock winced in irritation as his stomach let out another unhappy rumble.

Besides, John did owe him, and he was going to enjoy making John pay first before anything else.
Author's Notes: (spoiler alert for scenes in A Scandal in Belgravia)

If there is a moment that I found disagreeable in the second series of BBC Sherlock, that would be the last ten minutes of A Scandal in Belgravia, where we see Irene Adler reduced to the pitiful state of a woman nearly beheaded and at the mercy of Sherlock Holmes, after he had beaten her at her own game. It was an unpleasant shock ending to an otherwise dazzling episode, and I thought that it was rubbing it in just a bit too much. For this story, I choose to restore her in all her triumph as the one Woman to have beaten and escaped from Sherlock (and a Vampire!Sherlock, at that!).
Part II: Courtship

The screw turns: beginning part II, expect things to get darker.

Please see Author's Notes at the end of the chapter.

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John was not going to let this latest Sherlock episode overwhelm him. He really wasn't. He was a medical doctor, for God's sake. A man of science. Sherlock was wrong, he was simply and completely wrong when he said John was starting to believe him. John was not interested in participating as the other half of a folie a deux, and God help him if he was going to allow Sherlock to pull him into this madness along with him.

Sherlock may not be insane in the usual sense, but he was damned close. What Sherlock was asking John to do was to believe in the impossible and the nonexistent. If it were another doctor, there would have been no hesitation at all as to the final verdict. So why was he even considering other alternatives?

Oh God, but how to approach this problem logically? The problem of it all was that Sherlock was being so completely logical that it was maddening. But something had to be done to toe the line somewhere regarding Sherlock's claims.

*When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*

But there lay the problem. Right there in that phrase.

John could not eliminate the one glaring impossibility in the equation because, first and foremost, everyone knows vampires don't exist. Period. End of discussion. They are products of an overly fertile imagination, granted that that imagination stretches to almost every culture throughout the world.

It is fact that long before the discovery of pathogenic microbes, people had resorted to superstitions and malevolent, supernatural beings to explain the reasons behind just about every kind of plague, pox and pestilence wreaking havoc upon humanity since the beginning of time. A person dying was a fact of life, but a beloved person dying suddenly and at a young age had a way of driving even the most steady and staid people to think and act in ways they wouldn't normally resort to. From there, believing that a malignant force was behind their beloved's death seemed like the most natural step in the world.

Sheer, bloody superstition!

Psychologically, there really were people out there who thought of themselves as vampires, but John knew that these vampire fixations were symbolic of several unconscious drives and defense mechanisms, some but not all sexual, whose repression may lead to the expression of regressed forms of behavior in people believing themselves to be one of the undead. Pure textbook theory. That was how he had initially tried to approach Sherlock's problem, until he realized that Sherlock was ahead of him and faking his way through it all by using the very same principles.

Pathology-wise, there were several illnesses throughout history that could have been mistaken for signs of vampirism in an unfortunate patient: the blood disorder porphyria among them, with its attendant photophobia. Rabies was another candidate, with its hydrophobia and aversion to
substances with strong odors, such as garlic. John could only imagine what those poor people had to go through.

There were always misunderstandings.

Why the enduring fascination with vampires? Why all the movies, the novels, the plays and shows and games about these creatures who are, essentially, parasites? It is very obvious. People identify with these powerful, immortal beings because that way they can somehow overcome their dread of their own mortality. And perhaps most significantly, vampires and the lore surrounding them are forever shrouded in romance. And who does not like a good romance? All that bloodsucking is so intrinsically sexy and, let's face it, sex sells. A lot. People long to be desired, needed, by someone they deem extraordinary. That I-hunger-for-you theme is simply a timeless classic that is explored and exploited and reshaped into new forms since people first put pen to paper.

But were these the reasons why Sherlock believed he was a vampire? Did he adopt this identity because he needed to feel unique and special? Was he scared of death and he needed to feel sexy? These descriptions did not fit the man at all, especially the latter one. If anything, John caught him lying over that sex/death scenario because John had a strong feeling that Sherlock did not know what he was talking about.

Everything simply did not fit.

Eliminate the impossible…

Okay, so those were the cons of the argument. John was a fair man, so he set about constructing the arguments for the possibility of Sherlock being a vampire. He needed something concrete.

Well, Sherlock did break those wooden chair handles. That was certainly no easy task. John had tried gripping the arms of a replica chair in the waiting room and no matter how hard he had squeezed, the handles had refused to budge, let alone splinter into fragments.

But just because the man was strong (and the strangest thing was that he did not look like it at all), was he a vampire?

Then, of course, there were all his excessively detailed accounts of his blood hunger. But short of Sherlock feeding in front of John, John doubted whether he could be convinced of Sherlock’s accounts being anywhere near the truth.

But coming from Sherlock, they had sounded so real, so logical and reasonable. And that last account of Sherlock feeding…it had been everything that John had just finished describing about people’s fascination with vampires: it had been compelling and exciting and sexy as hell…

John shook his head, appalled at the direction his thoughts were taking him. That did not mean he believed Sherlock to be a vampire. Far from it.

What to do when one was short of data? Research, of course, even if the only materials available at hand were fiction, because vampires simply were not real. This fact was just too big an impossibility to eliminate.

So there. He had come full circle. Sherlock would have to argue his way out of that one in their next session. In the meantime, he was going to prepare for his argument by going over all possible sources of vampire lore.

With that thought in mind, John turned on his laptop and set to work on his new research topic.
After several hours of browsing the internet, John leaned back in his seat and took off his reading glasses, rubbing his tired eyes. It was already nearing 8pm, and he had barely scratched the surface of the genre. Amazing.

The output concerning vampire literature was simply too much to handle. John would get nowhere fast if he were to scan through them all. Very early on, he had decided to narrow his range by eliminating the more recent works concerning vampire romance/erotica (he couldn't believe it, but there really was such a thing as paranormal erotica!), along with science fiction and fantasy-related works (not that they were bad: John remembered reading a sci-fi vampire story in his late teens called *Shambleau* and liking it very much), as he did not think these would shed light on his problem with Sherlock.

That still left a great deal of twentieth century works to plow through. He decided to go back, back in time to the first modern vampire novels— John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which was a thinly-veiled sketch of Lord Byron; *Varney the Vampire, or the Feast of Blood*, which was really rather hysterical and which John abandoned after the first few paragraphs; and of course, the Great Vampire Novel: Bram Stoker's Dracula. He had actually read Dracula when he was twelve years old. He may even have a copy of the book at home. He would have to check.

There were so many more stories, but among them, perhaps it was a passage in J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* that struck John the most, and sent a chill running down his spine as he read this passage at the end: "The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem...It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent."

That passage was just so spot-on that it left John with goosebumps crawling over the skin of his arms. Hadn't Sherlock mentioned courtship and possession of people he considered special?

And these were just the books: he had not yet started on the movies and TV shows. Although, to judge from what he had seen especially during his teenage years— when he and Harry had passed through a stage where just about every weekend movie they had seen together with friends could be relegated to the pages of Fangoria magazine— he probably wouldn't be able to glean anything significant from them. In fact, they were all eminently forgettable.

Well, all except one, perhaps. And this was only because it was his very first, serious horror movie, and it had caught him unawares.

He was eight years old when Mum and Dad brought home the video tape of Salem's Lot (yes, that movie based on the Stephen King novel), and Mummy had immediately aroused twelve year old Harry's curiosity by forbidding the kids to watch the movie until they had seen it for themselves. When they had finished watching it and there had still been no green light to let the kids have their turn with the video, Harry had decided to take matters into her hands one weekend afternoon when their parents had briefly stepped out to do some errands, and had popped the video into the machine.

So they had watched it together, one ear perennially cocked toward the direction of the garage in case Mum and Dad suddenly returned. Years later, John would not be able to remember the ending of that movie, or whether he even thought it was good. But one scene was forever forged in his brain, never to be forgotten, lurking in his subconscious and waiting for the most inopportune
moments (such as his answering an emergency summons in the middle of the night and walking through dark and deserted hospital corridors as an on-duty psych resident) to strike: that pivotal scene where the young hero's newly undead friend had come for a night-time visit, tapping on his window pane amid a swirl of mist. John was never going to forget that image of a vampire boy with shiny, silver dollar eyes, lips cracked into a hideous smile as he whispered to his friend, "Let me in..."

John was getting goosebumps just thinking about it right now.

Enough. Enough for one night. He had to think about getting some dinner and crashing in his apartment.

As John rose to leave, he heard a soft thud right outside his door. For a moment, he went still, heart suddenly and unaccountably at his throat.

Silence.

Jumping at shadows, now are we, John? Nice, he thought disgustedly.

The clinic at 221 Baker Street spanned seven floors, each floor catering to a different medical specialization: the ground floor, or A, was for Internal and Family Medicine. B was for Neurology and Psychiatry. C and D, for the Surgical Sciences. E for Obstetrics and Gynecology. F for Pediatrics and G for the mini-laboratory. It was only 8 pm, not very late. It was possible that it was just one of the doctors upstairs heading down the lift and emerging onto B by mistake.

John switched off the lamps, opened the door of his office. The automated lights directly above him flickered to full light as he emerged into the hallway, leaving the farther reaches of the clinic in shadow.

See? Nobody there. Mrs. Hudson's table was as neat as a pin, as always. Nothing disturbed. The hallway was empty, all the other office doors were sensibly shut.

John locked his office door and made an effort to walk calmly to the lifts, despite the hairs beginning to stand on end at his nape. Of course he could get out of the building a lot faster if he simply took the stairs (after all, he was only on the second floor), but he was damned if he had to go down that dim and narrow stairwell by himself.

You are a grown man, a doctor, John, he reminded himself angrily. Be rational.

All the while he had to resist the overwhelming urge to look behind him.

Nothing there. No vampire boy with silver eyes, and definitely no Sherlock...

The familiar chime at last, followed by the lift doors opening. John got inside, relieved. Just when the doors were closing, John thought he saw a shadow flit across the dimmed hallway of the clinic, at the far end of his office. Then, it was just the sight of his face reflected on the chrome surfaces of the lift doors as they closed.

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Author's Notes: Folie a deux, or "the madness shared by two" in X-Files parlance, is a rare psychiatric syndrome in which a symptom of psychosis (particularly a paranoid or delusional belief) is transmitted from one individual to another.

Among the Victorian vampire stories, Carmilla (1872) by J Sheridan Le Fanu, is a classic short
story that I highly recommend looking into. *Shambleau* (1933) by C.L. Moore is an amazing, amazing sci fi vampire story. For those of you who think science fiction and vampire stories don't mix, this story will blow you away. Do give it a chance and I promise you won't regret it. You can read these stories for free in the web.

Wikipedia served as the chief reference for my vampire discussion in this chapter.

Fangoria is a popular American horror movie magazine and a sister publication of Starlog, the science fiction/fantasy show magazine of which the author is a fan.

John's experience of viewing *Salem's Lot* (1979) is based on yours truly's childhood trauma of accidentally watching that particular scene (thanks to her older siblings and cousins) when the author was only seven years old. I know some of you would think that John at eight years of age may already be too jaded to be scared of a horror movie, but he did grow up in the 1970's and it was different back then. (At least I hope so).
Chapter 11

John was back on Louise Mortimer's couch.

Louise did not share the psychiatric practice at Baker Street. Instead, she had her clinic at Bart's, which was convenient for John as he could pop in as soon as he finished his rounds, the doctor getting treatment for himself after seeing to his patients.

It had been a full month since his last visit, after he told Louise that he was stopping the antidepressants. If anything, they were only making him feel worse.

John lay on the couch, feet crossed at the ankles, hands linked on his chest as he told Louise what had been happening to him lately. Except, it did not come out as anything resembling a coherent story. Instead, it was a kind of self-examination and diagnosis—proof that doctors were extremely difficult patients and guaranteed to drive other doctors crazy.

"I'm regressing, I know I am," said John. "Christ, I can't even see straight when it comes to this guy. I've never been one to indulge a patient, but you should hear him, Louise. He is the very definition of flawless logic. I can't penetrate his delusions because they're so air-tight and well-organized. After each session, I can't help thinking there's nothing wrong with him and everything's wrong with me!"

"John…"

"But then once I start hallucinating about this guy hounding me then I thought I really, really need to get back to you on the medications," babbled John.

Louise was silent for a moment, then she said, "But has he really been following you? Did you actually see him?"

It was a legitimate question, a serious question that needed to be addressed. For obvious reasons, psychiatrists had more problems with stalkers than anybody else in the medical profession.

John shook his head. "No, I can't really say that. It's…I think it's all in my head."

"Do you really want to go back to the meds?"

John sighed. "No," he said, closing his eyes wearily. "I felt awful when I was on them. It's just…tell me I'm not regressing, after all these months of therapy."

"Of course, you're not, John," said Louise gently. "But it's clear that you're tired. You're pushing yourself way too hard. I don't have to tell you just how difficult it is to handle a manipulative patient. Goodness knows we get all sorts in our job. Perhaps it might be good to refer this patient out to Sarah, or perhaps you can do some sort of group therapy where you don't have to be alone with him. That would be helpful in defusing whatever atmosphere he's trying to create around you."

John nodded. He sat up from the couch and ran a hand over his ruffled hair. "I don't want to be on medication for now," he said. "I just wanted a little outlet over this matter."

Louise nodded her understanding. "Of course," she said. "Just remember the breathing exercises, mental calisthenics—you know the route. I'll see you two weeks from now, then."

As John left for Baker Street, he thought over the unfruitful session he had just had with Louise. It
was not Louise's fault; John could hardly think of anything better to offer, if he were in her position. This was just the thing about having doctors as one's patients: they always thought they knew everything and more compared to you. John was disgusted to find himself being one of these creatures, but it could not be helped.

Because, of course, the idea of referring Sherlock to somebody else had already occurred to him, as early as session two, if we would recall. He had also considered recommending group therapy to Sherlock. Not that Sherlock would take kindly to it, he thought, so he never made the offer.

But what John could not bring himself to own up to Louise was the simple fact that he could not bear the thought of sharing Sherlock with anybody else. Sherlock was his patient and his alone. Of course, if John stopped to think how that statement must come across to somebody else who heard it, the implications would have filled him with mortified embarrassment. It was difficult to shed light on a complicated problem that John had resolutely buried deep, deep down inside himself.

Okay. So therapy with a shrink's shrink got him nowhere. The answers would have to come from Sherlock then.

That afternoon, John was prepared. He saw Kitty off and waited by the doorway for Mrs. Hudson to bring in Sherlock's file.

He watched as Kitty paused in the hallway outside to examine Sherlock's approach and heard her say appreciatively, "Well, look at you. Nice to see you again."

John frowned, a bit startled at what he was seeing and hearing, but Sherlock did not even so much as look in Kitty's direction as he brushed past her to enter John's office. John took the file from Mrs. Hudson, murmured a "thank you" and shut his door.

Sherlock paused by the armchairs and turned to him. There was a look in his eyes that seemed to speak of keen interest and anticipation, and John looked away almost immediately. He was not going to be led down whatever road Sherlock had in mind. Not today.

"Nice to see you again, Sherlock," he said offhandedly. "I see you've managed to survive and get a meal after our last session."

Instead of the armchairs, he made for his desk.

Sherlock went still at John's jibe, his eyes tracking him all the way to his desk with the books stacked neatly on top. Drifting his way over, his gaze skimmed through some of the titles on the covers, and John saw his eyes roll upwards for a brief second.

"Okay," sighed Sherlock in resignation. "You still have questions."

"Some, yes," answered John as he sat down on his side of the table. "I looked you up in the internet for the past couple of nights— what you claim to be anyway."

"Did you find anything interesting?" asked Sherlock, the hint of a drawl in his voice suddenly becoming more pronounced.


"Why not?" asked Sherlock as he draped himself over the seat facing John's table.
If John ever came near to spluttering, this would probably be the moment to do it. "There isn't a single scientific finding or explanation backing their existence!" exclaimed John, throwing his hands up in the air. "You're a scientist, Sherlock. Have you ever thought to consider it that way?"

Sherlock surveyed John, his expression remaining aloof and bored. "Yes, I am a scientist, and you are a medical man, John," he said. "Of course, I've thought of it that way. It's the only way worth considering. My question is: why haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

Sherlock flicked a scornful look at the books—novels, mostly—in front of him. "You are not going about your research the right way, Doctor," he said, the emphasis on John's title a cruel jab.

John folded his hands across his chest and leaned back on his chair. "How should I conduct my research then?"

"You should have gone to the much older texts, dating around the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, back when people still had a chance of catching one of us alive," said Sherlock in his quick ramble. Then he conceded: "Of course, the texts were all in Latin, some of them in Old German. Most of them probably did not survive the various book burnings that this nation's past monarchs were fond of implementing, and even if the relevant tomes managed to survive to the present day for your perusal, the information may not necessarily be accurate as they were observations made by your professional forbearers who were severely limited in terms of equipment and technology and hampered by their religious and personal beliefs to arrive at the proper conclusions. All in all, I quite understand your predicament. But to resort to fiction…!" Sherlock shook his head, tsking gently. "John, John, John…"

John stared at Sherlock, wondering whether he could get away with throttling a patient. "Okay," he said, striving for patience. "You, on the other hand, have access to the latest technology and I trust that you are in the unique position of being able to use it to investigate yourself. Do explain everything to me."

"All in good time," said Sherlock, clearly beginning to enjoy himself. "Although this much I will say: in terms of gross anatomy you won't be finding much difference between us. I can easily get away with an x-ray examination, for example. But a deeper probe such as tissue biopsies, lab exams of blood and other body fluids, and especially this—"

Sherlock pointed to his head. "This is where all the mystery lies," he said. "Have you ever wondered why I got into neurochemical research in the first place, John?"

John tried to keep his breathing even. Why the bloody hell could this guy just not fit into any proper and comfortable psychiatric diagnosis? Oh, right. John remembered: Sherlock did try to fake his way into an easy diagnosis only to have John blast him for his lies.

"And what did you find out?" he asked.

"Enough to make sure that I must never be examined by any doctor at this day and age," said Sherlock, "and that includes you. Therefore, unless you want me lying to you again, I would recommend that you send for the results of my last physical from Manchester for the sake of my chart records."

God, this just keeps getting better and better every single time. "So… you're saying you're not some supernatural being, after all?" John finally asked. "If you're not, then, what are you?"
"What do you think I am?" returned Sherlock.

"I don't know. An alien?" hazarded John. That sounded just about as outlandish as a vampire.

Sherlock smirked. "More like a member of a separate and distinct humanoid species related to Man and totally dependent upon him for the food we need to survive," he said, as though this was nothing out of the ordinary.

John stared at him open-mouthed.

"A species on the verge of extinction," added Sherlock, without emotion. "I am one of the last of my kind."

John looked away. Unbelievable. Just Unbloodybelievable...

Sherlock was watching him narrowly. "You still don't believe me," he said.

John fixed his gaze back at Sherlock. "Is it relevant that I believe you?" he asked.

"You tell me, as you seem particularly affected by my narratives," said Sherlock.

"I'm not..." John licked his lips, tried again. "I just want to understand what's going on here, what's going on with you."

"But I've already told you," answered Sherlock. "What do you make of it?"

"I need more proof—concrete proof," said John quietly. "Otherwise I will have to treat all of this as hearsay."

Sherlock said nothing, merely gazed at John with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Obviously, Sherlock was not going to give him anything more as of now. John released a breath, and looked down at the books on his desk. "So these..." he said. "These are all complete rubbish then?"


"I beg to disagree," said John, reaching for a book which he had marked with a ribbon. "Look at this passage here."

John handed him a copy of In a Glass Darkly, J Sheridan Le Fanu's collection of stories that contained Carmilla. Sherlock languidly flipped open the book where John had left the bookmark, his pale eyes skimming over the paragraph that John had found so chilling, and smiled.

"Given the amount of text written about us, it would be a wonder indeed if they can't get at least a single thing right just once," was all he said as he flipped through several more pages of the book before shutting it and carelessly tossing it back on the table.

"So, that passage was accurate," said John. "Regarding the way your...kind conducts courtship?"

"Of course, that story also mentioned people sleeping in coffins, essentially floating in several inches of blood, as proof of vampirism," continued Sherlock as if he had not heard John speak. "A shocking waste of a valuable resource, not to mention the appalling lack of sanitation. If you were to ask me, I'd say blood deserves to be in only one place, and that's in one's stomach. So you see, John, that you will have to regard your so-called vampire reference as suspect."
"But the courtship thing," insisted John, refusing to be derailed. "Engrossing vehemence resembling the passion of love? Is that accurate? Is that how you feel?"

"Would you like to find out?" asked Sherlock softly.

John quickly sat up straighter in his seat as he stared at Sherlock with equal measures of affront and surprise.

But Sherlock merely raised his eyebrows at John, apparently waiting for an answer.

Yes— no…maybe…John wasn't sure how to answer that question.

"What are you saying?" he managed at last.

"Would you like me to court you, John?" asked Sherlock quite seriously.

"Whoa. Hold on just a minute," said John, raising his hands as if to ward off a blow. He was so taken off guard that he wasn't sure how to school his face at that moment, and his expression was a cross between incredulous amusement and a grimace. He finally settled for something like heavy disapproval.

"You're joking, right?" he said.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" asked Sherlock, all the amusement suddenly gone from his face. All of a sudden, John felt like he was talking to a completely different person.

John groped around for something, anything to say. He felt a rush of unfamiliar warmth tinging his cheeks. Damn it all to hell, was he blushing? Oh please God, don't let it be that he was actually blushing!

"I'm your doctor," he finally said, as if that ought to explain why this was all so inappropriate.

"So?" Sherlock asked. "It's not like the other way around where you're soliciting me. You're bound by your medical ethics; I'm not."

"It goes both ways, believe me," John said. "I can't be involved with a patient, and I also happen not to be gay."

"What does being gay have to do with anything?" asked Sherlock, sounding genuinely perplexed.

Silence for a long time as John gaped at Sherlock, but it seemed he really wasn't having John on. "I can't believe this," John finally muttered, dazed.

"All I'm saying, John, is that this is a relatively simple question, answerable by a yes or no: do you want me to court you?"

John shook his head. "No," he said softly. "Of course, no."

Sherlock did not seem fazed, though it was obvious he found John's answer tedious. "Answering 'yes' would have made it all simpler, but no matter," he said. "You will find, John, that it would not be easy to continue saying 'no' to me for long."

John's gaze hardened as he said, "Are you…are you threatening me?"

Sherlock's smile was actually gentle as he replied, "Vehemence, love. Threatening, romancing. It's all in the choice of words, John."
"Fucking hell, the man was playing with him. Again! God damn him!

"Stop this," said John through gritted teeth. "Stop this right now!"

"Or what?" drawled Sherlock, his eyes alight with interest and cool enjoyment.

"Or I will refer you out. I swear it. I'm through playing your games, Sherlock. It's not what I do for a living," said John.

If anything, Sherlock's smile merely widened. "Now that, I would like to see," he said in that low voice, deep as an ocean and as cold and dark.

He leaned forward on his chair, elbows on knees and long hands together and rubbing gently, speculatively just in front of his mouth.

"Why so tense, John?" said Sherlock softly. "And clearly, you're angry. Angry and frightened, but for the wrong reasons. True, you're angry that I seem to be perpetually running circles around you. But you are also frustrated with yourself, and angry at being frustrated. No matter how frightening I may seem, you're not scared at all. You're interested in me—even fascinated; angry, but not afraid or repulsed, as you believe you should be under the circumstances, and that frightens the hell out of you."

Sherlock pulled back. He stared at John for a moment with something like satisfaction before continuing: "It frightens the hell out of you because deep down inside, I think you already know what you want. So why not just go ahead and say it?"
"Deep down inside, I think you already know what you want," said Sherlock. "So why not just go ahead and say it?"

For a moment, John stared at Sherlock as if he had turned to stone.

Then he did the unthinkable as a psychiatrist.

He laughed.

Once he started, he found that he could not stop. He laughed and laughed until he choked and his belly ached.

Sherlock watched him, his expression unreadable.

John's laughter finally turned breathy before trickling away completely.

"God, that felt good," he said, looking back at Sherlock. "I've not laughed like that in ages. Thank you."

"You find what I said amusing?" Sherlock asked, his voice very still, controlled.

"Oh yes," said John, sarcastically. "Very. It's actually quite refreshing, as I never thought of it that way. Can you do me a favor? Can you please not tell me that you know what's going on deep inside me? Because you have no idea what's going on in there. You can't possibly. Secondly, I'm not a masochist, Sherlock. If your idea of courtship is to drain me of my last drop of blood, then no, thank you. Dying is definitely not what I want to be doing anytime soon. I want nothing to do with what you're...proposing."

Sherlock watched him with the expression of a mycologist discovering a rare and very interesting fungus. "A lie," he said, his voice tinged with something almost like wonder. "Your first."

"No, it's not," said John, bristling again. The first part of his reply was, of course, and very likely the last one, too.

"And that's your second," counted Sherlock.

No use giving it a go for the third time, so John settled for glowering at Sherlock, waiting for whatever he was going to say next.

Sherlock finally shook his head. "You deliberately misunderstood me, John," he said. "Just so you can evade answering my question. But as I've said: it does not matter. There are ways to get to the truth, no matter how much you may resist."

He stood to take his leave, then paused. "By the way, I do see your point about deceptions, and I must insist on lifting a page from your book. If I can't lie to you, you may as well not, to me. Practically useless between the two of us, so why even bother?"

Sitting alone in the doctors' lounge hours later, John lifted his cup with fingers that still trembled a little and tried to drink some of the tea in it without spilling the beverage all over the place.
Get a grip, he told himself grimly. You did well. You actually did well. You were able to fob him off, so there's no need to be overreacting now...

After the sessions with Sherlock, John wondered why he hadn't gotten used to the shock quality of it all yet. Though to be fair, he suspected that this was not something that one ever got used to.

It was hard to believe that barely two weeks had passed since he first met the man, but it seemed that Sherlock had already single-handedly demolished and restructured his life to the point that John had trouble recognizing it as his own. It was unbelievable.

It was also intolerably intrusive.

John was now assessing the damage. He couldn't live like this forever—his poor heart would not be able to take it. Ever since he met Sherlock, that four-chambered muscle caged in his chest had been running like mad, not able to catch even a moment's rest, it seemed. John felt like he might just expire from all the unhealthy excitement one of these days.

Wistfully, he thought back on the days before Sherlock and wondered when, if ever, he would get to experience that sort of uneventful placidity again.

Only, on thinking back, those days had not been exactly placid either. Not when one was depressed and recently off medications. The days were uneventful, perhaps, although monotonous might be a better choice of adjective. There was always the stress of work, the fear of another one of his patients going the same way as Henry Knight. There was Harry to deal with on occasion. The loneliness that encroached whenever he left the clinic and started for home in the evenings, and those long, dead nights when he was too tired to go out and there was nothing ever good on in the telly.

So, yeah. That pretty much summed up his days before meeting Sherlock.

Oh, hold on. Compared to all that, his Sherlock days were now taking on a positively shiny, new look, and that had not been his intention at all.

Damn the man for confusing him. This was all Sherlock's fault. And damn him even more if he was going to waltz into his life and turn his sexual orientation inside out, along with everything else. That was the last shake-up he needed right now.

John had never had reason to be uncomfortable with his sexual preference. He never considered himself homosexual, not even bisexual. He had never looked twice at a man, had never remotely considered anyone of the same sex to be attractive, not until Sherlock came along. Even now, John did not really know what it was about Sherlock that had triggered such an instinctive reaction within him. Certainly not his features initially, though they were striking enough. Those had come under his close scrutiny much later.

No, it was something in the man himself, that indefinable air about him that instantly told John the moment he set foot in his office that he was going to be dangerous and interesting and absorbing. And indeed, Sherlock turned out to be all that and more, and now John was having difficulty tuning him out and pushing him away at arm's length.

John sighed, shook his head as he took another gulp of his tea.

Damn you, Sherlock Holmes. You'd better not make me want you, or there'll be hell to pay...

The door of the lounge opened behind him and in came Sarah.
"Ah, I thought I might find you here," she said as she strolled over to take the seat beside John.

John smiled. "Hi," he said.

"Hi. So how's it going?"

John shrugged. So-so.

"Your vampire didn't actually try to eat you alive after that concert, did he?" Sarah teased.

John smiled noncommittally and lifted his cup to his lips. "How are you?" he asked.

"Good. Dinner with James later, then maybe the cinema." A pause. "Listen, John, I think we need to talk."

"Yes?" John was suddenly alert, anxious.

"It's about Harry."

"What about Harry?"

"Well, it's probably nothing. It's just, you asked to be alerted in case there's a break in the routine," said Sarah. "I'm sure it's nothing. Anyway, she's missed three sessions of therapy now."

Three sessions. That would be three weeks in total.

"Of course, it's not like she really needs to come so often. In fact, I was thinking of cutting back her sessions to twice a month. She's really been doing very well," continued Sarah. "Anyway, just a heads up your way."

"Thanks, Sarah."

Sarah got up, squeezed his shoulder briefly, and left.

John closed his eyes. Harry…

He was already digging out his mobile from his pocket. Harry picked up on the fourth ring.

"John?"

_And hello to you, too…_

"Hey," said John. "How's it going?"

"Fine. I'm sort of busy." Her tone was irritated. The usual Harry, in short. John was glad to note that her words were not slurred, thank God. It seemed like she was keeping it together.

"Sorry. I just wanted to know how you're doing," said John.

A pause. "I see Sarah's been tattling," she said flatly.

"Is there any cause for alarm?" John asked softly.

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. "If there is, I'm sure you will be the first one to know, John," she said.

"How would I know if you don't ever call, or drop by the clinic?" asked John in a reasonable tone,
the one guaranteed to set Harry off like a handful of firecrackers. "How are the AA meetings
going?"

"Look, don't worry, okay? Everything's under control. I've just been busy with a project, is all. I'll
try to swing by next week, all right?"

"Okay."

Well, that was that. The usual conversation with his sister. Definitely a feature of his pre-Sherlock
days. How on earth had he actually convinced himself that he missed those days?

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Given how badly their last interview had ended, perhaps it was not surprising that John had his first
dream of Sherlock a few nights later.

Ever since Henry's suicide, John could not remember any of his dreams, or even if he ever dreamed
at all. His sleeping pattern had been shattered. Most times, it seemed as if he were only taking naps
at night, leaving him raw and edgy and grumpy in the mornings.

But this was sleep at its deepest level— the dream was startlingly clear and vivid, as if it were not a
dream at all. The fact that it was deeply erotic was another point of surprise, though John did not
know why it should be, after what he had gone through during his last session with Sherlock.

John dreamt that he was lying on his bed. It was night— moonlight spilled in from the open
windows, bathing the bed and several feet of wooden floor adjacent to it with a soft, unearthly
glow. He wanted to move, but found that he could not. His body seemed completely detached from
his mind, heavy and inert even though he could feel the soft weight of the blanket on top of him
and the soft breeze through the open window.

His heart was racing wildly, as if he were running a marathon. He was afraid, afraid because there
was that shadow again, lurking amidst the other shadows just off his closed, bedroom door. It was
darker than the night darkness pooled in the room, and it was moving slowly forward.

John first saw one foot appear, then the other— elegantly shod in narrow, black leather shoes— as
the form detached itself from the inky darkness and stepped onto the moonlit floor just off his bed.
More of the man emerged: dark trousers above those feet; the dark, tailored coat swirling gently
about him; his thin, long-fingered hands resting on his sides; and finally, his beautiful, pale face
with those impossible cheekbones thrown into sharper relief by the moonlight.

For a moment, John was frightened that he might see Sherlock as that vampire boy with the silver
eyes, but when he finally saw them, Sherlock's eyes remained his: pale blue and hard, glittering
with amusement.

John opened his mouth to speak, but found that his voice failed him.

"Hush, John," drawled Sherlock, his voice pitched low and dark and oddly soothing, as he paced
for a moment at the foot of John's bed, his movements unhurried. "There is no need for words. Not
when you're just going to lie to me."

Slowly, Sherlock placed a hand on the white sheets at the foot of the bed, and John could swear his
heart stopped for the briefest moment as he saw Sherlock draw himself onto John's bed.

This can't be happening, John thought, dazed with the heady onslaught of arousal and terror as he
watched Sherlock slowly advancing toward him on his hands and knees. Oh, move, dammit!
But he couldn't. He was paralyzed as Sherlock crawled his way slowly up on top of him.

Oh my God. This felt so real. John could feel Sherlock's knees finally straddling his legs, Sherlock's weight settling down on him, with only the blanket in between them.

John saw him lift a white hand to undo the first two or three buttons of his pajama top, peeling the fabric away from John's neck to reveal the smooth column of his throat. "No use fighting, so don't even try," Sherlock was saying, his voice a guttural purr. "You mustn't forget that you owe me, John, and I've come to collect."

John felt Sherlock's gentle fingers under his chin, angling his face away a bit, exposing more of his throat, forcing him to look at Sherlock through the corner of his eye. He felt a cool finger glide from his collarbone to rest lightly on the side of his throat, just on top of his leaping pulse. "You will let me have you, won't you, John?" asked Sherlock, sounding as though he were interested in John's reply. "You will let me have what I want because you're mine."

No no no…! screamed John, but it was locked deep inside his head, like an echo of an echo of an echo. The only sound that he could emit was a low, strangled moan, completely misrepresentative of how he was actually feeling and thoroughly, maddeningly inappropriate.

He felt those fingertips brush teasingly over his slightly open mouth, where his quick breath came. "You can speak, you know," said Sherlock. "Will you let me, John?"

John swallowed audibly, and his traitor mouth, upon finding itself released from its bondage, merely breathed out hoarsely, "Oh God, yes…"

Sherlock smiled. "That's my John," he murmured approvingly. "No more lies now, yes?"

John saw Sherlock's tongue appear to lick at the corners of his mouth, saw him bend his head down towards John's exposed neck.

John could feel Sherlock's hair— surprisingly soft— as the dark curls brushed at and tickled his chin. Breathless, he waited in an agony of anticipation for that first, sharp kiss, but Sherlock took his time, trailing his nose along his neck, inhaling deeply, taking in his scent.

Oh please…

To John's mortified embarrassment, he did not know whether he spoke those words aloud or not, but he felt Sherlock chuckling silently against the sensitive skin of his throat.

Then he felt something shatter within him when he finally felt Sherlock's tongue licking a hot, wet stripe just over his pulse point—

John abruptly came awake, breathing harshly, feeling as though he were going into cardiac arrhythmia. His legs tangled in the blanket hitched low over his torso as his body fought to come out of its stupor. The feel of the dream was still upon him for a few moments, until he realized that he was staring at his bedroom in bright sunlight. His strength suddenly left him and he sagged back onto his pillow.

Breathe, just breathe, he thought as he took in great gusts of air and letting them out in huffs. Huffs that gradually turned into silent sobs.

Oh God, what is happening to me?
Chapter 13

Sherlock opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of his hotel room, where a sliver of pale morning light shone in through a break in the curtains of his windows. Slowly, he got up from the nest of warm blankets around him, allowing sensations to envelop his body and mind.

Interesting dream…

Sherlock had never dreamed of John before, and the fact that this was merely the first time and it was already in such a highly charged context…

Most instructive.

Sherlock stood from the bed and walked to the bathroom. The feel of warm water on his skin as he stepped into the shower. He let the residual feelings of arousal the dream had brought on ebb away with the water. All the while, his thoughts continued to flow, like flashes of quicksilver in the depths of his mind.

He knew John was a feeling person (what human wasn't, really?), he just did not realize he could be so passionate beneath that calm, steady exterior. It had been quite…stirring.

Sherlock very rarely had this kind of dream where he could successfully penetrate a person's sleeping mind and seize control. It was a very difficult trick to handle and execute, albeit very useful— quite a weapon actually. His kind had used it to maim and, on occasion even kill, enemies, giving rise to exaggerated claims in fiction about how vampires could flit in and out of one's dreams (rooted in fact, as it turned out). The process behind it was not yet properly understood, but the fact that it could happen meant that a scientific explanation existed. He would need to perform…additional experiments in future.

The different textures of silk and linen sliding on his skin as he slipped into a clean, white shirt, a pair of dark trousers. A light coat jacket on top of the shirt, to be followed later by the heavier outdoor coat when he intended to go out.

And another vital finding: he was not the only one controlling the actions in that dream. That was the truly exceptional thing about it. Incapacitating John and pinning him to his bed— yes, he was responsible for that. John had so annoyed him by laughing at his deductions and lying to his face that he had decided to teach the doctor a lesson or two. The intention of drinking from John had also been his idea. However, he would not— could not— imagine himself engaging in such theatrics as crawling over John and practically seducing him in that manner. It was intriguing that John himself had lent a hand in it— flavored by all the stereotypical nonsense that he had probably accumulated by reading all those trashy vampire novels— creating a scenario so heated, and John’s hold over the situation was so strong, that Sherlock had been surprised at his own inability to break away. He had already observed several times that John was no pushover. This matter merely established the observation as unassailable fact. It was almost unheard of that a victim could wrestle control of a dream, even partially, from a vampire. John had been most impressive.

Sherlock frowned. He had heard of this phenomenon before, from someone a long time ago, though he had never encountered it until now.

Resonance, it was called. An extremely difficult feat, made possible only if the vampire and the other participant had been dreaming of each other at almost the same time. And only if the participant/ intended victim had enough will power not to give in to the vampire’s whims, but can
instead make the vampire dance as much as the vampire can make him.

He and John had resonated last night, like the deep chords of a cello's strings being plucked. Together they had woven a fantasy, surreal and intense. How interesting.

And how right he had been about John.

John had wanted him. Badly, to judge from the dream. Sherlock could still remember the almost-real sensations of those last moments just before waking—John's neck, like a column of marble in the moonlight; the frantic hum of John's blood just beneath his fingertips; John's scent, warm and intimate; the way he had surged up against Sherlock as he licked the salt on John's lightly perspiring skin…

*Mmm...John...*

Oh, there was so much to look forward to, with John. Sherlock knew he would savor the moment when he would be able to realize what John actually tasted like.

Once he had finished dressing, Sherlock turned to look at his reflection in the mirror, and the sight of a slender young man hardly a day above thirty, with striking dark and white features, stared back at him.

The dream had ended abruptly, possibly because of John waking. The unresolved scenario had made Sherlock hungry. He was going to have to see to some breakfast then.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

There were things to do after breakfast.

Sherlock had an appointment at the British Library at 10 am. He was early, so he spent the time at the periodicals section, flipping through the newspapers. Just as John had done days before, Sherlock methodically went through each page, paying close attention to the tiny news pieces on the inner pages. When he was satisfied that no mention of a young woman had gone missing or an unidentified one was found dead, he let the papers go.

*That's it, Molly. Keep hiding. Never emerge until the spider is dead, or I am...in which case, you will be, too.*

A storm was coming.

Sherlock cast a glance at his watch. It was nearly time. He made his way to the rare books section, where an assistant (in her last year of graduate school, dissertation not going well, considering a drastic change in topic or adviser, or both) was waiting for him.

"Dr. Sigerson, it's good to meet you at last," she said as they shook hands.

"Good morning. You must be the lovely Avery that I've been talking to on the phone," he said, smiling, with just a touch of a Scandinavian accent.

The young woman blushed prettily. "This way please, Doctor," she said.

They moved to the inner sanctum of the rooms, whose temperature and moisture levels were strictly regulated. Sherlock loved the feel and smell of old books, could spend hours surrounded by and immersed in them. This morning though, he was more interested in the visitors' log book, duly presented to him by the lovely Avery.
"If you can just sign over here, Doctor, we can get to the medieval archives and the originals of the *Historia rerum Anglicarum* in no time."

-----------------------------------------------

Just minutes after he emerged from the library, Sherlock got a call from Mrs. Hudson.

"Sherlock, dear. Dr. Watson's just called in sick and asked that all his patients' appointments for today be postponed," she said.

Sherlock closed his eyes briefly. *Oh for the love of God!* He thought, exasperated. And all because of a silly dream!

"Of course. I understand, Mrs. Hudson," he replied.

"We'll see you the day after tomorrow for your next session then."

"Yes. And please tell the doctor to take care of himself," he said.

"I will," chirped Mrs. Hudson. "Bye now."

"Goodbye."

John wasn't getting away. Not this easily.

It was time Sherlock paid him a visit. In broad daylight.

-----------------------------------------------

The entrance to John's apartment building was secured by heavy glass doors guarded by a machine panel requiring keys and a code for entry. Sherlock went back out and made sure he was standing just below the building in full view of the balconies before he got his phone out.

John was not going to know what hit him.

The doctor picked up on the second ring, his voice uncertain—Sherlock's number was new and unrecognizable to his mobile phone, of course—as he said, "Hello?"

"You don't sound sick, John," said Sherlock flatly. "Haven't we agreed that there'd be no more lies between us?"

Silence for what seemed like an eternity, before John's voice, transformed with rage, said, "Sherlock. How the bloody fuck did you get my num—"

"Never mind the minor details. We need to talk," cut in Sherlock imperiously. Give the guy no time to think and no room to maneuver in.

John's voice practically cracked in what suspiciously sounded like near-panic: "No! I don't want to talk to you right now!"

"John, you're being irrational. Just because of what happened last night."

A gasp, as though John had been punched in the gut: "What?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me, John Watson. You know what happened last night: the dream," said Sherlock, lips twitching into a smirk as he imagined the doctor all alone in his apartment upstairs,
walking around in rapid circles, hyperventilating. Because that was how he sounded over the phone just now.

"Oh my God," said John, voice rising and going slightly off-key. "Jesus. Jeesus. How—"

"I can explain. Or try, anyway. If you'd let me in," said Sherlock.

"No! No, there is absolutely no way you're coming over to my place!"

"Ah, well. That's unfortunate. But if you would really prefer it, I can do the talking from down here and let the neighbors know the score between us," said Sherlock.

A pause. "Where the hell are you?" demanded John.

"Go to your balcony," instructed Sherlock. John appeared moments later at his balcony on the fifth floor, phone held to his ear, a mixture of anxiety and confusion on his face.

"Okay, look down. I'm on the pavement just outside your flat," said Sherlock.

"Oh fuck. Oh no. Oh God!" John cried when he finally caught sight of Sherlock staring at him from below. "How did you— have you been following me? Leave me the bloody hell alone, Sherlock, or I swear to God I will call the police!"

"And tell them what?" drawled Sherlock. "That you've been having erotic dreams about me, that I've been stalking you in those dreams? What might that sound like, I wonder? They're welcome to take that particular dream sequence apart and—"

"What the hell do you want from me?" John practically shouted.

"Shush, John!" Sherlock said sharply into the phone, scandalized. "What would the neighbors think?"

Sherlock nearly laughed when he saw John clamp a hand to his mouth, saw the same hand slowly spreading to cover John's red face.

"John, be reasonable. I want us to talk, just like always," said Sherlock, his voice clearing, becoming serious. "If you don't want me to come up, then at least come down and let's just…talk."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I can stay here indefinitely. I can serenade you, if you like," replied Sherlock, the smirk back on his face as he looked up at John looking down at him.

"Oh, fuck you. Fuck—!" a string of violent invectives followed before John abruptly cut the call and disappeared back into his apartment.

Sherlock waited for around ten minutes before he saw John appear at the doorway of his apartment building. Apart from last night's dream, Sherlock had never seen the doctor out of his various coat and tie ensembles, with the long, white doctor's coat overlying it all, and the sight of John now in jeans, a tan jumper and a short, black jacket was so different that Sherlock could feel his eyebrows rising. He was well acquainted with John's thunderous expression though.

"Stay at least three feet away from me at all times," warned John, hands balled into formidable fists on his sides and every line of his body screaming bloody murder. "Unless you want to find yourself
in a headlock so fast and the coppers all over us in seconds."

"I'd like to see you try," said Sherlock, smiling, "but, all right. I shall indulge you just this once."

Without another word, John buried his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket and, shoulders slightly hunched, set off at a brisk pace down the street with Sherlock effortlessly keeping stride beside, and well away from, him.

John needed to cool down. He needed to walk. All over London, if necessary. So he did. Or it seemed that way when they finally settled down on a bench in, oddly enough, Regent's Park— the very same place just five minutes away from Baker Street where they had met a week ago when Sherlock had dragged John out of his office for their meeting.

He was wheezing slightly, winded, but the rigidity of his limbs and the tightness in his chest were gradually easing. All the while, Sherlock had remained blessedly silent beside him.

He rubbed his face tiredly with his hands, let them remain cradling his head for a while with his elbows on his knees until he trusted himself to speak in a calm, rational manner.

"Okay. You said you can explain. Let's hear it."

"You've got to be more specific, John," said Sherlock, careful to keep the impatience from his voice. "Explain what, exactly?"

"The dream, of course!" exclaimed John. "How the hell did you know about it?"

"The usual way," replied Sherlock with a shrug of his shoulders. "Because I dreamed it too."

"I haven't the faintest. Though it's not unheard of among my kind." he finally asked.

"So you...your people do it all the time?" asked John.

"Not all the time, no. It's hard enough without resonance even entering the picture."

"What we did. In the dream. We resonated. We contributed equally to the scenario." Sherlock gave John a sly grin. "I had no idea, John, that you could be so—"

John interrupted before Sherlock could finish whatever it was that he meant to say. "Hold on just a minute," he said, voice suddenly thinning into that sharp, unsteady wobble again. "Just so we're clear on this: I did not contribute to anything in that dream. That was all your making. I couldn't even move a damn muscle—"

Sherlock shook his head. "No," he said. "That whole crawling bit was not me, cannot be me. So you must have made it happen."

"There is no way I could have come up with anything so...so...!" John was at a loss for words. So he finally settled for, "No. Impossible. That wasn't me."

"Whatever you say, John. Though it doesn't really change anything."

"That dream was practically a rape scene! You think I'd want—"
Sherlock's voice was cold when he cut in brusquely: "No."

John stared at him, brows lifted. "No?"

"No, that dream was many things, but it was definitely not rape," replied Sherlock, his eyes pinning John in his place.

"Oh yeah?"

"How can it possibly be rape when you were saying 'Oh God, yes…' to me?" inquired Sherlock, thoroughly without mercy.

John flinched as though he had been poked with a live wire. He got up abruptly and walked several feet away, wild roses blooming in his cheeks as he muttered, "This isn't real. This can't be real…"

John stared off into the trees for a time, his back to Sherlock, hands on his hips, shoulders tense, his breathing rapid before it finally slowed down to something near normal. Slowly he turned and came back to sit beside Sherlock on the bench.

"You were saying something about resonance?" asked John, eyes averted.

Sherlock's lips etched a brief smile of approval. "It's an extremely difficult state to achieve," he said. "A dream where both participants strike a balance in the scenario they're concocting. I've not come across it before. Think of it as the highest form of compliment I can pay you, John."


"It's okay, John. It's all fine."

"No, it's not!" bellowed John, glowering at Sherlock. "It's not okay!"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "You don't have to be so upset."

"And why the bloody hell not? You practically invaded my dreams, you pinned me to my bed, you tried to feed from me!"

"That's only because you were being so pig-headed in the office. I don't appreciate being laughed at, John. Besides, you do owe me a meal."

John let out an explosive breath. "You owe me an apology," he said, shaking his head ominously.

"Do I?"

"Yes, goddammit, you can't just do what you did and expect me not to react this way!"

Several passersby stared at them, dismissed the heated argument as a lovers' quarrel, and moved on. But John was too furious to care what other people thought at this point.

"I don't see the need to apologize for anything," said Sherlock with maddening calm, "especially over something that turned out to be quite enjoyable. I now understand how you caught me at my lie about the fantasy bedroom scene with my female colleague that I described upon first meeting you. I was being extremely theoretical, wasn't I? The actual experience is so much more intense. And no use lying to me again and telling me you didn't enjoy it, by the way."

"Enjoy it? I was terrified, Sherlock!"
"And aroused and excited as well. You'll never feel more alive than when you're standing on the edge of the precipice. Get used to it when you're dealing with me, John."

John squeezed his eyes shut. This was too much. God, this was just too much to go on with. It was like being strapped to a hurricane doing 180 miles an hour.

"You believe me now, don't you." It was not a question.

John's answer took a while. A long while.

John finally sighed before opening his eyes. "You've got things to say," he said. "Go on. Tell me, then."

Author's Notes: Sherlock's pseudonym, Sigerson, was lifted from ACD's "The Adventure of the Empty House", and was used by Sherlock Holmes during his years abroad after defeating Moriarty in "The Final Problem".

Historia rerum Anglicarum (History of English Affairs), by 12th century English historian William of Newburgh, relates the history of England from 1066 to 1198. It also serves as an early source for stories about medieval revenants and vampires. Available in its original copy in the British Library, Sherlock need not go that far to read it, if he were really interested in the text. Excerpts are available online.
"You've got things to say," said John. "Go on. Tell me, then."

John watched as Sherlock hesitated, then looked away, as though suddenly unsure of himself, or uncertain where to begin. Now that the moment had finally come that John was forced to fully acknowledge the truth about Sherlock, the silence greeting John was tinged with a touch of diffidence, almost of shyness. John couldn't blame him. What did one say or do after such a stunning revelation?

John himself was still feeling more than a little punch-drunk, still trying to get his bearings on a world that seemed to have tilted on its axis abruptly, destroying certain beliefs that had been unassailable truths throughout his life and thrusting upon him the knowledge, as certain now as gravity, that somebody or something like Sherlock could exist in the same sphere of reality as he did. It was as though somebody had suddenly and unequivocally found out that the earth revolved around the moon. How did one cope with such an alteration in one's way of thinking that was of such life-changing magnitude?

The panic and nausea brought on by the initial shock were subsiding. John was a doctor, and his special coping mechanism, courtesy of his medical training, was kicking in. Mental triage— that process of determining the priority of addressing certain situations based on the severity of the likely consequences. Right now, he had to push down all thoughts that threatened to break his already-fragile composure and which would result in his running away from Sherlock, screaming his head off. It simply wouldn't do.

As if to spare them any further awkwardness, Sherlock's phone suddenly started to ring.

"It's Mike," said Sherlock as he looked at the caller ID before bringing the phone to his ear.

John, wiping an unsteady hand across his dry mouth, was about to look away when Sherlock's voice, raised in sharp accents, drew his attention back to him: "No, no! Tell him... tell Anderson to step away from the machine. Now! Tell him to turn away and not even so much as look at it!"

Sherlock looked absolutely furious as he listened to what Mike had to say. "Okay, you'll have to turn the thing off manually. There's a red master switch at the back. Turn it off. Wait five minutes before you try turning it on again," he said shortly.

John stared at him wonderingly as Sherlock shifted impatiently in his seat, irritation clear in his every movement.

"What? Nothing?" Sherlock finally said. "Oh, perfect. Just perfect. My congratulations to Anderson for breaking the machine simply by trying to turn it on. Of course there's a right way and a wrong way of initiating the start-up for the machine! All he had to do was look it up in the manual! He had to make sure the balancing solution was replaced and the waste solution discarded before he did anything else. Has the man not enough neurons to work that out? What's to be done? There's nothing to be done now. Repairs will take a few days and it's going to be quite useless starting any experiments while the machine is broken. At the rate things are going you might as well send Anderson in for brain repairs along with the machine. That ought to save us some problems in the future."

Sherlock punched the end call button on his phone emphatically, turned to look at John, and said, "What?"
John was actually laughing in that quiet, breathy way of his, eyes cast downwards on his lap. "Nothing," he said. "It's just…it just struck me as funny."

"What was?"

John looked up. "You," he said. "I mean, you're a bloody vampire, for crying out loud! You said so yourself that your life is measured in centuries, not decades."

"So?" asked Sherlock with a shrug and a tilt of his eyebrows.

"So what are you doing, going through such hard slog as a scientist and researcher when you can be in Paris or Venice or some other exotic locale, enjoying yourself?"

Sherlock frowned, as though he did not quite follow. "Who says I haven't been to Paris and Venice and just about everywhere else?"

John raised his brows. "So, you'd prefer to be stuck in a lab in Manchester over those places?"

"Wouldn't you?" asked Sherlock.

"God, no!" exclaimed John, looking at Sherlock with a what-is-wrong-with-you expression. "I mean, if I have an eternity to burn, I'd take myself off on a permanent vacation, somewhere sunny and warm and nowhere near a hospital."

"Give it a hundred years and I promise you the novelty of being on vacation will wear off," said Sherlock. "After all, you can only have enough of loitering around a pool or a beach day in and day out. You will find that ennui will easily be your biggest enemy. This is the work I've chosen to do because I find it absorbing and worthy of my time and effort. Besides, at any age you happen to be living in, there are certain...practicalities that cannot be brushed aside."

"You mean money?" John said.

"That, among other things."

John shook his head at the logic of it all, though he couldn't stop himself grinning. Jesus, he couldn't believe it. He was actually discussing the practicalities of everyday vampire life with…well, a vampire. After a moment, Sherlock joined him by chuckling softly.

"So this is what you've been doing your entire life? Scientific research?" asked John.

"Not my whole life, no," replied Sherlock. "Until four hundred years ago science was not science as we know it. Most tedious. I've had…various occupations throughout the years."

"Really? Such as?"

"What does it matter what I did in my past lives?" asked Sherlock. "Those years are gone, never to return. To ruminate over those dead years is to give way to sentiment, a concept I have no wish of acquainting myself."

John frowned, but decided not to press Sherlock further. Instead, he asked, "How old are you?"

"I can't really say for certain. There are whole periods of time that I cannot take into account."

"Why not?"

"Because I slept through them."
"Hold on. You…slept through them. Do you mean to tell me you hibernate?" asked John, unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

"No one can stand absolute reality for very long, John."

"When does this process happen? Like every hundred years or so?"

"There's no definite pattern to it. It's usually during times of intense physical or mental stress, though I can simply shut down by lulling myself into that state whenever necessary."

"And when do you wake up?"

"Again, it varies. It could be months, years. Sometimes even decades."

"So how long have you been living your present life?"

"I woke up sometime in 1976."

John exhaled a breath. Amazing. Simply amazing. "And Sherlock Holmes isn't your real name, of course," he said.

"It's as real as all my previous names, simply because it names me," said Sherlock. "Though for the sake of verity, I lifted that name off a tombstone in a Sussex churchyard, the original bearer having died sometime in the 1820's."

John bit his lip, tried not to look at Sherlock and finding that he could not look away. Just what was it about this creature before him that he could fall under his spell so effortlessly? And yet all Sherlock ever did was to tell John the truth about himself.

"I don't think I'd like to find out how you managed to fake all your identity papers and documents," said John. "Though that must be a feat in itself."

"That would be a wise course of action," agreed Sherlock.

"How about your family? Where do you come from?"

"I don't remember my parents. It was so long ago. Though I do have a brother," Sherlock replied, scowling.

John did a double take. "You do?"

Sherlock made an annoyed gesture. "The only reason why I remember him is because he makes it a point to seek me out each and every time I wake up," he said. "Though to be frank I'd much rather that he leaves me alone."

"And right now, does he…"

"No. He's getting slow. It's either that or he's reluctant to make contact, although I'm sure it will only be a matter of time before he does."

"Why don't you want to be in contact with him?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Too much history between us," he said succinctly.

John nodded. As strange as it sounded, that was one aspect of sibling relations that he could perfectly understand and sympathize, although he was sure that in Sherlock's case, he meant it both
"So now you're Sherlock Holmes, scientist," mused John. "For how long are you going to maintain this identity?"

"As long as I can," said Sherlock, eyes on the trees and their gently swaying branches holding the last handful of red and golden leaves. "I do rather enjoying living at this age. So many new technological developments, especially during the last twenty years."

"Yes," said John, smiling gently.

"There was a problem, before we met," said Sherlock. "I got into a spot of bother. I thought, at that time, that if I managed to get myself out of that mess, that perhaps it would be good for me to disappear and sleep again."

"But here you are, wide awake," said John. "Why didn't you just take off then?"

"And start all over again? No. It's never easy, falling asleep and waking up God knows when to forge another identity from scratch. It's extremely troublesome, and it's not going to get any easier anytime soon. Besides, I have… unfinished business."

"And what unfinished business might that be?"

Sherlock glanced at John. "Perhaps it might do you good not to know too much about it," he said softly.

John shook himself out of the lull that Sherlock's words were gradually placing him in. Even after the massive shock he had just experienced, it was easy, so easy, to put everything out of his mind and just listen to Sherlock's fascinating account of himself. John must never forget that he was not dealing with a man here.

And yet, he wanted— needed—to know everything about this extraordinary being.

"Perhaps. Though it might help a little if I were to know the gist of the problem," John said, guileless blue eyes round and brimming with mild persistence.

Sherlock exhaled soft laughter. "Stubborn, aren't we?" he said. "All right. That female colleague that I mentioned. I tried to feed from her. She shot me. Small caliber gun, never saw it coming. She managed to shoot me twice, here and here."

Sherlock gestured at his midriff. "The bullets did not penetrate that deeply, owing in part to my heavy coat and the layers of clothes that got in the way, but the blood loss was severe enough to disable me. I managed a few miles from the lab before collapsing. When I woke up, I found myself in the hands of a madman, the most dangerous kind."

John watched as Sherlock's eyes flitted shut. "He knew what I was," said Sherlock in the same soft, thoughtful voice. "He had some deranged notions about wanting to be a vampire and had some firm ideas on how to achieve it. Namely, through me."

"He… wanted you to transform him into a vampire?" said John.

"Yes. He did not just want to be transformed, he wanted to consume me in the process. In short, he wanted to be me, the way some people would ingest the bones and body parts of a tiger to become one."
"Oh my God," said John quietly.

"Oh my God, indeed," echoed Sherlock in an expressionless voice. "For days I despaired of my life. Then an opportunity arose, unexpected but welcome. There was a girl in his group who was more…receptive to reason than the others. She helped me escape. So now here I am."

"So now here you are," echoed John faintly. "By the way, how do you feed exactly? I don't see any fangs anywhere."

"And I give you full permission to shoot me dead if you ever see a set growing in my mouth," replied Sherlock curtly. "I've never heard of anything more absurd."

"So, how…?"

"There is a sharp, retractable stalk, very much like a needle, just below my tongue. It's—" Sherlock stopped speaking abruptly as he saw John suddenly sit up, a gleam of interest in his eyes.

"Show me?" asked John, his expression rapt.

Sherlock drew away a fraction, as though offended by the very idea. "John Watson, that is probably the most indecent thing anyone has ever asked of me," he said quite gravely.

John actually burst out laughing, a ring of hysteria somewhere in its depths. "Please?" he asked. "Come on. Just a little—"

"No." Sherlock's tone brooked no opposition.

John settled back in his seat, clearly disappointed. Sherlock continued to watch him for a time, wondering at this strange, cheeky man who couldn't seem to be afraid of anything for long.

John was silent for a long time. Then he said, "I know you're going to scoff at this, but I just want to get it out of the way. Can you really transform a person into a vampire by drinking his blood?"

Sherlock gave John a long-suffering look. "For God's sake, John, do use your head. Do you think it's really possible for me to transmit my condition as if I were an infection?" he asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know what to think, would I?" asked John defensively. "All the vampire stories point to that. At the very least, you transform a person into a vampire by drinking his blood. Sometimes, you get to share each other's blood before that person becomes a vampire. Until now, I've never met an actual vampire who could set the record straight."

Definitely fearless, thought Sherlock as he stared into John's unwavering gaze. Astonishing.

"No, of course I can't transform anyone," Sherlock finally huffed. "No matter what all the stories would say, I am bound by the laws of physics just like everybody and everything else in this universe, and that's simply, physically impossible."

"Oh," John said, looking away. Something in his tone of voice registered with Sherlock, who shot him a searching glance.

There was nothing for a while except for the sound of the wind in the trees, a soothing balm to John's frayed nerves.

Sherlock continued to look at John. "You seem to have recovered especially fast from your shock," he observed.
"Have I?" asked John.

Sherlock looked down at John's hands, fisted so tightly on his lap that the knuckles were white. He smiled at John's averted face.

"So, what now?" John finally asked.

"Unless you'd be so good as to release me immediately by giving me that bill of health to present to Mike in Manchester, then I see very little recourse but to continue with our sessions for a while longer," said Sherlock, his gaze suddenly on the trees, some children playing a few yards away, the giggling fountain, anywhere but on John.

There was only one logical question arising from that statement, but John chose not to ask it.

What's going to happen after that? What are you going to do with me after I have outlived my usefulness?

No, he was not even going to think about it now. John felt that he already knew what was going to happen. He also knew he wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it. He did not know at the time, but the moment Sherlock set foot in his office, things had already been set irremediably in motion. There was no turning back, no way to change the final outcome, and the less people he dragged into the matter, the better. He could not risk anyone else dying just because he would, soon.

There was nothing else to be done. So for now he would continue to see his vampire. Never mind what was going to happen to either of them afterwards.

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Author's Notes: John's question to Sherlock regarding his choice of working as a scientist as opposed to having the time of his life and living in Paris or Venice is lifted from an Anne Rice interview wherein she expressed her views about the Twilight series of books and films. No offence to Twilight fans intended.
Long after his impromptu rendezvous with John that day, Sherlock sat on the plush sofa chair in his hotel room, hands linked before him, eyes unseeing as he turned inwards into himself.

Talking about Jim Moriarty for the first time since his escape had triggered memories of that awful time in captivity, barely two months ago.

Two months ago, when he thought he was going to die.

Sherlock closed his eyes as he retreated into his mind palace, and in no time at all, he was back in the parking lot outside the Manchester lab in the waning light of early evening, staring at Irene Adler's stricken face as his hand closed in on her throat. The soft "pop, pop" of her gun barely registered until he looked down at his coat, at the two small, dark holes that had not been there a moment ago.

He let go of Irene, slumped onto the car just behind him as he peeled away the coat to reveal his inner coat jacket and the shirt beneath, crimson stains slowly spreading like the petals of a red flower on the pristine white cotton. Time seemed to slow down as his breathing turned ragged and the beating of his heart was suddenly loud in his ears.

He could barely remember the pain in his haste to get away. Irene simply stood there, eyes wide, hands still clutching the gun, frozen on the spot as he turned and fled.

He had very little recollection of what happened next. He could not possibly go to a hospital, could not ask anyone for help. He finally collapsed on the side of a dark road leading out of Manchester. The last thing he could remember was a man approaching him—a vagrant, by his appearance. The man turned him over, and then drew back and fled at the sight of his blood-drenched clothes, but not before taking his wallet and his cards—a blessing in disguise, as it turned out. Now he was practically without an identity.

The nightmare began in earnest when he finally resurfaced, to find whispering voices speaking overhead: a soft, high voice, and a lower, rougher one—both male.

"He's coming to," the soft, lilting voice said. "Feed him. I want to see for myself."

An ungentle hand behind his head propped him up as a cup was thrust onto his lips. He could taste the salty, metallic tang of blood, ice-cold and processed. He drank thirstily and slumped back, groaning, onto the hard surface he had been laid on when it was over.

"Oh. My. God," breathed the same voice in barely restrained delight. "It's real. It's really the real thing. Did you see that?"

Blessed unconsciousness once again.

He came to a few days later, the harshly bright fluorescent light above him hurting his eyes. He shut them again, fighting the vertigo that was washing over him in waves. He still felt extremely weak, his midriff was on fire. Shifting his head to the side, he cautiously opened his eyes once again. Once the objects in his line of vision stopped moving, he was able to take in a little of his surroundings: he was in a cell, with bars just off his makeshift cot, a small lavatory stuck into the wall opposite him, a sink with a faucet beside it.

There was somebody standing on the opposite side of the bars of his cell. Quick movement,
receding footsteps, to be followed moments later by more footfalls and excited talking.

"Oh, he's coming to," cried the familiar, soft voice.

Sherlock couldn't lift his eyes without suffering another bout of vertigo, so he fixed his gaze on the two pairs of legs outside his cell— a pair clad in obviously expensive dark trousers, the other one in jeans. The figure with the trousers bent down and presented his face to Sherlock for the first time.

He was a slight young man, with short, dark hair and pale skin. He had fine, even sensitive features, with round, dark eyes. Even in his state, Sherlock immediately found that he did not care for the light in those eyes, nor the smile stretching across the man's lips.

"Hi," said the man to him, the word coming out in singsong. He turned to look up at his companion and gushed, "God, isn't he beautiful?"

Sherlock licked his dry, cracked lips. His voice was low and hoarse when he said, "Where am I?"

The man turned back to face him once again. "Oh, don't you worry about that," he said. "In fact, that ought to be the last of your worries right now. Hungry?"

Over the next few days, as Sherlock gradually recovered, visitors started arriving. Sometimes there was only a handful, other times a crowd, ogling at him as he lay on his cot. He was still being fed refrigerated whole blood in a cup, the event eagerly watched to much whispering and gesturing.

One time another man, obviously a doctor, was ushered in to check his wounds. During the times he would have visitors inside his cell, he would be restrained with cloth ligatures tying his hands and feet to the bed. Not that he could lift a finger at that point.

"I've never seen anything quite like this, Jim," said the man as he replaced Sherlock's gauze dressing after a quick inspection. "I've only dug the bullets out five days ago and now look at the wound! Accelerated healing, tissue and scar regeneration at a rate that is frankly incredible. At this rate give him another week and he'll be up and about. God, where did you get this guy?"

The slight young man in the expensive suit merely smiled indulgently, looking down at Sherlock even as he wagged a finger at the doctor. "Uh-uh. You're not getting him, Doc," he said. "He's all mine."

Sherlock stared at the man, eyes unfocused even as his mind started contemplating his escape.

The young man remained behind after the doctor left. "You're probably wondering how you got here," he said. "I suppose you ought to know. The name's Jim Moriarty, by the way. I'm a hobbyist, of a sort. I collect things. I've got people finding me stuff. Imagine my surprise when one of them phoned me to say he's got a vampire for sale!"

Sherlock's cracked, black-crusted lips parted to whisper, "People will tell you that there are no such things as vampires."

"What do you call yourself, then? The guy who picked you up was an off-duty paramedic. You surprised the hell out of him when he tried giving you a transfusion! You practically plucked the IV line out of your arm and started sucking at the end of it!"

The man known as Jim Moriarty gave a shrill, delighted laugh.

"I didn't make it to a hospital then." Sherlock's voice was flat and devoid of emotion.
"Nah. The guy had a better idea. I've bought from him before. He knows what I like, what I'm looking for," Jim said.

"And you want a vampire to add to your collection?"

Jim knelt down so that his face was only inches away from Sherlock's. "I've been searching for someone like you my entire life. Think of yourself as an answered prayer," he said.

Jim Moriarty was away most of the day, coming in for only a few hours during the evenings. He had regular work then. Corporate work, from the way he dressed and handled himself. And this place was not his residence, though to judge from the slice of scenery outside the door of his cell that Sherlock would occasionally catch a glimpse of when the door was open (tasteful furnishings, a lamp on a gilt-edged table), it seemed he was being held in a house. Not an apartment— keeping and moving a captive around required more privacy.

Sherlock's gaze ranged slowly over his surroundings as he lay on his cot. The room holding his cage was small, probably just a utilities room before its conversion. The bars were recent additions apparently, but solidly constructed. There would be no point in forcing his strength on them, especially not at this time when he could hardly hold up his hand. Moriarty had installed an overhead camera at the corner of the room to update him of Sherlock's every move while he was away.

The door to his room was usually closed, though sometimes it would be left slightly ajar, affording him a small peek into what lay beyond his cage. Occasionally he would detect fleeting movement out there as someone passed by. Except for those parties of people who came, there did not seem to be many people outside.

Even less frequently, there would be someone stopping by just outside the open door, looking in, just like what the girl was doing right now. Sherlock could only make out a portion of her features through that slit of space— a soft, dark eye, hair brushed back on her forehead, a trace of her nose and lips. She caught him looking back and quickly withdrew.

By day seven, Sherlock's wounds had healed sufficiently to allow him to sit up on his cot. He was still feeling absurdly weak though, and gave his captors no trouble. While Moriarty was away, there were usually two people coming in and out to look in on him: a heavily set man, ex-military by his stance and appearance, probably had seen action both in Afghanistan and Iraq and was a hunter in his spare time. Dishonorably discharged from Her Majesty's armed forces. From the way he would sometimes stand and stare into Sherlock's cell for long minutes, it was obvious that the man was a murderer, and though he may never had been convicted of it, he had acquired a taste for hunting and dispatching humans through all the chaos of war.

The other one was the girl, probably a recent college graduate and currently working as an assistant of some sort. Now that Sherlock could see her in full, he could see that she had long, mousy brown hair tied back from her face and a sweet, shy smile. Gentle, doe-like eyes. She was the one who saw to his needs most of the time, the one Sherlock could not really piece together. What was she doing among this lot of ruffians?

Pushing his daily ration of blood across the floor through the bars, she would watch as he slowly took the cup to lift to his lips. She would watch him drink with a look in her eyes that held a mixture of pity, tenderness and wonder.
Once when he had finished with his meal, Sherlock licked at his lips as he let the cup settle on the cradle of one palm resting on his lap before drawling, "The answer is no, of course."

The girl jumped, her wide eyes flying to his face. Sherlock allowed a small smile to touch his lips as he continued, "No, the taste of packaged blood is of course different from that obtained straight from the source. The anticoagulant alone renders the taste a great deal less pleasant, and we haven't started on the temperature differences yet."

The girl turned and fled.

Sometime after the first week, Moriarty arrived one evening carrying two antique books.

Sherlock stared at him as he made his way into the cell, then glanced at the military man standing just outside, holding a tube-like apparatus in his hand.

"Yes, you guessed correctly," said Jim engagingly. "Sebastian there is an expert with that nasty blowgun he carries around. Don't worry, he has nothing more lethal than a sedative dart in there as of now. I trust you won't be doing anything rash to warrant any action from the colonel."

Sherlock said nothing, merely continued to look into Jim's eyes as the man seated himself beside Sherlock on his cot.

"You know these volumes?" he asked, handing the books over to Sherlock.

Sherlock eyed the leather-bound covers, marked by a family crest and motto: "I Tayke What I Wyll."

The man was a British peer then. Sherlock would discover, upon his escape, that Jim Moriarty was also known as the 22nd Earl of Westwood and as rich and powerful as Croesus.

"The first book belonged to an ancestor, Thomas Moriarty," said Jim. "It was his last journal before he died in 1588. He was declared insane, you know. How a man was insane and could still write such a coherent account of his last few months of life is a source of wonder, don't you agree?"

Sherlock opened the book, ran his eyes through one frail page filled with passages in old English, written in an elegant hand.

"Of course," Moriarty continued, "he was declared insane on the basis of his claim that one of his oldest friends was a vampire. The friend was, unfortunately, a powerful figure at court, so you can understand how his final circumstances came about: banished to a suite of rooms in his own house at Lincolnshire, with nobody to attend to him except for a couple of old servants and the immediate family disgraced for a generation…and yet, looking through his journal, I've never doubted that he knew what he was talking about. Isn't it strange that he should be proven right now, five hundred years later?"

Sherlock still said nothing, his hands flipping the second book open. He was careful to keep his face blank as his eyes ran over the title in Latin.

"The Celestine Recognition," translated Jim, his smile stretching across his face to show a row of very white teeth. "By Simon Magnus. Have you heard of it? An original copy. It's been in the family for generations. Of course, we've not been able to find out whether his recipe for immortality was true, but then, we've not had the crucial ingredient of a vampire in our midst before. We are going to have so much fun finding things out."
Sherlock thrust the books back at Moriarty. "You are insane," he said.

Jim shrugged, chuckling. "Call it that, if you like," he said. "But I should say people will need to revise their definition of sanity when they come across you."

Sherlock looked away from him. "I need to shave," he said, his tone disinterested as he stared straight ahead of him. "And a toothbrush would be useful."

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The girl appeared an hour after Moriarty left, bearing a disposable razor, a can of shaving cream and a toothbrush kit. Trailing behind her was the man called Sebastian, armed with his blowgun.

"Jim said...he said he doesn't want you handling the razor by yourself," she said, her voice pitched high and uncertain. "He said I am to shave you."

"Has he?" Sherlock said. "That is most inconvenient."

"No tricks," said Sebastian as he opened the cell door to let the girl through. "Be quick about it, Molly."

Sherlock languidly detached himself from leaning against the wall and sat up straighter at the edge of the cot for Molly to kneel down and apply the shaving cream to his cheeks and chin.

As she worked with unsteady fingers, Sherlock cast a glance at the man outside the cell. Not exactly a very zealous guard, had a tendency to let his gaze wander away, bored.

Sherlock returned his gaze to the girl before him. One of his hands lifted and touched her wrist briefly. His words were no more than a mere breath: "Get me out of here."

He felt her fingers go still for a fraction of a second before she resumed her actions, lightly tracing the razor under his cheekbone. Her frightened eyes flitted sideways at the man standing behind her before raising them to look uncertainly at Sherlock.

Sherlock reined in the boiling impatience he was feeling. He could see he would need some time to win the girl over, and time was definitely not on his side.

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**Author's Notes:** The detail about the fictitious book on witchcraft, *The Celestine Recognition*, by Simon Magnus, is lifted from the chilling ghost story "Lost Hearts" by M. R. James. The story is available online. Please feel free to read it if you would like to see why Sherlock has cause to be alarmed by Moriarty's designs on his person (it does not really contain anything about vampires, but I will be using the ritual described in future chapters).
The Second Interlude (Part 2 of 2)

Moriarty, again.

He sat on a folding chair just outside Sherlock's cell, perusing a thin black book. "You know, I can't really decide between Simon Magnus and Hermes Trismegistus regarding the appropriate number of sacrifices before the last, great one. How do you suppose we're to resolve it?" he asked. "And then there's also the manner of ingestion: should I eat it raw, cooked, or what? One of them recommended burning the thing to ash and downing it in port. Eww…"

Moriarty's shudder appeared almost comical. "Oh, well. I guess we'll just have to try them all!" he said brightly.

Sherlock sat, unmoving, with his back on the wall and long legs stretched out in front of the cot. He stared at the man before him, then asked, "Why do you suppose this will even work?"

Jim Moriarty smiled. Really, thought Sherlock. It was the smile that gave the man away. To look at him, one would not have thought there was anything wrong with him, until he smiled.

There were people in this world who even Sherlock could not unlock at first glance. Irene Adler was one of them, and so, it seemed, was Jim Moriarty.

"It has to," said Jim, waving the small book at Sherlock's direction. "Think of it as a dead branch of science, soon to be revived. Centuries of these writings by vastly different authors, all proclaiming the same thing. That can't be a coincidence."

"Proclaim what? That my blood has miraculous healing powers and my heart is capable of powering yours for eternity?"

Jim laughed. "I love it when you say it like that," he said. "It's so…dramatic."

He leaned in and said in a confidential tone, "Do you know what I really am?"

"I'm sure you will enlighten me," said Sherlock, sounding bored.

"I'm not a man, not really," said Jim, shaking his head. "I've always thought myself different from the people around me. So why must I share the same ultimate fate as they? Things came easily enough— wealth, power, prestige. It's almost…boring. What I find interesting are the little puzzles with just a twist of the bizarre in them. Everything is all here in my head, I've got them all mapped out. I've got fingers in every pie, every kind of association you can think of. But what's the point of it all if you can't live forever to enjoy it?"

"Funny," said Sherlock. "I thought you people beget offspring just especially for that purpose, for the perpetual transmission of your genes."

Jim scowled. "Offspring. Nah," he said, lolling his head as he shrugged. "The very idea is such a deadly bore. I'm not interested in sharing."

"Is that what happened to your father half a year ago?" asked Sherlock casually.

A corner of Jim's mouth turned up. "You're good," he said softly. "The thing is, he's been soft around the head for a long time. Senile dementia, you know. Runs in the family, or so I'm told. An awful way to go, it takes practically forever. I just did him a favor and helped things along."
Jim leaned back onto his seat. "I have no intention of going the same way as he did. In fact, I'm not even going to grow old. You will assist me in my…little project, won't you?" he said.

He looked down at the black book that he held in his hands. "The autumnal equinox is now only a week away," he said pensively. "Hermes Trismegistus suggests that fasting will enhance the transition of powers more effectively."

He looked up at Sherlock from under his brows. "You're almost fully healed anyway," he said. "I shall have to instruct Molly to start you on a diet."

He was able to stand it for three days, but there was no stopping the restless prowling around his narrow cage after that. Blood was the perfect food—fully absorbed by his special gut flora and leaving no residuals. That was the reason why he could not stand to go hungry for long, because absolutely nothing could remain behind.

Molly would occasionally come in to clean and check in on him, but she brought no food and she would not bring herself to look at him.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. Sherlock watched her for a moment as she started vacuuming the room around his cell, forcing himself to sit at the edge of his cot and keep still, for the sake of the camera high above their heads.

"Simon Magnus. Hermes Trismegistus. Have you ever heard of them?" Sherlock finally asked in a low voice.

Molly, for her part, gave no indication of having heard him as she continued to run a Hoover over the floor before his cell, the noise of the vacuum machine drowning out his words.

"Between them they penned some of the foulest books on medieval witchcraft," said Sherlock, turning his gaze away from her and not giving in to the temptation to raise his voice above the din of the vacuum, so that it seemed to the camera that he was not even remotely interested in her presence. "Absolute nonsense. Rituals calling for sacrifices to obtain supposed powers or immortality, but not just sacrifices of beings like me. They required at least two more before the main sacrifice—the blood and heart of a child not yet reaching the age of majority, and those of a virgin. You're a virgin, aren't you, Molly?"

Molly merely gave the slightest pause and then continued with her task, the vacuum cleaner still running in her hands.

"Think about it, Molly. Why did Jim Moriarty ever choose you for this job? It came at a very convenient time, didn't it? You couldn't possibly refuse the high pay, not when your family needs the money, not when your father is dying and there are hospital bills to be paid," said Sherlock. He was too desperate to consider how his words would come across to Molly, and even if he did have the luxury of time to consider them, he would probably not have thought it necessary to change anything. It was the truth, after all.

"He will have to ingest the hearts, our hearts. It doesn't matter how. The blood—you already know what he's going to do with it, my blood especially. He will need to feed me blood from one of the victims beforehand, to cement the bond between the sacrifices, as the books tell it. He will need to accomplish the first two murders before the autumnal equinox. Our remains will be scattered across certain points in an empty field to resemble a pentagram. You and I have only a few days to live," he continued.
Sherlock could see Molly's mouth working, but no sound came out. She never paused from her cleaning.

No, he could not give up!

"Even now…even now, a child has already gone missing, hasn't it? You've probably heard of a name being dropped somewhere in one of the conversations out there. Think, Molly!"

Molly stooped to turn the vacuum machine off, gathered the cleaning materials and left.

Sherlock sat back on his cot, not sure what to think. He would have to trust Molly. He would have to hope that she had heard enough to understand and believe him. She had played the game perfectly so far. Perhaps all would turn out right. But it may also very well be that perhaps all would be lost.

They brought Molly in that night.

"One last little detail from the books," announced Jim. "Come Molly, you said you'd do anything for me. Show me your devotion."

Sherlock slowly let himself relax. It seemed they had not suspected anything, after all.

They let Molly into the cell. She was as white as a sheet, but otherwise perfectly in control. She sat down beside Sherlock on his cot, raised her wrist to him.

"Drink," instructed Jim.

He did. He felt Molly flinch just a bit as he pierced her skin. Then, warm, sweet blood filled his mouth. He tried to curb the urge to take in more as he stared up at Molly, silently urging her to see the situation as it was. She watched him, and tears slowly gathered and fell from her eyes. Her breath hitched in the minutest of sobs, but otherwise, she kept still.


Sherlock released her hand. Molly rose slowly as if in a trance and allowed herself to be ushered out of the cell.

"There now, Molly. I told you I won't have anything happen to you, didn't I?" said Jim, placing a placating arm around her shoulders. "You don't have to be so upset. It was just a little test. That's my girl."

He then turned to Sherlock and sang, "We're going to the country tomorrow."

Hours later, Sherlock lay on his bed, eyes wide and unseeing as he stared off into space.

Tomorrow, the game would be over. He was as good as dead the moment he was transferred to the country. He and Molly, both.

Oh, for God's sake, woman, put two and two together and…

A whisper of sound as someone slipped into his room.
"Quick. Jim just left. There's nobody in the house right now except Sebastian and myself but people will be arriving within minutes," whispered Molly urgently. "Create an emergency."

Before Sherlock could even sit up, she was already out of the door, screaming for Sebastian.

Sherlock quickly raised his wrist, bit hard into the white, quivering flesh.

By the time Sebastian entered the room, blowgun in hand, Sherlock was already on the floor, convulsing, bright blood splashed on the floor in a shocking puddle.

"I found him like that, I don't know what's happening," babbled Molly hysterically.

"Oh, shit! What the bloody hell…!" Sebastian was saying as he stepped forward.

He did not see Molly swing the heavy stick at his head from behind. Before Sebastian hit the ground, she was already on her knees, her shaking hands trying to insert the key into the cell's door.

"Quickly," rasped Sherlock, grasping at the bars, his face mere inches from Molly's.

The door finally swung open, and Sherlock shot out of his cage in a dark blur. He grabbed at Sebastian and hurled him roughly into the cage before Molly shut and locked the door back into place.

They made it out of the room and onto the corridor before they heard voices issuing from the front of the house.

"The back, quickly," said Molly.

She ran to the other part of the house, along the elegant, lamplit corridors, past the deserted kitchen and toward the back door, with Sherlock close at her heels. They emerged, quite oddly enough, onto a street near Mayfair, at the very heart of London.

They were in London!

Sherlock could feel himself starting to grin widely, the grin transforming into a laugh of pure relief, as he took in the familiar streets. He had not dared to bring himself to hope for any chance of surviving Moriarty, not when he was trapped in his house. But now, now that he was in the streets of London, the one city in the world where every nook and cranny was as familiar to him as the back of his hand…well. Hope really was a thing with wings.

Molly was about to dash down the main street. He shot a hand out to restrain her, sending her whirling drunkenly back in a semi-circle.

"No, they will be taking that way precisely," he said as he started running into the small alley opposite them. "Come on! This way!"

So they ran, cutting through back streets and up the fire escapes of some buildings, going over low ones and jumping over the roofs of some just so they could avoid the main streets of the city.

"What time is it?" cried Sherlock as they ran.

"Twenty minutes to midnight," Molly half-panted, half sobbed.

"Still enough time for the last train," said Sherlock. "Come on, I'll take you to the Tube."

Almost halfway across London from where they originally started, they stopped at an Underground
"Enough…enough!" panted Molly, bending over and coughing, taking in breath after breath hungrily through her open mouth. "I can't run anymore!"

"We can't stop now—" Sherlock began to say fiercely before he looked down at the girl before him. Molly's terrified face was streaked with tears as she suddenly leaned into him, as if all her courage and resolve had evaporated. Sherlock took one look at the staring passersby and quickly put an arm around the sobbing girl, the better to cover his bloodstained arm as well.

"Molly, listen to me," he said. "Take the last train out of London. Run. Keep running and never stop. Don't stop by your family's place, don't let anyone know where you're going. Just disappear. Go to a friend of yours, someone Moriarty doesn't know about. Hide. Have you got any money?"

She nodded, detaching herself far enough to retrieve a wallet in her pants pocket.

"We'll divide it between us," said Sherlock as she gave the wallet to him. "Run, don't stop."

He pushed her away. Molly whirled and flew down the stairs of the train station, and that was the last that Sherlock saw of her as he turned to the direction of Vauxhall Arches, where his disheveld, unwashed state would go quite unnoticed.

Early the next day, he was back, unheralded, in Oxford.

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When Sherlock opened his eyes again, the hotel room was bathed in shadows. His hands disengaged from themselves as he brought one into the breast pocket of his coat jacket, fishing out a second-hand Nokia hand phone, several years old, with a disposable SIM card.

He punched a number into it and waited patiently for the recipient to pick up.

"Lestrade," the familiar, gravelly voice finally said at the other end of the line.

"You haven't acted on the information I gave you, Detective Inspector," he said, his voice dark and heavy with disapproval.

"What the-? You again! How the bloody hell did you get my—"

"Listen carefully, Inspector. The grounds off Aswarby Hall in Lincolnshire. The remains of the boy will be divided in five points in the shape of a pentagram in a field clearing. Search quickly. They might already have thought to dig up the remains."

"I can't act on anonymous tips that do not have any sort of foundation!" declared Inspector Lestrade thunderously. "You're talking about the private estate of the Earl of Westwood here. We can't just—"

"Then Carl Powers will never be found," said Sherlock.

"You mean he's dead? Who are you?" demanded Lestrade. "Come in to the Yard and let's talk—"

Sherlock cut the call, disconnected the SIM card from the phone. That was enough chatter. It was always hard to talk to the police. A simple nudge in the right direction was never enough for them. Even now, they might be too late. Undoubtedly, Jim Moriarty would have covered his tracks by now.
It could not be helped, then. He would have to engage Mycroft's help in the matter, after all, and once Mycroft moved in, things were bound to get extremely ugly.

It would be time to leave. He would have to sever all links to the city.

Sever all links with John.

John.

How wrong he had been to involve John in anything at all concerning him. He had not foreseen things would come to this point, had not foreseen John and everything he would come to mean to Sherlock.

The spider's web was closing in, and John had no role whatsoever in the upcoming events that may unfold. At the very least, he would be in the way. At most, he may end up as a dangerous pawn that could be used as leverage against Sherlock.

Oh, John...

Sherlock closed his eyes, remembering once again the events of that afternoon, of John walking away from him in the park, bemused at their conversation. Sunlight had caught at his short fair hair, the way the candlelight had during the evening concert at St. Martin-in-the-fields. He remembered the very first time he saw the doctor at 221B Baker Street. The afternoon sun had been everywhere in that room, too. He had hung back in the doorway, the better to observe and size him up unnoticed, as Mrs. Hudson bustled in ahead of him to hand his file to the doctor. He could still remember the way the sun had glanced at John's blond head and turned his features golden as he looked up and said quizzically, "Um, where is he?"

Sherlock's eyes were heavy-lidded and still when he opened them again.

Where had he been, indeed, all this time? Where had he taken himself off to, with John? He saw now that he had let sentiment crowd out reason when it came to John. A most dangerous and unnecessary diversion. He would have to do something about it, do something about John.

He would have to get rid of him.

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Author's Notes: Moriarty's repulsive ritual is an amalgamation of details from various stories, most notably M.R. James' "Lost Hearts", as already mentioned in the previous chapter. It's a crazy hodgepodge of nonsense and is not intended to reflect any real ritual (which would really be freak-out scary).
Chapter 17

John Watson was a very worried man.

As a psychiatrist, he had received one of the toughest types of medical training a doctor could undergo— the type with emotional and psychological endurance foremost in mind. Throughout his residency training and beyond, John had had his mental stamina tested time and again for any breach in the barriers that might lead to the unfortunate but all too common phenomenon of burnout.

But no psychiatric training could possibly help him endure something like Sherlock Holmes. Burnout was a mild description of what he was feeling right now. John had tried everything— the breathing exercises, the mental substitutions and analogies, the attempt to defuse his thoughts along safer channels— all to no avail. After that massive shock of a dream, the actual fallout was just beginning to be felt, like the waves of a tsunami spreading out from the epicenter of an underwater earthquake.

The moment he closed his eyes or let his mind wander, it would drift down the same mental path automatically, as if by default, leading to memories of that dream: of Sherlock straddling him as he lay helpless and unmoving on his bed; the look in Sherlock's eyes as he gazed down at John— as palpable as a caress; the feel of his long fingers gliding over his skin; and— most of all— the hot, velvety rasp of his tongue on the sensitive skin of his neck…

He was aghast at the way he had responded to Sherlock in the dream, and was even more horrified at the certain knowledge that if he were presented with a similar situation once again, in real life, he probably would not be doing anything differently.

This was not burnout. If anything, John felt like he was burning up.

He had counseled men devastated by the discovery of latent homosexual drives in their persons before. Even at this tolerant day and age, there were these kinds of patients, and John could understand where they were coming from. Usually it was not so much the sexual part of it that was terrifying; rather, it was the loss of control over an aspect of oneself— the sudden wrenching of a pillar that had been one of the foundations of one's identity— that could reduce, say, a soberly married man and a father of two kids into a blubbering, tearful heap in John's office as the man realized he was in love with a male colleague.

Okay. John was kidding himself. The sexual part of it was terrifying as well.

It was terrifying that he could want somebody as frightening as Sherlock Holmes. He was well beyond the stage of denial at this point: he wanted the bloody monster, body and soul. He wanted a bloody male monster. He could not recall ever wanting a woman, or indeed, anyone, like this before. This want— this need— was sudden and all-consuming, as queasy and unnatural as the craving felt by certain pregnant women to eat soil. How he could feel this way was beyond him. It was deeply disturbing and mortifying that he would hunger for this…this creature, a predator and a hunter of men. Hell, the bloke was not even human.

He knew Sherlock was toying with him, the way a cat would a trapped mouse, and he knew Sherlock would not hesitate to devour him when the time came. And yet, here he was, practically aching for him. God help him, there was no explaining it. After the dream, he could not stop thinking about Sherlock, fantasizing him in scenarios utterly alien to his predominantly heterosexual nature.
Oh God. He was sounding like some of the passages in a cheap, paperback romance novel, but he could not stop wondering what it would feel like to touch Sherlock back, to run his hand over those tousled, night-dark curls, to feel the texture of those lips on his.

His fevered imagination ended abruptly with kisses, for now. He was still too much of a heterosexual male to be comfortable thinking about the next steps beyond touching and kissing another man. Well, another male, in this case. As things stood, everything was bad enough. Worse still, he wasn't just physically attracted to Sherlock. He yearned for Sherlock's mind and his very person—that cold and incisive nucleus inside him, austerely beautiful and limitless in its capacity for logic and also for cruelty.

John ran an unsteady hand through his flaming face, up his hair.

*Oh my God.*

He had never known himself to be a masochist. Not ever.

What was he to do? He was going to see Sherlock again very soon, and he could not face him like this, not when his emotions were running wild and naked and obvious. Human or not, Sherlock was still his patient, and medical ethics was not something he could violate for whatever reason. It would be unprofessional and unacceptable to allow his feelings to possess him.

He would continue to talk to Sherlock then. It wasn't the greatest option out there, but it's the only one available to him.

Sherlock came at his appointed hour. Leisurly, he made his way to the armchairs and paused, eyeing John as he sat behind his desk.

"Still barricading yourself behind your table, I see. Whatever for?" he drawled, his gaze flicking over John for a moment. Perhaps his overactive imagination was putting way too much meaning into things lately but the way Sherlock's gaze felt to John, it may as well have been the touch of a hand with five fingers running over him.

John remained silent, watching as Sherlock casually divested himself of his scarf and coat and draping them over the back of an armchair, his eyes following the movements hungrily. He forced himself to look away when he realized how he must appear to Sherlock at that moment, biting the inner lining of his cheek hard.

Get a grip, John!

If Sherlock noticed it, he seemed oblivious for once. "What's the matter, John? Have you finally run out of things to say?" he said as he sat down on the armchair, bringing his leg over the other gracefully. He took out his mobile phone and started texting.

"We…" John cleared his throat. "We need to talk."

"Hmm…" Sherlock's tone was distracted. "Indeed we must, though I will have to insist that you leave your table and join me here. I refuse to talk to you across a divide."

John remained obstinately seated behind his desk for a moment more.
Sherlock glanced up, and in a deceptively soft voice said, "Come here. John."

Anger and resentment flared inside John at Sherlock's proprietary tone, but if he were to be perfectly honest, a part of him—that newly awakened part of him—also found it a huge turn-on. Dear God. He was totally and royally screwed.

John sighed in defeat, got up wearily and made his way over to the armchairs.

"So," said Sherlock, putting his phone away as John deposited himself in the armchair opposite him. "You first."

"Today, I thought we might talk about sex," said John, proud to realize that his gaze and voice remained steady.

Sherlock lifted a sardonic eyebrow. "Might we indeed," he drawled.

"So, how does your kind...?" John gestured as the words abruptly ran out.

"The usual way, I can imagine," said Sherlock, his eyes amused.

"So, you...you've..." John felt himself coloring at his sudden attack of inarticulateness.

"If you're asking whether I've done it with a female of my kind, the answer is no. No, I've not met one for hundreds of years, and even if I did I can assure you we're not the type to jump on a female just because she happened to be there for procreational purposes, unlike you people."

"Well, no wonder you're going extinct," muttered John, piqued.

"All I'm saying, John, is we are capable of sex in its physical aspects. I had to come from somewhere, after all. It's just that we're not obsessed with it, unlike humans," said Sherlock.

"But surely you feel the urge. I mean..."

"We probably don't feel it the way you do. Not physically, and definitely not constantly," Sherlock answered.

"So, you do it with your mind," said John.

"Yes."

"Is that what you've been doing to me?" he asked.

A smirk: "What do you think, John?"

"I don't know what to think! That's why I'm asking!" exclaimed John. Finally he said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" queried Sherlock, looking quite surprised. "I like you, John."

John quickly looked up. Sherlock did not seem to be joking. John did not like the warm feeling blooming inside his chest, bringing on an ache that was actually quite physical.

He looked away as he said, "Look. You must understand something about us humans," he said.
"We…we have certain ways about us which may not be familiar to you, and about sex especially, I'm afraid it's got more spoken and unspoken rules than any other set of behavioral mores."

"Since when," said Sherlock, "do you think I am bound by any of your rules?"

"See, that's the attitude right there," pointed out John. "That's the attitude I'm talking about, or getting to, anyway. Does it not bother you that I'm extremely disturbed by what you've been doing?"

"Are you, John?"

"Yes! Yes, I am. Oddly enough, it may seem to you, I am," said John, leaning back on his chair. There. He had said it.

"Why should you be bothered?" asked Sherlock, shrugging.

"Because…!" John searched around for words. "Look, in our case— in the case of humans, we have such a thing as sexual orientation. I know it will sound archaic, perhaps even nonsensical to your kind, but our sexual orientation contributes a great deal to our self-identity, how we perceive ourselves and those around us. Am I saying it's a rigid, inflexible thing that remains constant all our lives? No. And it's quite all right, it's absolutely normal for us to have certain leanings. All I'm saying is there are certain things that can lend themselves too close for comfort with us regarding this aspect of ourselves, and what you did in that dream..."

"Yes?" prompted Sherlock as John seemed about to leave off without finishing his sentence.

"Will you be doing more of that dream thing on me?" John asked quite bluntly.

"Resonance, John. It's called resonance."

"Whatever the fuck it's called."

"And if I choose to continue, what can you do about it?" Sherlock asked.

"Don't do it again," said John. "I don't want you inside my head."

"You haven't really answered my question, John."

John licked his lips, looked away. "Does it please you to do it?" he asked. "Does it make you happy to strap me down to my bed and render me powerless? No, wait. Don't answer that. I think I already know what you're going to say."

Sherlock ignored the dripping sarcasm in John's words. "I did it to prove a point," he said.

"And what point is that?"

"You lied to me, John. Stop lying to me, and perhaps I will desist." Sherlock paused. "Although, of course, now that I've realized how enjoyable it turned out to be, perhaps I won't."

"And is this how your people conduct courtship? By driving the other party mad?" John asked.

"Are you saying you didn't like it?"

"No. Not like that."

Sherlock's eyes widened with interest. "How do you like it, then?" he asked.
John was shaking his head, eyes shutting tight. "Stop it. Just stop it! I don't… I can't…!"

Sherlock looked away, his voice growing bored as he said, "You're going to plead again that you're not gay."

"Yes! I'm not. Believe me, I have no homosexual, bisexual or transgender issues, but no matter what people will say, one's sexual orientation is not something one can change overnight," John said. "And this kind of attention from you, this… rough wooing, is severely disturbing on so many levels, the least of which actually involves my sexual orientation."

"I have three words, John, and they happen to be all yours: Oh. God. Yes." Sherlock's gaze bored into John.

John sighed. "You're not going to make me forget that, are you?" he said in a weary voice.

"Problem?"

John groped for an explanation. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being gay. And just because I'm straight doesn't mean I am immune to this kind of… attention. I won't deny it: it's quite flattering, in a way. It's normal to have these kinds of tendencies, even if one is straight. But can you tone down the threatening aspect a bit? I can't help but feel you're going to eat me alive or something. Although I don't think you can divorce those two things, can you, being a vampire? Sex and death? Appetite and destruction?"

Sherlock shook his head. "John," he said, sighing exasperatedly. "Have you learned so little in your dealings with me?"

John stared at Sherlock. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not human, John," said Sherlock, "and the greatest mistake you will make is to treat me as one."

"And again, what does that mean?"

"Don't try to define me by your pitiful human standards," said Sherlock. "You will find this hard to believe, but this has nothing to do with sex. The way we conduct courtship goes way beyond it."

John couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And how does that work?" he asked cautiously.

"I couldn't possibly care less if you're a man or a woman, John," said Sherlock. "All I care about is you."

John had to admit he was stunned by that declaration. "No," John said stubbornly, shaking his head. "It's not that simple. You can't just strip away our sexual identity and—"

Before he could even finish, John was already feeling shitty at the awful realization of just how narrow-minded he really was and how limited his supposedly liberal perceptions were, once things were pared down to the basics.

As if he needed it to be rubbed in further, he heard Sherlock say, "We're not stripping anything away. We simply do not consider it that important. And that's the reason why you feel the way you do about it because you can't wrap your head around the concept. People are naturally afraid of things that they cannot understand. You may want to hide behind the tattered remnants of your excuses regarding your sexual orientation, but I am inviting you to step out of the box and broaden your mind when you're dealing with me, John. In fact, I shall insist upon it, always."
John stared at Sherlock as he bit his lip. "Okay," he finally said in a small, contrite voice. "I don't think I can say anything to that."

"Good."

"Though that doesn't answer my point about the threats. Nobody enjoys being threatened, Sherlock. I don't particularly like the endpoint of your so-called courtship, if it means you'll end up draining me of my blood."

"How would you know you wouldn't like it, as you've never experienced it yet?"

John stood up abruptly. "Okay. You know what? We're done talking. Once you start dancing those little circles around me, we're done," he said.

He stood up and went to his table, stopping just before it, his back to Sherlock. "Oh, and another thing," he said. "Don't try following me around or haunting me after office hours, all right? That last time here, lurking outside the office, I know it was you."

Behind him, Sherlock was silent.

John sighed and glanced at the clock on his table. Time was up. They were so caught up arguing that time had flown by without John realizing it.

He shut his eyes. *Oh God. That didn't go very well, did it?*

Well, that was that then.

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow," he said over his shoulder as a form of dismissal as he heard Sherlock stand up to slip on his coat and scarf.

What he did not hear was Sherlock's approach, and the most that John could get out was a grunt of surprise, his entire body freezing instantly when he felt an arm slip around his midriff. One long, white hand splayed over his stomach just as another hand easily caught the one he instinctively flung out behind him. Sherlock pinned it to John's chest as he leaned into him from behind, not allowing John to turn around to face him.

"Sshh, John," said Sherlock into his ear. "Not a sound, now. Mrs. Hudson's just outside."

John remained rigid, heart banging away in his chest and momentarily forgetting how to breathe, as Sherlock curled his arm around him more securely.

"I did not realize my attentions would be so distressing to you," murmured Sherlock into his ear, his breath warm, as warm as the rest of him around John. "Would you really want me to desist?"

John let out a breath, his voice slightly unsteady as he said, "I don't think my answer would be relevant. You've never taken my choices into consideration before. I distinctly remembered saying no when you asked whether I wanted to be courted, but you went right ahead and did it anyway."

Sherlock tilted his head slightly to look at John. John did not dare turn another inch, seeing just how close Sherlock's face was to his. "True," Sherlock said. "But I will take your word into consideration now. All you have to do is say it. Do you want me to stop?"

John closed his eyes, fighting to keep his breathing even. Did he really want Sherlock to stop? It was horrible that he should be feeling so conflicted about it now, when the answer should have been immediate and clear. Besides, was there really any alternative to that one logical choice?
"Yes, of course I want you to stop," he finally said, his voice wooden.

Sherlock's response was so immediate that it came as a shock.

"Done," he said, his voice so decisive that it made John jump a little to hear it. John instantly felt Sherlock's arms withdrawing from him, felt the empty air closing back in as Sherlock stepped away. It suddenly felt very cold not to have those arms and that warm body around him. John turned around slowly to look at Sherlock standing a few feet away, his hands in the pockets of his dark coat.

"How does it feel then, John?" he asked, a slight smile playing around his lips. "It must be such a relief. You need not worry now. The courtship is off."

With that he turned away and left, leaving John standing near his desk as though he had turned to stone.

Author's Notes: Pica is a disorder characterized by an appetite for substances largely non-nutritive, such as soil and clay, persisting for more than a month. There are several forms of the disorder, based on the substances eaten, and it is not just confined to pregnant women; for example, some iron-deficient patients have been known to ingest sand and dust.
John waited until he was sure that Sherlock was safely out of the door before he slumped down bonelessly to sit on the edge of his table.

Well, he hadn't seen that coming.

Oh, God. What the hell…

He couldn't believe it. Everything had happened so fast…he had been expecting something else, had thought that Sherlock had been ruthlessly teasing, as usual, and for this to happen instead—

He couldn't believe it!

But what was it that he couldn't believe? The more rational part of his mind argued. Hadn't he wanted this? Hadn't he told Sherlock, in no uncertain terms, that he wanted to be left alone?

Well, here it was: his longed-for release from Sherlock's attentions. Shouldn't he feel relieved?

John shook his head, waiting for the appropriate reaction to kick in. He waited. And waited some more for the sudden, bewildering feeling of emptiness to dissipate. Only it didn't.

Had he actually sunk this low? To feel this hideous mixture of frustration and disappointment over an outcome he thought he had wanted, needed? What had Sherlock done to him in the course of two weeks to twist his mind around so?

No, he thought, fighting the nauseating panic blooming inside him as a thought occurred, unbidden, fighting to come to the surface of his mind, almost breaking into consciousness before it was squashed hurriedly back down again.

He turned to address a lesser, safer emotion. He couldn't possibly feel disappointed. No, he could not! And Sherlock walking out on him was certainly no biggie. How could it be, when he had only known the bloke for two weeks, and on such ambivalent terms?

As a doctor, John was trained to handle all sorts of crises, most of them life-and-death emergencies, certainly more urgent compared to this. And personally, John had had several episodes in his romantic life that had not ended well. After all, he could not have lived for nearly four decades without encountering some bumps and dumps along the way. There had been some good times, and definitely some bad times.

For example: compared to the skirmish he had had with Harry over Clara, this episode with Sherlock was practically nothing. The Clara issue had to be one of the worst things to ever happen to John, and not just romantically.

Clara was Harry's wife. He and Harry had met her at the same time, in an art exhibit that Harry had been participating in over a year ago. When sober, Harry was a wonderful watercolor artist. If she could only turn out her works with something resembling the slightest hint of regularity, she would have made it long ago in London's art scene. But that, as Harry would say, was not how artists
rolled.

Generally, art exhibits were not John's thing. He had attended as part of his efforts to boost Harry along after tell-tale signs were emerging yet again that she could be sliding back down into the bottle. It had been an evening reception, with champagne and hors d'ouvres in one of those trendy little galleries in the West End. It had not been an easy night, and he had known that things could very well take a turn for the worse once Harry got worked up. So he had kept a sharp eye over Harry's alcohol consumption, had got on her nerves by pointedly taking away her third glass of champagne and handing her some fruit juice instead. He had not cared. With Harry, he had learned not to care what she thought for a long time. Or so he had thought then.

Then in she had come— tall and blond, in a slinky black dress. John had to admit, during those first few moments when they had been getting to know each other, he had found his future sister-in-law sexy, had even toyed briefly with the idea of asking her out on a date. Of course, that had been before he found out that Clara liked women more than men.

And it had been fine. It had been more than fine that Clara had ultimately chosen Harry. John had been genuinely happy for them. He had always liked Clara for her calm, no-nonsense approach to things. He still did. He had thought then that at last, Harry would finally have a steadying influence in her life.

Of course, somewhere along the way, Harry had to ruin it all for John, and all because of the booze. Once the booze started taking over Harry to do the talking, God only knew where the actual boundaries of hell lay.

To say that their parents had been surprised was an understatement. As much as he loved them, John knew that with his parents, there were boundaries. They were essentially a product of their times, and for them there were certain chasms that could not and should not be crossed. They had nothing against gay people, they would say. They had nothing against their kids having friends who were gay. But what remained unsaid was that gay people belonged to some other family, not theirs.

For as long as he could remember, Harry had never gone for boys. But before Clara, she had been careful to keep her choices unnoticed by their parents. With the arrival of Clara and love, she had thrown caution to the winds, had announced over one disastrous family dinner that she was getting hitched to her girlfriend of three months.

John did not want to remember the chaos that had ensued. The drama and tension had been excruciating. John had known instinctively that the only possible way out was to deal with the matter patiently and coolly, to keep one's head down, not giving in but also never— ever— rising to whatever verbal bait their parents would choose to throw out. But to tell Harry not to respond to those verbal baits was like expecting a shark not to chomp on a bloody bit of carcass thrown into the water.

Almost overnight, John had found himself with not just one, but virtually every member of his immediate family in need of full-time counseling, and even though he had turned them all over to Sarah, Harry's situation and their anger and anguish were all they could talk about outside therapy sessions. The conundrum had dragged on for months, exhausting John and driving Harry into another drinking spell.

Harry had always been one for ideas, but when it came to practical application, she would balk at the slightest difficulty. John had been expecting it. Harry had somehow never managed to deal with problems head-on, and would choose to fly instead of fight, leaving behind job after job and relationship after relationship.
Her drinking bout had signaled such a pattern coming on again, and John, having had enough, had leaned his weight in a little, asking Harry what Clara would think of her if she should know about the drinking. He had, in fact, suggested that Clara ought to know what she was in for.

What he had gotten had been nothing less than a slice of hell.

"Why don't you just say it, Johnny?" his sister, his own blood-sister, had shouted at him. "God, you are such a hypocrite, hiding behind your so-called concern and your bloody support. You never wanted this to work out between me and Clara, did you? Not from the start! Why don't you just admit that you had the hots for her and you're still smarting at the fact that she chose me over you?"

John had stared at Harry speechlessly, her next words mercifully inaudible for the thrumming of his blood in his ears, suddenly loud. He had stared at her and had a distinct thought: no, this was not Harry. This person standing before him looked like Harry— the same hair, the same small, pointed face, eyes practically the same color as John's, but it was not his sister. This was a thing possessed by a particularly malevolent demon.

He could not remember what he had said in response, though he must have said something— perhaps even shouted it, for the argument had ended with Harry in tears and John storming out of her studio and into his car.

Since then, John had made a vow never to talk to Harry when she was inebriated.

Harry had not apologized; indeed, she could not remember a thing about it the next morning. And since John had flatly refused to even mention the incident, the hurt had remained, building layer after layer of resentment around itself as the months rolled by until it became quite impermeable.

And he had warned Clara about Harry's condition. He had thought that it would have been on his conscience if he did not. Between Harry and Clara, it had been clear whose side he was on. And yet in spite of it all, Clara had accepted Harry as she was and the wedding had gone ahead. Needless to say, he had not attended it.

It was only recently that things had started to cool down between himself and Harry, and again it was largely through Clara's intervention. It was no simple task to get Harry to start attending sessions with Sarah and the AA meetings, but things were finally beginning to look up.

As a psychiatrist, John always made it a point to look beyond the disease to see the people alienated from themselves deep within. That did not mean that it was ever easy. He knew that Harry had been under the influence of alcohol, that she had not been herself when they had that fight. Nevertheless, the hurt that had been born from that incident had been a rampaging monster, damaging everything it laid its hands on. Based on all possible criteria, that was a truly epic rift between brother and sister. How could Sherlock's sudden about-face ever compare to that?

And yet, what was this that John was feeling as he sat on his desk, his mind involuntarily reliving the moment Sherlock turned away from him? One moment, Sherlock was going, going, and then the next moment, he was gone. And John… John felt that familiar slash of pain deep in his heart, as he had over his argument with Harry, as he had when he found out that Henry Knight had killed himself.

His heart was breaking, breaking...

John wrenched his mind abruptly away before that treacherous thought had a chance to complete itself. The action was so forceful that John actually felt himself jerking his head back. He bit his lip...
hard as he made himself to do a mental exercise, let his thoughts flow down other paths.

This was nothing. Compared to all the other crises he had ever encountered in his life, this was less than nothing. Even if it felt like something— something huge and monstrous, clawing and tearing at the fabric of his heart, it was nothing he could not deal with.

He had to believe that, for his own sake.

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Before Sherlock's next appointment, John felt like he was existing in a vacuum. The initial shock had largely worn off by the next day, leaving a dull throb such as a bruise might feel the day after one had received an unexpected punch in the face.

His dreams had been uneasy— a murky kaleidoscope of running through the deserted and foggy streets of London in the dead of night. He was searching for something, something just beyond his reach but proving deliberately elusive, and at the same time he seemed to be running away from something else. The dual feeling of hunting and being hunted was accentuated by the sharp sense of desolation that suffused his entire being. John felt so lost, so alone, searching for that something that carried with it a part of him, leaving him incomplete and broken. The feelings were so sharp, so vivid, that John actually woke up feeling the heavy frown still upon his brows and a lump in his throat, as though he were on the verge of crying.

The day of Sherlock's appointment.

John was half-expecting that he would cancel at the last moment, citing some excuse or other, but no. He came in pretty much as he usually did— the same tread, that graceful ease that pervaded his every movement: from the way he took off his scarf and coat and draped them over the back of the armchair to the way he sat himself down in the armchair facing John.

And despite everything that had happened, John was disgusted to realize that the strange, jagged awareness— the hunger— was still there in him, deep down inside, turning his mouth dry and making him a bit lightheaded as he let his gaze sweep up Sherlock's seated form.

But something was different.

John took one look at Sherlock's face and knew instantly what it was. The unsmiling, pale eyes gazing back at him were impersonal and indifferent— as if they belonged to a different person altogether.

As if they belonged to that stranger who, on their second session, had ruthlessly and methodically stripped John down in front of his own eyes, leaving him raw and naked and bleeding within.

The caressing look was not only gone, it was as if it had never been.

Silence, hideous and strained, for a time.

John finally cleared his throat. There was no fucking way that he was going to beg for an explanation of Sherlock's behavior from the other day. If Sherlock thought he was going to lose it and grovel for one, then Sherlock was fucking mistaken. "So," he began.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "Doctor?" he said, his voice polite.

*So this is how it's going to be now...*
John steeled himself, allowing the anger to form and take shape inside of him. For once, anger was good. John needed the anger. It was going to make sure he wasn't going to cave in to this creature and dissolve into a puddle at his feet.

_Fine. Two can play this game._

"I don't think we've got anything else to talk about," he began, rifling through Sherlock's chart. "Unless you've got something else in mind that you'd like to air out."

Sherlock stared at him, his eyes unreadable. Then: "Actually there is one thing, Doctor, aside from that bill of health that I desire of you."

"Oh?"

"We've been undergoing therapy for two weeks now. You've heard everything pertaining to my condition."

"Yes."

"You've probably arrived at the same conclusion as I have, that something had gone wrong with me to induce a series of mistakes on my part that had led to all the problems I had encountered in the last two months. The same thing that was very much in evidence between us."

John lifted a brow. "And what do you think is wrong with you?" he wanted to know.

Sherlock's voice was a few degrees colder than usual when he said, "You know what it is, Doctor Watson. The empathy between us. The empathy I had somehow acquired for humans— enough to make me lose my balance and imperil my very existence. You're a doctor. You know what's wrong and I need you to fix it for me."
They stared at each other for long minutes.

"Don't," Sherlock finally said, his voice cold.

John raised his brows. "What?" he asked, striving to keep his voice even as fury and savage hurt surged through him.

"That," Sherlock practically snarled. "Don't say 'what'. Have you noticed that's a favorite expression of yours? You're not deaf. Therefore, what can you not understand about my words that you need me to repeat myself over and over again, every single time?"

"I wasn't going to make you repeat what you said," John retorted. "I understood you the first time around. My question is: what's brought this on?"

Sherlock frowned. "You know why," he said.

John shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm sure I don't."

"Sentiment, John," replied Sherlock. "Empathy is nothing but pure sentiment, and sentiment is a disadvantage to be found only on the losing side. It's something that I do not care to acquire and if I have, it must be discarded immediately."

"Oh," said John. "By the losing side, you mean it's only meant to be found among humans."

Sherlock did not mince words: "Yes."

"We don't consider empathy a disadvantage, Sherlock."

"Help me get rid of it," growled Sherlock.

John shifted in his seat and leaned forward just a little. "See, here's the thing that I don't understand," he said, his voice remaining light. "You've been undergoing therapy with me for two weeks now, and the form of therapy we've set is the kind where I've let you indulge in telling me things about you. You could have held back, but you chose to tell me everything, and in so doing, you chose to build whatever understanding there now exists between us. The so-called empathy that we have is of your own making. Tell me why you'd want to demolish it now."

"Because it's wrong," replied Sherlock.

"Why is it wrong?" asked John implacably.

"A whole lot of good it's done to you, Doctor," said Sherlock unkindly. "It failed to save your patient from killing himself and it nearly destroyed you in the process. How could it not be wrong to possess such a trait?"

John's voice was a furious, hushed sound: "If you think I regret feeling the way I did over Henry, you're fucking wrong. Just because my patient died does not mean I should stop caring for people because it hurts too much."

"Why would you even put up with it?" Sherlock seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Because that's what we do, Sherlock," said John, his voice rising. "We care about other people."
"Because you don't have to feed from them," finished Sherlock.

He suddenly stood up, began to prowl the area between the chairs and the windows. "Empathy cannot exist. Not for my kind," he said. "I should never have allowed it. To obliterate the distance between predator and prey is to destroy the difference between them."

John paused as he digested this startling piece of information. "So what are you saying?" he asked slowly.

Sherlock turned and suddenly lunged at John, effectively trapping him in the armchair as he placed both hands on the arms of the chair. John felt the impact of his head hitting the back of the cushioned chair as he involuntarily pulled back and struggled not to wince.

Sherlock leaned in until their faces were only inches apart. "You can't be anything other than prey, John," he hissed through clenched teeth. "You can't be the exception. There is no such thing."

"There is always an exception to everything," said John.

Sherlock stared at him, his eyes taking in every inch of John's face. "Not in this case," he said. "It can't happen."

John felt as though his heart was about to explode, from the way it was beating so wildly in his chest. He felt the blood rising to his face, bringing some color into his cheeks. Oh God, what sort of creature was he, to feel so intensely alive at this particular moment?

Sherlock was practically speaking of the need to kill him, and yet here he was, with only one thought in his head: that of fisting his hand in Sherlock's shirt and pulling him roughly in—

John gave himself a violent mental shake. *Snap out of it, John!*

"You should have thought about that before you started courting me, then," he said without thinking, in a voice suddenly gone hoarse.

Something about John's expression must have registered with Sherlock, for his eyes widened incredulously and he suddenly pulled away as though burned.

He resumed his restless pacing by the windows, not looking at John.

"Do you even know what courtship means?" demanded John, his breathing now audible even to himself. "At the very least, it's a form of social interaction. The fact that your kind engages in it, that means this outcome is always possible. It can happen, even to your kind. I think you know that. You've always known that. But that's not the real problem, is it?"

Sherlock was shaking his head, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, as though he were trying to shut John out.

"No, the problem that's making you panic is that you've discovered something about it that you've never encountered before," said John. "Sure, you've courted other people in the past, but—"

"Enough, John!" roared Sherlock.

In the ensuing silence, Mrs. Hudson's soft, hesitant tap on the door was as loud as a pistol shot. The tableau that met her gaze when she opened the door a crack was raw, edged with tension so thick it was almost palpable: of Sherlock, facing the windows with his back to the room, hands on his hips. Of John, sitting rigidly on the edge of his chair. Of both men breathing hard, as though they had
just fought a round against each other in a boxing ring.

John managed to look at Mrs. Hudson's direction and nod reassuringly: It's all right. I've got this.

Sherlock waited until he heard the door click shut before turning to face John again.

"Just…help me," he said at last. "Please, John. Make this go away."

"If you mean to ask whether I can exorcise this…empathy, as you call it, from you," said John softly, "then I'm afraid I can't help you.

"I'm a doctor, Sherlock, a psychiatrist," he continued as Sherlock turned away exasperatedly. "I help people by making them more human, not the other way arou—"

He stopped as his words suddenly sank in on him.

_Sherlock, becoming human…_

He felt his eyes widen as the enormity of it all struck him.

Sherlock did not wait for John to finish his sentence. "You won't help, fine," he spat, moving quickly over to his chair to collect his coat and scarf. "I'll have to see to it myself. This happened in two weeks, I can make it unhappen in days."

He moved to open the door. He paused just as his hand touched the knob. "And one other thing," he said, his voice like ice as he stared straight ahead of him. "Tell the girl who usually precedes me to leave me the hell alone, or I won't be held responsible for what may possibly happen to her."

With that, he was gone, the door banging loudly behind him.

John collapsed back on his chair, feeling like a balloon that was suddenly deflated of all air. But there was no time to gather himself together at leisure. What had Sherlock meant by that?

What he had meant, of course, was Kitty.

John should have known it, should have suspected it that time days ago when he had heard her say those words to Sherlock as he passed by her on his way into John's office.

John stared at her now as she sat across him, in floods of tears.

_Oh God, this can't be happening_, he thought, dazed.

As far as he could gather, Kitty's story was this: Sherlock had been her newest obsession, and yet he had been unresponsive to her every attempt at conversation. In fact, he had acted as though she were invisible—the nerve of that guy! It was something that could not be borne.

So she had deliberately scheduled her appointment after Sherlock's today, and had arrived earlier to catch him moments before he could enter John's office. Indeed, an opportunity had presented itself when she had caught him going into the men's room.

And there, catching him at the sink washing his hands, she had confronted him angrily, only to be driven away by three words.
John waited, feeling the strangest sense of unreality washing over him as if in a dream, as Kitty sobbed, "And then…and then he said, 'you repel me'…"

John exhaled the breath he had been holding as Kitty continued to cry into her handkerchief. Okay. He had been expecting something worse. Indeed, it could have been so much worse…

(The image of Kitty's broken body, entirely drained of blood, in an alley…)

"Kitty," he said. "Kitty, look at me."

Kitty raised tear-streaked eyes to stare at John.

"You do realize that you can't go around tailing men into the men's room," he said, struggling to hold back his temper, badly frayed as it was around the edges after the day he'd had. "Surely you have to know that's wrong."

He took out his prescription pad and started writing.

"Oh, Dr. Watson, not another medication," she wailed.

John looked up. "Oh no," he said. "I'm referring you to Dr. Mortimer, at least for a while. You can do the next few sessions with her at Bart's. It's much closer to your address anyway."

"What?" Kitty cried, aghast. "You're referring me out?"

"For the time being, yes," he said, steeling his heart as he gazed at Kitty's stricken face. "You've got a mood disorder, Kitty, not psychosis. There's nothing wrong with your grasp of reality, and it's time you start learning that there are consequences to everything that we do. What you just did— following a male patient of mine into the men's room and harassing him— can never be right under any definition."

He looked back down at the note he was writing.

"You like him, don't you?" said Kitty suddenly, accusingly, and John had to stop himself from jerking his head up, or showing any reaction at all as he continued to write into his pad. "I can see it. There's none of that 'oh-God-what-does-she-want-now' look when you see him. There's that light in your eyes whenever you look at him."

John calmly refused the bait. "Believe me, Kitty, this has nothing to do with whether I like him more than you," he said evenly.

Liar, a voice inside him said quite objectively.

No, I'm not, he reasoned with himself, annoyed. This boils down to one basic question: who can I control better? Or at all? Sherlock or Kitty? The answer is just too obvious to merit any form of discussion.

Kitty burst into renewed tears as John finished his referral note to Louise. He felt calmer after he finished it. He should not have wasted time referring her out earlier to Louise, who would have dealt with her using a firmer hand and gained some positive results much sooner.

"Kitty," John said, his voice tired but firm. "This isn't a rejection. Don't think of it that way. I'm only doing this for your own safety. Promise me you won't go following Sherlock Holmes around. He's so much worse off than you are, and there's no telling what he can actually do to you. He's dangerous."
Kitty gazed at him, and John saw fear and alarm spring into her eyes for the first time. "Really?" she breathed.

John nodded. "Promise me you'll stay away from him," he said quietly. He handed the referral note to her.

Kitty's face crumpled as she looked down at John's note. "I only wanted him to like me," she said, brokenly. "Why doesn't anybody like me?"

_Believe me, Sherlock would be the last person on earth you'd like to like you..._ 

This time, John did not need the voice inside him telling him that was a lie. Needless to say, it was a deeply upsetting realization.

John stared at Kitty and felt something finally give in deep inside him.

"Oh, Kitty," said John as he reached for her hands. They felt cold in his clasp and because of that, he held them all the more tightly. "You're ill now, but that doesn't mean you're not going to get well in time.

"Get better soon," he urged, smiling, his voice kind. "And I promise you people will."

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John felt completely drained as he waited for the lift to take him down that evening. He was too tired to even contemplate using the stairs, which he normally did.

It was only early evening, and he wasn't the only one on the second floor— the cleaning people were going through the rooms. See, even the elevator held somebody else. So there was no reason to think he might catch Sherlock just around the corner.

There was no point in denying it. That was what he had been doing lately: imagining Sherlock everywhere. Ever since that dream, he had been half-expecting Sherlock to emerge just about anywhere, even in the secure confines of his home. If he could not make himself safe from him in his dreams, was anywhere safe at all?

The woman in the elevator smiled at him as he stepped in. She was that lovely doctor with the olive skin and large, dark eyes— a pediatrician, if the floor she usually punched into the lift panel were to give any indication of her specialization. John sometimes shared the lift with her in the mornings as they got in. He smiled back at her now, then leaned back a little on the wall of the lift, sighing.

"Bad day, is it?" she asked, grinning.

John breathed out a tired laugh. "Yeah, you could say that," he said.

She extended a hand. "Jeanette," she said.

"John," he replied, shaking her hand.

The chime sounded as they reached the ground floor. Before the doors could open, Jeanette said, "Listen, John. I hope you won't think it a bit forward, but...would you care to have a drink with me?"
John stared at her, his mouth slightly open in astonishment.

She blushed. "Of course, unless you've got other plans for tonight…"

John quickly recovered enough to say, "Oh. No! No. That is, nothing I couldn't heartlessly change at the last minute."

He smiled at her.
Chapter 20

The sleek, black car slowed smoothly to a stop at the entrance of the small hotel, and the figure, dressed in an elegant, striped three-piece suit and clutching an umbrella and his briefcase— he had come directly from work, after all— alighted.

He walked into the lobby and made for the lifts at a leisurely pace, never one to hurry. Inside the lift, he took out the hotel keycard he had acquired from his assistant, swiped it into the slot, and peered at the room number on the card before punching in the necessary floor. One could only conjecture about his thoughts as the lift made its way slowly up. If he felt nervous, he was marvelous at concealing it.

He finally arrived at the correct door. He inserted the keycard into the slot, heard the apparatus beep softly once before the door clicked open.

Inside the room, darkness all around.

He sighed. Apparently, very little had changed.

"I see you're still one for a bit of drama," he called into the shadows as he made his way in. "Or perhaps you're locked away in your mind palace once again and let the day go to waste."

He stopped by the nearest table and reached out to turn on a lamp. Light flooded the room, and he took in his first look of Sherlock outside the cctv footages in well over seven decades.

"You took your time, Mycroft," said Sherlock. He was seated on the sofa chair, legs crossed and hands draped on the arms of his chair.

"Please," said Mycroft, scoffing. "That name was from a lifetime ago. Besides, I thought this was how you wanted it. You did make it very clear that you didn't want to see me again, the last time we spoke."

He advanced slowly and took the seat facing Sherlock, setting his briefcase down on the carpeted floor but holding onto the cane handle of his umbrella.

"So," he said. "Sherlock Holmes, is it, this time around?"

Sherlock said nothing, merely stared at this creature who was his older brother. Then: "You've gained some weight since I last saw you."

Mycroft lifted his brows in an almost comical manner. "Losing it, in fact," he said, his lips tilting upwards in the slightest of smiles.

"And still reliant on your heavy-footed minions to do all the legwork for you. No wonder even John Watson caught one of them sneaking around his office," remarked Sherlock. "Which position are you filling in this time? The MOD or the interior?"

"A minor government position, as always," said Mycroft, his tone still mild, diplomatic. "I must admit I was surprised by your summons."

"It couldn't be helped," said Sherlock, sliding his gaze away in disgust.

Indeed, Sherlock had decided to contact Mycroft after walking out on John that afternoon. Enough
was enough. Something had to be done now that he had acknowledged that a part of him had somehow been wrenched loose from his rigid self-possession, and was actually in free fall.

He had stopped in front of the nearest cctv camera in the streets and stared directly into it for a full thirty seconds. That had been enough invitation for Mycroft to pay his younger brother a visit, at long last.

"I thought so." Mycroft stared at him, a slight frown creasing his forehead. "A psychiatrist? Really, Sherlock? Has it finally come to this? You could have just come to me from the start."

Sherlock slanted his brother a look. "Now that I think about it, this really started with you," he said icily. "Do you remember your old friend, Thomas Moriarty?"

Mycroft went still at the sound of the name.

"It just goes to show how some things are beyond even your control. The man left a journal, Mycroft. A family heirloom detailing everything he knew about you," said Sherlock. "Considering how close you were to him before you had him branded as insane and locked away in his own house, I would say that journal makes for truly interesting reading."

Mycroft's mouth worked silently for several seconds, and Sherlock could see that he had thrown him off balance. A very rare occurrence indeed. Finally, Mycroft said, "That was many years ago. And he was truly insane. He wanted me to turn him, and had become rather…public with his demands."

"A family trait, no doubt. But unfortunately he was not insane enough not to leave a lucid account of our kind for posterity, not to mention his progeny," said Sherlock dryly. "You ought to meet the present Earl of Westwood. Perfectly charming specimen."

"You were…off the radar for two and a half weeks a few months ago," murmured Mycroft.

"Yes."

"I suppose you should tell me everything from the very beginning," said Mycroft, leaning back into his seat.

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John came home later than expected that night, smiling bemusedly.

Well, that had been a pleasant surprise. He and Jeanette had enjoyed the drinks thing so much that they had extended it to encompass dinner. And what a lovely dinner it had been, ending in yet another date scheduled for Friday evening. John felt absurdly pleased that his social skills had not entirely rusted away.

He shed his coat and suit jacket, hanging them on the stand beside the front door as he moved slowly into the living room, hands undoing his tie.

How long had it been since he had really been out on a real date? Almost a year. God. That long. He needed to get out there more often. How had he not missed this?

He sat down on the sofa, the wine consumed at dinner making his head slightly fuzzy, all in a good way.

Jeanette was…absolutely incredible. Gorgeous, funny, and sweet. So sweet. That soft, dark gaze
was like having warm honey poured all over him. So very unlike the cold, pale one that he had gotten used to these past two weeks, though that one could also turn caressing in its own, strange way…

John shifted his thoughts abruptly away. What had made the last three hours so relaxing and wonderful was the fact that, for the first time in over two weeks, he had successfully managed to put him out of his mind.

He looked around his living room, Spartan-neat, the colors starkly minimalist. What had he been thinking, spending night after night cooped up in here when he could have been out there?

John shook his head at the first image that came to mind as he tried to answer his own question. No, he wasn't going to think about it, think about him.

He sighed. He needed a shower. And then bed.

The shower was a bit of a bad idea.

(Water sluicing down his face, his neck, down his chest— like a trail of cool, teasing fingers…)

And bed was even more so.

(The memory of him looming over John on this very same bed, bending down to nuzzle his neck. That hot, wet, velvet tongue licking the salt on his skin…)

But he couldn't bypass either just because they brought on certain memories.

Ever since that dream, nothing had been the same again. John found that he hated him for it. Hated him for the feelings he had aroused, and then turning away like that, leaving John out to dry.

And yet, John was sure he had struck a nerve that afternoon. He had not been his usual cool, sardonic and collected self. He had been on the verge of panic. He had asked for John's help over something that was impossible to cure or alleviate. He had been angry enough to shout—a first. Angry at John for saying certain things…things with implications that John wasn't even sure of.

All in all, it had all been so unlike him.

John ran a hand over his face as he tossed and turned in bed, was annoyed at the warmth he felt there as his tired mind admitted defeat, once again. No matter how hard he tried, his thoughts would always return to him. He tried to imagine Jeanette instead, but Jeanette was too new a memory to ever supplant an old favorite.

I need to get laid, he thought grimly. And soon.

Or he could try to relieve himself now. He was, after all, a man— with the same sharp and sudden appetites and capabilities as any other normal bloke. Only, it wouldn't work. He had tried, over the past days, but it had never worked, leaving him hot and bothered and frustrated beyond words. The mixture of feelings that he had brought on was so conflicting, so confusing— arousing yet at the same time not really— that the only thing John had succeeded in doing was to work himself up into a feverish pitch and never, ever, being able to get off.

He hated him for it all.

And yet, he couldn't stop thinking about him. He hated him even more for this.
As if to mock him, the last thought to register in his mind before sleep finally claimed him was, of course, about him.

What could he be doing right now…?

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It was already late when Sherlock finally finished his story.

"Here," he said, handing over Molly's ID card to Mycroft. He had obtained it when Molly had handed him her wallet during their late-night flight. "Track her down and make sure she's safe."

Mycroft hesitated for the briefest moment before he took the card.

"I will see what I can do," he finally said. He then took out his pocket notebook and ran through some of the names he had written down as Sherlock recounted his tale. "And Detective Inspector Lestrade will need some… assistance in getting that search warrant, I suppose."

Sherlock nodded. "Don't forget to scour over the names of the researchers in the library archives. I've already gone through the British Library, but there are several others. They're searching for one more book."

"Of course. And one last thing," said Mycroft, lifting his briefcase and snapping it open. "I thought you might be interested in these."

He took out a bunch of papers, and Sherlock saw the doctor's scratchy handwriting in page after page of them.

"A copy of your chart, from Dr. Watson's office," said Mycroft, his eyes deceptively mild as Sherlock reached out with a hesitant hand to take the papers. He watched Sherlock's face with sharp interest, expertly veiled, as he rifled through them. "As you can see, he's pretty much left a lot of things out. His notes are about as dry and noncommittal as possible. Which would mean—"

"He may be keeping personal notes, and they're probably at his home," finished Sherlock as he piled the papers together.

"Yes. I can organize a search—"

Sherlock quickly lifted his eyes to glare at Mycroft. "No."

"No?" echoed Mycroft with a lift of his eyebrows, not bothering to mask his incredulity.

"Leave John Watson alone."

Mycroft's eyebrows remained lifted.

"I will take care of him myself," said Sherlock after a moment, holding Mycroft's gaze with something approaching haughty defiance.

Mycroft let the strained silence stretch on for a few seconds longer, let the significance of Sherlock's words fully sink in, before he murmured, "As you wish."

He made to stand up. "You will not appreciate my saying this, but…it's good to see you again," he said, not quite looking at Sherlock, his tone carefully bland. "I'm glad that you've not come in harm's way."
"No thanks to you," said Sherlock shortly.

Mycroft bowed his head once, as if in concession. "Amends will be made," he said lightly before turning toward the door.

Friday, at last.

Thank God for it.

John found that he was actually, nervously looking forward to it. Jeanette did not come to the clinic on Fridays, so they had arranged to meet at that Italian place in Soho, Angelo's, for dinner. For today, there was only the matter of getting Sherlock's appointment over and done with, withstand whatever outrageous surprise he had in store for him, and it would be smooth sailing from there.

Baker Street, after his rounds at Bart's. Already, Mrs. Hudson had his tea and the list of the day's patients ready on his table. John took one look at the list and felt an inexplicable, sinking sensation deep inside his chest. A line had been drawn across Sherlock's name, crossing out his appointment from two to three that afternoon.

He had cancelled.

Well, that solves a problem right there, he tried to tell himself, but instead of the relief he had been expecting, the feeling was still there, hollow and empty, inside him.

He sat down behind his desk, and stared out the window for a moment.

Oh come on, John. Stop it. Just stop it, he snapped at himself irritably. A part of you wanted this to happen. You've hoped for a respite from him, and now you've got it. So what's going on with you right now?

He shook his head. He was being horrid. Just absolutely horrid. He couldn't be feeling like this, not if he were sane. Which he was starting to seriously doubt.

It's all for the best, he told himself resolutely as he prepared to see the first patient of the day. For both of us.

To John's surprise, everything went without a hitch throughout the day. The patients had been on time, he had finished on time, and he was at the restaurant in time to meet Jeanette.

It was perfectly lovely when everything just seemed to go so smoothly one's way.

Angelo's was a small, cozy restaurant. The place given to them was perfect— a corner table for two by the window, which was festooned with small, Christmas lights, creating an ambience both intimate and jolly. They chatted nonstop throughout the meal, with John sitting with his back to the window. Jeanette laughed at his stories, his jokes. John found that he liked Jeanette's laughter, the way she would peer at him from under her lashes, her coy smiles.

His night was definitely going in the right direction.

Dessert was barely over when he began thinking of a way to steer the conversation around having more coffee at his place. Or her place. Whichever would be fine.
Before he could open his mouth though, Jeanette said, "Right. I have to go to the washroom."

"Of course. I'll settle the bill then," he said, smiling, as Jeanette rose from her seat and went in search of the ladies' room.

What followed happened so fast that everything had been a blur.

One moment he was looking away to gather his coat beside him, and the next moment he saw the chair that Jeanette had been using suddenly yanked from its position opposite him and planted at an angle closer to him on the side of the small table.

John froze as Sherlock, still clad in his scarf and coat, settled down on the chair, effectively blocking his way out from the table.

"I thought she'd never leave," grumbled Sherlock, his gaze at the direction where Jeanette had disappeared to before bringing it back to John's face, slack-mouthed with shock.

"Hello, John," he said, brows raised. "Interesting evening so far?"

Author's Notes: Please refer to the second interlude, part I, regarding the situation involving Thomas Moriarty.

In this story, I choose to maintain Sherlock's need for Mycroft just as in the ACD canon, something that the BBC series isn't very keen on, but I do think Mycroft is indispensable to Sherlock in so many ways, no matter what happened between them.
"It is the demon, Father. The most terrible one of all."

- Father Cayetano Delaura, on Love

From "Of Love and Other Demons", by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"No," said John, mind still partially frozen although his mouth appeared to be working just fine. "Oh God, no."

"Surprised, are we, John?" inquired Sherlock, baring his teeth in a lupine smile. "I knew I was, when I saw you with her. So fast. Off with the old and on with the new, is it?"

John's mind finally caught up. "Get. The. Fuck. Out of here," he said, accentuating each word just to make himself absolutely clear that he was not amused to see him. "Before she comes back!"

Sherlock affected not to have heard him. "Although I didn't realize you'd be so desperate, going out on dates with people you hardly know," he continued, his voice low, his words pouring out in a rush. "You couldn't possibly have known her before this week. What do you actually know about her, John, apart from the fact that she's an anesthesiologist?"

"What?" said John, brows lowering into a heavy frown. "Hold on, she's—"

"And would just anyone do? I thought we had something going, John."

"I thought you said the courtship is off," hissed John, unable to keep his voice from rising. "And anyway, it's not as if we actually have anything going on—"

"Oh John, what makes you think the endpoint would differ, even if the courtship were off?" asked Sherlock, shaking his head at John's naiveté. "The moment you said 'oh God, yes', you're mine to do as I please."

John stared at Sherlock. "And what does that even mean?"

"Lose her." Sherlock's voice was cold and clear as ice.

"Wha-? No! Who the bloody hell do you think you are?"

"You know exactly what I am," said Sherlock, his gaze boring into John.

He wasn't kidding. Sherlock's pupils were dilated, and not just because of the dimly lit interior of the restaurant. John could see actual fury in those cold depths, and knew Sherlock's threat was real, which made him even more furious, holding firmly on to Sherlock's gaze and refusing to look away first.

"Lose her or I shall have to involve her in my plans concerning you," continued Sherlock.

John finally had enough. "Get the hell out of here, you…you fiend!" he gritted.

If anything, John's words only made Sherlock's smile wider. "Oh yes. A veritable fiend. A demon fresh from the pit. Call me what you like. I'm sure I'm all that and more," he said. "But I'm the only
one who can possess you, John, and if I can't have you, nobody else can."

Sherlock watched as John's mouth fell open in disbelief at his words, then saw John's gaze suddenly and involuntarily shift to a point beyond him, saw his angry expression change to an appalled one.

"So she's back," Sherlock said, his eyes narrowing as his voice dropped to a whisper. "Shall I turn around and introduce myself? I haven't really given her a thorough once-over."

John's voice sounded oddly strangled: "No."

"That's my John," murmured Sherlock, nodding. "You know what you'll have to do then, don't you?"

Aloud he said, "I'll see you later then, darling."

With that, he launched himself at John. The move was so sudden, and John was in such cramped quarters, that there was simply no way he could dodge Sherlock. Even if he could, Sherlock's hand was immediately around the arm he had thrown up, effectively immobilizing it in a vice-like grip. John felt the impact as the back of his head slammed painfully against the wood of the window pane behind him, but he did manage to angle his head away just in time so that Sherlock's lips only managed to graze his cheek.

But the damage was done.

Having made his point, Sherlock pulled away from John smoothly, stood up and without ever turning to look behind him at the woman, was out the door as quickly as he had come in, leaving John to deal with the aftermath.

Startled silence inside the entire restaurant as John, dazed, took in the staring faces, the expression on Jeanette's face as she stood, frozen like a statue, a few feet away. Her beautiful face looked suddenly a lot less beautiful because of the horror and disgust mingled there.

After-dinner coffee was definitely out of the picture now. In fact, at the very least, he knew he was never going to be able to use the goddamned lifts at the clinic again if it meant he might bump into Jeanette there.

He removed the shaking hand from his mouth and made a feeble attempt at a smile. "Would you believe that's one of the hazards of being a psychiatrist?" he told her rather breathlessly.

His hands were still trembling when he got home. In fact, his entire body was shaking in reaction, still. He threw his coat down on the sofa and paced the length of the living room, hands on his mouth, his face, desperately trying to get a hold of himself and utterly failing.

He couldn't do this, not anymore.

Sherlock had gone too far this time. It simply wasn't just his night and his date in tatters. Sherlock had done nothing less than to grab onto the very fabric of his life and rendered it in shreds—the heartless bastard.

John could bear it no longer. Something had to give, or he felt he would go mad.

He tore his hands from his face, breathing harshly, surveying the living room with wild eyes. He
felt like throwing something, or downing an entire bottle of something strong enough to make him pass out— anything to lessen the nauseating pressure deep inside. Then he remembered he never kept anything stronger than red wine in the chiller, and the throwing dramatics was simply not his style, no matter how much he may be driven to it.

He sat down hard on the sofa, cradling his aching head in his hands.

Oh God! What to do?

*Think, John, think! What could have driven Sherlock to do something as outrageous as that? What could possibly be his motivation?*

Apart from driving me mad, you mean? He asked himself. He was in self-shrinking mode now, was he? Great. Just great.

The voice inside him refused to be deterred: *Well, of course, aside from that. If there is anything aside from that…*

He thought for a moment, willing his heart and his breathing to slow down as he forced himself to do a bit of analysis.

I've never seen him this furious before, he finally said to himself. This is the nearest he has ever come to losing it. Come to think of it, he really did seem to have lost it back at the restaurant…

*Okay, good. That's good. Keep thinking…why would he be so angry?*

Because he thinks he bloody owns me and therefore I should never have a life of my own, John thought angrily.

*And how do you feel about that, John?*

Is there any other fucking way to feel about it? John asked himself, exasperated. Of course it makes me angry!

*No, I mean how do you feel about Sherlock thinking he owns you?*

John was silent for a moment, stunned.

*You do realize maybe that's where all the answers lie. Of course you do, you've always known, but you just never wanted to dig deeper into it.*

Shut it.

*Sure. Go ahead and shut me up again, and I promise this is going to go nowhere, as always. Perhaps it's about time that you be honest and just think things over, John. Don't cringe away from it. Why have you never wanted to go deeper into it?*

Because it's scary, that's why.

*Why is it scary?*

Because he's a monster and I am little more than food to him. He may toy with me for any amount of time, but in the end, things are going to go only one way— he's said so himself— and truth be told, I don't want to die just yet…

*That's only partly the reason, and you know it. What's the other part?*
I am so not going there right now, he told himself, angrily. He could feel the shrink in himself backing off, as if in grudging agreement.

Okay. Fine. But have you considered that there were episodes when Sherlock had not been himself? Apart from the restaurant, there was that time when he had not been able to feed because of you; and that last session, when he had shouted to drown out your words...

What had you been about to say to him to anger him so?

John sighed. I don't know what it was exactly. It's just that, he was panicking, because he was used to playing this game but somehow he found something new to it this time around— something he didn't understand and it upset him. It seemed as though he had always been in control and for the first time he's not and it had frightened him.

And this new, upsetting element...what do you think it is?

How the hell can I possibly know what it is? He snapped at himself.

You can try guessing. (The words, also delivered in a sharp retort)

John exhaled loudly. Something to do with the empathy that's sprung up between us...he did say I must never be anything but prey, that there is no such thing as an exception...

And this previously perfectly balanced predator is left unhinged enough to go rampaging through a restaurant at the sight of you going out with somebody else. An incredibly thoughtless, clumsy move for somebody like him. What does that tell you, John?

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes at himself. Look, I know how it must appear, but I cannot seriously think that he's capable of it...

Just answer the question, John.

He sighed. It appeared as if he were jealous, and he had acted as though he had to fucking mark me as his property. But this is probably more wishful thinking than anything. I cannot possibly think that he's capable of that—

Because if he's indeed capable of it, what does it mean, then?

No, he can't be, so don't think about it. It's impossible...

Is it? You thought it would be impossible, too, in your case, but look at the state you're in.

Shut up. Just shut up...

You can just ask him, let him clear things up. He did say he'd see you later. Darling.

Really? And just how am I supposed to go looking for him at this time of night?

The thought was barely out of his head when his eyes widened.

The shrink's voice inside him was smug as he had the last word: You still have those sleeping pills left over in the bathroom cabinet, don't you?

...................................................................................................................

At the very best, it was a far shot. John was pretty sure it was not going to work out. After all, how
could one possibly control one's dreams enough to shift them according to one's plans? It was virtually unheard of.

But he had no choice. This was the only option available, and although he knew it would probably prove fruitless, he was desperate enough to give it a try.

He had to sleep deeply enough to dream. More than that, somehow he had to be able to tap into Sherlock's dreams and resonate with him. And once he was able to do that, he owed him a special payback…

Sheer impossibilities! But he took the sleeping pills anyway. Even then, he slept fitfully for the first two to three hours. Towards dawn though, he finally began to dream. Uneasy, fleeting dreams that seemed to shift and melt into each other. Various scenarios, each one forgotten the moment he turned his attention elsewhere. He was searching for something, something important.

He was inside his office at 221B Baker Street, but he needed to be elsewhere. Where? He could not remember.

He took the stairs down and opened the main door of the clinic to a darkened street filled with thick, swirling mist. It was so thick, turning the light from the streetlamps into mere globs of white and yellow in a miasma of grey and black, that he stood frozen on the pavement for a moment, unsure of where to go.

And he was afraid.

What could be lurking there in the mist? That vampire boy with the shiny eyes—?

Vampire.

Sherlock.

*Get Sherlock!*

The fear melted away and raw anger gradually took hold of him as he remembered what his quest was. Sherlock was here, somewhere. He was sure of it. He was going to find the bastard and demand some answers. Answers that Sherlock had been unwilling to impart during waking moments.

He set off down the street, his steps as sure as if there was no fog swirling about him at all.

He was going to find him, and even if Sherlock chose to be elusive, he was going to make him come forth. This was his dream after all. His and Sherlock's. He had as much control here as the other had.

The mist gradually lifted, and he found himself in an unfamiliar part of town, with old brick buildings set in dark alleys and narrow streets. He spotted a familiar form clad in that long, dark coat, walking just a few yards ahead of him. Running noiselessly, he was behind him in seconds, his hand grabbing at one shoulder—

The figure suddenly turned and caught his arm before he could throw a punch. The grip was incredibly strong, the bite of those long fingers on his wrist painful, but John was beyond caring. He set his head down and rammed his shoulder into Sherlock's torso with all his strength.

The force of his onslaught apparently caught Sherlock by surprise, sending them crashing against a brick wall nearby. This time John succeeded in smashing his fist against one of those cheekbones,
earning a soft grunt from Sherlock and sending him sprawling back a couple of steps. He recovered quickly though, catching John's fist before it could connect with his face for the second time. For a few minutes, there was no sound except for their harsh breathing as they tussled for leverage.

John wanted to shout out all the foul things he had wanted to say to Sherlock, but his pent-up rage made speech impossible. He could not find the words to shape his thoughts. So he let his anger out in pure, physical form, attacking Sherlock with everything he had.

Even then, it was extremely difficult. Sherlock suddenly sent a knee up against John's stomach, knocking the air out of his lungs as he doubled up in pain. Such pain! God, that sensation felt real enough. Unkind hands gripped his shoulders and finally forced him against the wall.

"Oh, John…John," said Sherlock, shaking his head even as a thin smile made its way to his lips. "Ever so impressive. I wasn't expecting you'd get to this point so fast, and all on your own."

"I've got a score to settle with you," gritted John through clenched teeth, one hand gripping Sherlock's as it remained fisted on his chest.

Sherlock's brows lifted. "Says the man pinned to the wall," he said.

"Why?"

Sherlock did not bother pretending not to know what John meant. "Oh, let me see," he said, affecting to think. Then: "Because I can."

"Why don't you just kill me and be done with it!" snapped John.

"Now where's the fun in that?"

"Tell me why you followed me on my date."

Sherlock stared at John, the smile slowly easing away from his face.

"Tell me why you were mad enough to make a scene in public like that," continued John, his voice suddenly hushed.

Sherlock regarded John with hooded eyes for a moment before something seemed to click in his brain.

"You think you're so special, don't you, John?" said Sherlock, his eyes narrowed, a corner of his lip curled in a sneer. "Special enough to make me lose my head over you, change the entire way I hunt because of you? You think I won't be able to take you in the end just as I had all the other special people I've ever come across?"

"Take me then," said John softly.

Sherlock blinked. Evidently he had not been expecting that.

He stared as John reached up and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, lifting the collar away to expose a sliver of his throat.

"Come on," prompted John, still in that quiet voice. "You're fond of saying I owe you a meal. Come and get it."

Sherlock's grip slowly eased away from John's chest. He could sense Sherlock's breathing suddenly changing— growing fast, erratic— and tried to suppress the strange, growing excitement
that he himself was feeling. He felt Sherlock's hungry gaze slide down his throat and settle at the strong, steady pulse he must see there at the base. He saw the hand that Sherlock was lifting towards him and knocked his fingers away.

"No," said John. "None of that Vulcan nerve pinch for me, thanks."

Seeing Sherlock's look of incomprehension, John said, "I want to be awake to see you at it."

He saw the muscles of Sherlock's jaw working. Sherlock's hand came up again, this time to cradle the side of John's face as he angled it away to expose more of his throat. John fought to stay calm as Sherlock brought his head down to nuzzle his neck. At last, he could feel Sherlock's parted lips at the base of his throat, feel the hot breath fanning out to tease his skin, sending frissons of awareness down his spine. He closed his eyes and waited.

And waited.

John heard the growl first, deep in Sherlock's throat, before he felt Sherlock wrench his head away abruptly from his neck. He flinched as Sherlock sent a fist into the brick wall inches from his head, sending loose fragments of brick and mortar flying.

"Are you satisfied now, John?" said Sherlock, his voice rough with fury and anguish. "Are you happy with the results of your attempts to humanize me?"

John stared at Sherlock, shock and something more potent stirring inside him.

"Is this what you wanted to see, John?" he heard Sherlock saying, his face only inches away from his. "You want to see me starving, unable to feed, is that it?"

John shook his head, his voice suddenly gone.

"Tell me then. What do you want to happen?" Sherlock demanded, his gaze as hard as flint.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, John had brought up a hand to Sherlock's nape while the other caught his face, effectively immobilizing him as John brought his head forward to crush his mouth against his.

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It wasn't a kiss.

It was too brutal, too punishing a thing to be called one.

He heard Sherlock's muffled exclamation of surprise, felt him recoil, bringing his hands up to wrap around John's to pray them away, but John only hooked an arm around Sherlock's head to keep him securely in place as he kept up the vicious, grinding pressure on Sherlock's lips.

God, he had to do this. Do something, anything, to relieve the burning feeling inside him before it consumed him totally.

A few more seconds, and Sherlock finally managed to twist his head away savagely. John felt a stinging sensation on his bruised lips, could taste the sharp, metallic saltiness of blood on his tongue. The kiss had left him bleeding, and he knew that Sherlock had tasted it too, could smell the minute amount of blood on his cracked lip.

A moment as they stood there panting, frozen. Sherlock could not seem to tear his gaze away from
John's bleeding mouth. Then, with a low moan, he lowered his mouth back to John's lips.

John forced himself to remain still, not knowing what to expect. Well, in a way he did: a single drop of blood to spark the feeding frenzy of a vampire. He expected Sherlock to devour him then and there. What he did not expect was the light touch of Sherlock's tongue on his lower lip.

Just that.

Just the tip of Sherlock's warm, wet tongue lapping once, twice, on his bottom lip—the gentlest of touches—licking away the rosy drop that had gathered there.

It was over all too quickly. John swallowed hard as Sherlock pulled away again, his gaze a clash of desire, hunger and misery as it raked over John's face.

Sherlock watched John lick his lips, his mouth parting to form one fiercely whispered word: "More."

Sherlock lost the struggle with himself as he leaned into John then. He felt John's arms wrap around him tightly even as he lifted a hand to cradle the back of John's head, his other hand under John's chin as he brought his mouth to touch softly on John's parted lips.

His kisses were so soft, so tentative, like the touch of a watercolor brush on paper. John could feel Sherlock's eagerness straining against the tense muscles of his shoulders, and yet he was holding back, as though uncertain, afraid. John groaned, flicking his tongue reassuringly over the cupid's bow of Sherlock's upper lip before sucking on his full, lower lip.

Oh God, he had wanted to do that for so long and never realized it until now. It felt so very good.

Sherlock shifted his head, changing the angle of their kiss, his mouth parting a bit more under John's. John accepted the unspoken invitation and drove his tongue into Sherlock's mouth.

The kiss quickly turned desperate, urgent—burning hot and so achingly sweet. John felt his back hitting the wall as Sherlock leaned his full weight into him. Their kiss deepened, the touch of Sherlock's mouth and tongue finally hard and rough with abandon against John's. It was thrilling beyond words. John found that he could not get enough, and he plundered Sherlock's mouth like a man dying of thirst. And always, the faint, underlying taste of blood served to accentuate the intensity of it all.

More, thought John mindlessly. Oh God, I need more!

John loosened his tight grip on the back of Sherlock's nape, let his hands stray down his chest, feeling the heat of Sherlock's body through his open coat and his silk shirt, settling to clasp at his narrow hips. They were practically straining against each other; they were so close together that John could feel every slide and shift of Sherlock's body against his, could feel the evidence of Sherlock's arousal and knew that this passion was undeniably something that they shared.

The realization was a heady one, sending the blood surging through John's head, making it pound viciously. He must have given voice to the discomfort, for he dimly saw Sherlock's eyes flare wide open in sudden alarm. And then Sherlock was breaking the kiss, pulling away forcefully from John, holding him off with strong but unsteady hands.

"Don't," he said sharply as John made to move toward him. His grip was like steel, holding John away at arm's length. And then quite suddenly the feel of his hands was gone as Sherlock released him.
"Sherlock..." John fell back weakly to lean on the wall, feeling his strength suddenly drain away from him.

"Don't, John," Sherlock repeated, his voice dull this time. Dead. "Just...don't."

John stared at Sherlock, both of them breathing hard, as Sherlock raised a hand to wipe at his mouth. "This has been a mistake," he rasped.

John merely shook his head, his mind curiously empty of words.

"Don't come looking for me again," warned Sherlock, backing away a step or two before turning to disappear into the wall of mist.

John let him go, knowing he wouldn't be able to track him down this time around.

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John woke up slowly, his vision spinning, swimming, his heart thundering away in his chest. He closed his eyes and waited for the vertigo to pass before he slowly opened them again to find himself alone on his bed. For some strange reason he felt like weeping. Lifting a hand to pinch at the junction of his brows, he was astonished to feel tears spilling from the sides of his eyes.

He brushed them away even as his heart gave a broken lurch deep in his chest.

*God...oh God...*

He supposed it was only fitting for a man to weep upon discovering that he was possessed. Not just by a vampire, but a demon as well. The most terrible one of all.

He had tried to deny its existence, but the dream had only served to drive the point home to him—the one that he could not bring himself to admit for the longest time: he did not just want Sherlock. He was in love with him.

End of Part II

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**Author's Notes:** John's term for Sherlock's technique to induce unconsciousness on his prey (the Vulcan nerve pinch) is from **Star Trek.**
Part III: Consummation

Con-sum-ma-tion/ [kon-suh-mey-shuhn] noun. 1. The act of consummating; completion. 2. The state of being consummated; perfection; fulfillment.

(definition from www.dictionary.com)

Goodness, thought Mycroft as he entered the hotel lift once again early that Saturday morning. This many summons in so many days. Is this going to be a habit?

Sherlock's room was awash in weak morning sunlight when he entered.

At least he's up and about enough to draw the curtains a bit, he thought as he silently made his way into the hotel room. It had not been an uncommon occurrence in the past to have Sherlock unresponsive and buried in his mind palace for days on end. It would not do to have that now, especially when certain things had been set in motion and were moving at a very fast rate.

Mycroft was about to open his mouth and launch into an account of the progress of their plans when he stopped short at the rare and disturbing sight of a distressed Sherlock sitting on one of the sofa chairs by the window.

Still dressed in his pajamas and a blue silk robe, his hair wild and unkempt, it was obvious that he had just gotten out of bed. That was not an uncommon sight to Mycroft either. What instantly got his attention was Sherlock's stillness—a different kind from the usual: tense, filled with a nervous, restless energy just waiting for the slightest trigger to unleash its destructive force. He was breathing fast, a light sheen of sweat on his skin, making his pale face glow in the weak morning light. He was trembling ever so slightly, his expression alight with a strange mixture of rage and another, indefinable element as he stared out the window.

Mycroft had seen him in this state before—although there was something in Sherlock's expression now that gave him pause—and he knew very well that some careful maneuvering was in order. His mind raced back to the cctv footages fed to his computer from last night, showing Sherlock in Soho. Trailing after John Watson. Entering the restaurant that Dr. Watson and a woman friend had been patronizing and leaving barely five minutes later in a whirl of dark coat and black fury, so evident even on the grainy pictures of the cctv cameras.

It did not take a genius to know that Dr. Watson was somehow the reason behind Sherlock's currently agitated state, and Mycroft was instantly worried. He sat down carefully in the seat facing Sherlock. Knowing just how much of a minefield any topic of conversation could be at the moment, he wisely waited for his brother to begin.

A quarter of an hour passed by. Half an hour. Then Sherlock said, "You've never told me whether you got over Anthea or not."

Mycroft was never an easy one to surprise, but he was surprised now. "No," he said slowly. "I don't think I ever told you. I thought you weren't interested."

Sherlock slanted his older brother a look, his expression tightly guarded. "Was it worth it?" he asked.

Mycroft's expression never changed as he said, "She said she had no regrets."
"That's not an answer."

"I…suppose it really boils down to whether you can forgive yourself or not," replied Mycroft, his eyes never leaving Sherlock's face.

"And did you?"

"I learned to live with it, as time went by." Mycroft looked down to flick away an imaginary piece of lint from his impeccable dark trousers. "One has very little choice in the matter."

He let a few more minutes slip by in silence.

"Are you ready to tell me about Dr. Watson?" he finally asked.

Sherlock's refusal to look at him at this point added to Mycroft's growing unease. "What's there to tell?" he drawled.

"Oh, a lot, I can imagine," said Mycroft, keeping his voice neutral. "For instance, what were you doing following him around Soho last night?"

He thought he saw a ghost of a smile cross Sherlock's lips. "Hunting," Sherlock replied succinctly.

"You know lying will get you nowhere with me," said Mycroft. "If it were merely a hunt, you wouldn't be taking the risk of following him into crowded areas. If it were an ordinary courtship, he would not be alive this long. So tell me. Should I be concerned about Dr. Watson?"

"He's none of your concern." Sherlock's tone was cold and flat.

"Considering your behavior last night, I beg to differ." Mycroft's voice was no longer mild or amiable. "Unless you would like me to proceed without any data coming from you, I suggest you explain the situation with Dr. Watson immediately."

"Stay away from John," growled Sherlock.

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow. "Such…demonstrative words, coming from you. From these remarks and your surprising questions over my…your late sister-in-law," he said, "am I to infer that you've bonded with him?"

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Sherlock.

"Then why this protectiveness? I must admit this is a first for you," said Mycroft.

Mulish silence greeted him.

Mycroft sighed. "You know that I will find out sooner or later," he said softly. "I always do. Regarding matters of the heart, I wish you would just tell me directly."

This time, Sherlock turned to stare at him. "I thought you said that I don't have one of those," he said.

"Apparently I was wrong," said Mycroft. "I ask for the last time: who is John Watson to you?"

"A person of special interest."

"How special?"
Sherlock was silent as he continued to stare hard at his brother.

Oh my Lord. "Have you Bonded with him?" Mycroft repeated his question.

Sherlock looked away. "No," he said shortly.

Mycroft released the breath he was holding. "Good," he said. "I would suggest that we do not complicate the situation further. Everything is already in place. Detective Inspector Lestrade has been given the warrant and new orders to search Aswarby Hall and its surrounding lands in cooperation with the Lincolnshire police force. The Earl of Westwood will be taken in for questioning. I'd say it's time to wrap things up here in London, and that would include your dealings with the doctor."

He stood up smoothly. "I would advise that you get yourself ready to check out of here. I can arrange a car to pick you up," he said.

"Give me an hour."

"All right." Mycroft made to turn away.

"Mycroft."

"Yes?"

"Touch a hair on John Watson's head," said Sherlock slowly, deliberately, "and I swear I will kill you."

Mycroft suppressed the urge to roll his eyes heavenwards. "I suppose asking 'why?' will get me nowhere?"

But then he supposed he already knew why. Oh dear, dear.

"I want your word that he will come to no harm!"

Mycroft sighed. "All right," he said at last. "You have it."

It had been a strange morning, thought Mycroft as he made his way down the hotel. Who would have thought that after all this time, somebody would come and touch that cold, shriveled and lifeless thing inside his brother's chest and finally turn it into flesh and blood and—even more miraculously—send it beating?

He would need to meet John Watson in person, if only to satisfy his curiosity. While he gave Sherlock his word that he was not to harm him, he never promised not to make arrangements to see him.

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"Hey, Doc, are you okay?" The nurse on duty at the Psych ward in Bart's, Alice—John thought her name was—asked.

John looked up from the chart he had been scribbling into and cleared his throat. "Yes, fine. I'm fine," he said. "Just had a late night last night."

Were the red-rimmed eyes still that obvious? Fantastic.

"Hot date?" she grinned cheekily.
He gave her a tight smile and wondered briefly how she would take it if he were to tell her he'd spent the early morning hours crying over some bloke who might just turn out to be the love of his life and who also happened to be a vampire whom he had accosted in his dreams and who now wanted nothing more to do with him.

"Here," he merely said, handing over his patient's chart. "Thanks."

Well, that was the last of his responsibilities for the weekend. He really hadn't wanted to get out of bed at all except that he had gotten a call over one of his patients at Bart's. Now that that was dealt with, he had the entire, bleak Saturday and Sunday to look forward to. He might as well just crawl back into his bed and see if he could catch some much-needed sleep.

Outside Bart's, the sun had taken refuge in a bank of grey, surly-looking clouds. It was going to rain soon. The weather matched his mood perfectly.

His phone started ringing again. An unidentified number.

Heart suddenly racing, he raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Get into the car, Dr. Watson," said an unfamiliar male voice.

He frowned. *Huh?*

Just then a black Mercedes pulled up in front of him. Its approach had been so stealthy and quiet that John had not even seen it coming, especially not for him. The uniformed driver stepped out to open one of the back doors.

"Wait a minute. Who is this?"

"Get into the car, please."

"Why?"

"This concerns Sherlock Holmes."

Without another word, John got into the car.

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It was only after he had gotten into the car that John began to think his actions stupid. Such knee-jerk responses to the mere mention of Sherlock's name were unwise, at the very least. Sherlock had told him that he had enemies—had, in fact, narrowly escaped from the clutches of a madman. And now here he was, getting into unfamiliar cars just because Sherlock's name was brought up.

Stupid!

His ride was made all the more surreal by the silent presence of a well-dressed, attractive young woman sitting beside him, typing away on her blackberry.

"Hello," he finally managed.

"Hi," she returned without even so much as glancing up at him.

"What's your name then?"

"Uh…Victoria."
"Is that your real name?" he asked.

"No."

Okay. He supposed it would be too much to expect her to be honest about her real name when she had nothing to gain by it.

"I'm John," he said after a moment.

She smiled. "Yes, I know."

John looked out the window and considered just opening the door of the car and making a dash for it while the car was still running.

"I wouldn't advise it," said Victoria. "The door on your side can only be opened on the outside."

"Any point in asking where I'm going?" asked John resignedly.

Victoria finally glanced at him, smiling. "None at all, John," she said.

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It was raining when they got into the empty warehouse somewhere in the Docklands.

The driver got out to open the door on John's side. John glanced at Victoria, who merely nodded. "He's over there," she said.

He turned out to be a middle-aged man with short dark hair combed neatly back on his forehead. Dressed in a three piece suit and lounging on an umbrella, he stood waiting a few paces away from the car, an empty chair before him.

John got out of the car and walked over hesitantly. "You know we could have just talked on the phone, since you already know my number," he said.

The man smiled. "When one is avoiding the attention of Sherlock Holmes, one learns to be discreet. Hence this place," he said, waving his umbrella in a vague semi-circle about him. "Have a seat, John."

"No thanks, I prefer to stand," said John flatly.

Silence as the man looked him over. "You don't seem very afraid," he said mildly.

John lifted his chin. "You don't seem very frightening," he said.

The man laughed. "Were you ever a soldier, John?" he said. "Perhaps in a past life?"

John frowned. "What?"

"Never mind." The man moved on. "Tell me, what is your relationship with Sherlock Holmes?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"And you are?"

"A concerned party."
"You're concerned about Sherlock. Why?"

The man's smile faded as he said, "I worry about him. Constantly."

Mycroft watched as John tried to maintain a calm, stoic façade as he took all of this in. Interesting man, he had to admit. Damaged, beyond a doubt, but full of courage and not a small bit of irreverence. Were these the traits that had first drawn Sherlock to him?

"If you knew my phone number I'm figuring you would know that I'm Sherlock's doctor," John said at last.

"Hmm, quite. Is that all you are?"

Mycroft followed John's movements as he shifted his frame into a more alert stance, bringing his head forward just a bit. "We're not even going to touch up on what Sherlock actually is, are we?" asked John.

"Quite pointless, don't you think?" said Mycroft.

"So how did you know about Sherlock?" John asked.

"We go back a long way, Sherlock and I," replied Mycroft smoothly.

Something seemed to click inside John's head when he heard the words. "Hold on…you're the brother," he said before he could stop himself.

The man's placid gaze did not waver, but John caught that quiet flare of surprise in those deep blue depths. "Sherlock…mentioned that he has a brother, did he?" he said, his voice deceptively casual.

Shit. Wrong thing to say.

John licked his lips. "In passing," he said evasively.

"I see. And what other things has he mentioned to you…in passing?"

John shrugged. "Sorry, privileged information between doctor and patient," he said, his voice bland.

Mycroft stared at John, sensing the way John was closing himself up smoothly from his scrutiny, like a fan. He was beginning to understand Sherlock's choice. Definitely, there was something interesting about this man.

It was time he tried a different tactic.

"You look very tired, John," he said. "Late night last night, was it?"

He could see that John was instantly on guard.

"Those eyes," remarked Mycroft, tilting his head at a slight angle as he let his gaze bore into John's face. "Others would have gone for that obvious conclusion, but experience tells me they're red from weeping."

He let his head return slowly to its proper position on his shoulders. "What's the matter? Have you not gotten accustomed to Sherlock's attentions yet, John?" he asked.

"I might be wrong," said John, his voice cool, "but I hardly think that's any of your business."
"It could be."

"No, I really think it couldn't."

"Are you not even remotely afraid of the consequences of attracting such a…suitor?" Mycroft wanted to know. "Surely you realize there is but one endpoint in sight?"

John was silent, regarding Mycroft with a kindling eye.

Mycroft's eyes travelled swiftly over John's shuttered expression, and what he saw— and perhaps more tellingly, what he did not see there— was astonishing, at the very least. "You…don't care what's going to happen to you," he said at last, frowning.

Ooh dear Lord…

Earlier, he had been worried about the expression he had seen on Sherlock's face. His younger brother had been incandescent with rage and something else. He was seeing that something else on John Watson's face now, as well. As worn down and tired looking as the doctor was, that luminous quality so evident in John's features was not something Mycroft could miss. At the very least, he and Sherlock were clearly resonating. And after seeing their individual responses, what was perhaps the most surprising thing of all to Mycroft was the realization that, between his brother and this mere man, perhaps John Watson may even have the upper hand in the situation.

"Are we done now?" said John, almost snapping, bringing Mycroft back to the present.

Mycroft stared at him for a moment more, his own expression unreadable. "You tell me, John," he said.

John shook his head as if in disbelief, then turned and started to walk away.

"I suppose we shall see more of each other soon," John heard Mycroft call after him and fought to suppress a shiver from running down his spine.

Or perhaps we won't, said Mycroft to himself as he watched John go.
Chapter 23

As arranged, the car promptly came for Sherlock at the hotel after an hour. Of course, it had taken him less than that amount of time to get ready. Instead, he had used the waiting time to get a further hold of himself. It had not been easy.

The dream with John had been disconcerting to the extreme. He had not seen it coming, had never expected John to turn the tables and seize control that way. In fact, until last night he had never thought it possible for human beings to initiate the process of resonance at all. He was learning something new from John almost every day.

As if that rampage in the restaurant last night had not been bad enough. God only knew what had made him do it. He had cancelled his appointment with John earlier yesterday just to prove to himself that he could, and yet he had found himself wishing to see him so badly by the end of the day that he had thought an evening visit might be possible. He had been just in time to arrive at Baker Street to see John get out of the clinic and into his car. From the doctor's appearance (dressed more carefully than usual, hair also brushed in place, definitely unusual to be leaving so punctually from the clinic must have a prior engagement somewhere else after all it is a Friday evening), Sherlock had felt dread settle in the pit of his stomach. The feeling had been new and utterly foreign and unpleasant.

And his deductions had been correct, as always. It had been one of the few times when he hated being right. The sight of John meeting that woman in the restaurant had filled him with such cold rage that it had temporarily blotted out reason.

It had been a night of firsts: it had been the first time he had abandoned reason enough to charge into the restaurant and confront John like a spurned lover in a third-rate novel. It had been the first time he had questioned his own sanity. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he knew he had been mad to do it, but he had not been able to rein himself in, and the expression on John's face had been worth it. He had felt savage glee at seeing John so helpless and mortified as he exerted his prerogatives over him, to hurt John as much as he had been hurt by John's thoughtless actions.

And before he could really stop to examine the damage he had caused, the dream had to happen. He should have known that John would not take such abuse lying down, but never in his wildest dreams could he have foreseen what John Watson was capable of under extreme duress.

And the kiss.

Oh, God. The Kiss. It was only then that he had come to the full realization of just how out of control he was when it came to this one man. Out of control and out of his depth, like a dancing master who knew all the moves to a particular dance only to realize the music had been changed to a new and unfamiliar one with this particular partner.

Sherlock knew that he was being irrational when it came to John. The change taking place in him had been so gradual, the signs so blurred and so confusing, that almost before he knew it, everything concerning John had become an exception to his routine.

John was human—and therefore nothing but prey—and yet he could not feed from him. He had tried to break the man, and found that he was not so easy to break. John was special, yet Sherlock could not find it in himself to take him, not when it meant he had to kill him. That was the problem: he could not kill John, could not even find it in himself to want to kill him. He had tried to get rid of him by breaking off the courtship (an unprecedented move on his part), and yet he found
that he could not stay away from him.

He wanted John, yet he hated him— hated him for awakening these feelings in him. Feelings that he thought he was immune to. Feelings that had no place in his well-ordered and logical existence and were obscuring his judgment. He hated John for making him feel vulnerable, and at the same time he yearned for him.

He had pulled away from the kiss first, and yet he could not stop thinking about it. Even as he had emerged, reeling and dazed, from sleep, he could still feel the force of John's lips on his, could still feel the rough caress of his tongue in his mouth and taste his blood on his tongue. In his waking moments, he could not stop thinking about John and the horrible thought that he desperately needed to kiss him again, regardless of the consequences.

And there were hefty consequences attached.

*What was happening to him?*

He had broken out of the dream in a panic, and had summoned Mycroft— Mycroft! It had been the worst mistake in a series of unfathomable errors. Whatever control he had of the situation would be taken away from him the moment his brother decided to put his nose in. What could have possessed him to do it?

And yet, at that moment before he came fully awake, contacting Mycroft had been the most logical choice. His brother had gone through such an experience, after all. He would know what to do. So he had placed the call, and had done nothing but regret it afterwards.

He realized now that he was wrong to summon him when he was still trying to get a grip on himself. He had let Mycroft see him trembling. What could his brother deduce from that alone? And while he had managed to secure a promise from him that he was not to harm John, Sherlock was sure Mycroft would not be able to resist examining John for himself. Since time began, that was how older brothers were with the favorite toys and much-prized possessions of a younger one. That was how Mycroft had always been, how he would always be when it came to him.

Sherlock could only hope that John would be able to hold out against him. John had had plenty of practice from himself, after all, so there may not be cause for worry.

But now, what was to be done now? Here he was, in a car sent by his brother, being whisked away God only knew where and landing more firmly into his brother's grasp. He knew Mycroft did not do anything out of altruism.

Too late to reconsider his options now.

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The car finally stopped in one of the quiet streets almost out of London. The house that Mycroft had selected was evidently a rented one, small and unassuming.

Sherlock walked into the simply furnished living room and saw a surprise awaiting him on the coffee table.

His violin.

Not the standard-issue one he owned now and which he had left in Manchester. This was the Stradivarius that he had found in a Jewish broker's shop in Tottenham Court back in the 1870s, worth at least five hundred guineas of that era's currency and which he obtained for the incredible
sum of fifty five shillings. If there was anything in Sherlock's possessions that he could say he truly loved, it would be this violin.

There was a note perched on top of it beside the bow:

*I thought you might like to get reacquainted with an old friend. M.*

So Mycroft had kept it safe for him all the time he had been asleep. Sherlock did not know why he was surprised, but he was. Surprised and pleased.

Tucking the instrument under his chin, he scraped a few experimental notes on the strings. He closed his eyes at the sound of the resonant notes that flowed out, deep and pure.

Perfectly in tune.

As he started to play, he felt the tense tightness in his chest gradually ebbing away, and wondered how he could have gone so long without this, without the magic of music to ease away every troubled thought and worry from his mind and heart.

He was seated at the sofa in the living room, violin still in hand, when Mycroft arrived late in the afternoon. Mycroft's brows were pinched, the corners of his mouth turned down ever so slightly—subtle warning signs that he was hugely displeased.

Yet his expression eased a little and he actually smiled when he saw Sherlock strumming the violin's strings with gentle fingers. Sherlock looked so much calmer, the distressing radiance gone from his face. He seated himself at the other sofa chair at an angle facing Sherlock and considered how he was going to break some bad news to him.

Before he could begin though, he heard Sherlock say, "So you've been to see him."

Mycroft glanced at him. "Yes."

"And?" Sherlock's gaze was carefully averted.

"Interesting man, I will admit," Mycroft said, his tone light. "A little worse for wear, but bearing up incredibly well. I must confess I am more worried about you."

"You don't have to worry about me." A thread of steel wound itself in Sherlock's voice.

"You know that he will be a problem in the long run," Mycroft said quietly. "Sooner or later, all lives end. All hearts are broken. Caring is not an advantage, Sherlock. Take it from me. You will be doing him a favor by ending your association with him now."

"And how do you propose I should resolve such a problem as John Watson?" inquired Sherlock, his face devoid of emotion.

Mycroft sighed. "He's your problem, not mine," he said. "That's for you to decide. My only concern is that you weigh in all the consequences before you commit yourself to a course of action."

The words were so unexpected that Sherlock turned to stare at Mycroft. "You surprise me," he said after a moment.

Mycroft lifted his brows. "You will find it quite a shock to see just how much one can change over time," he said. "I've mellowed."
"Indeed."

Mycroft looked away, as if uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

"We have a problem," he finally said. "Lestrade and the Lincolnshire police have conducted their search and found nothing incriminating in Aswarby Hall and its grounds."

"I find that hardly surprising, given the amount of time that has slipped by," said Sherlock. "So the child had died for nothing. He will have to begin the ritual all over again."

"And the Earl of Westwood is not to be found anywhere," said Mycroft. "His people have said he's abroad. My people say they cannot ascertain his whereabouts as of now."

"Now that's unusual."

"They're still checking. Give them another day or two," said Mycroft. "Lestrade did manage to confiscate some...materials from the earl's library, but not the ones we're looking for."

Sherlock said nothing, his fingers never ceasing in their tender abstraction over the violin's strings.

"You will need to get moving very soon. I would suggest you conclude all your business with Dr. Watson in the coming days."

"I will see to it," Sherlock finally said.

"Good." Mycroft stood up. "Have you had dinner?"

Sherlock looked up, frowning. This was certainly a day of surprises from Mycroft. "Why? Don't tell me you're treating me to dinner as well."

"You're welcome to sample the stocks at home anytime," said Mycroft, sounding as if he were offering a selection of his wines. "I've bought—"

Sherlock looked away, grimacing. "Thank you, but no," he said. "I should have known you would take the easy route out at this day and age and just order take out."

Mycroft shook his head as he made to take his leave. "I'll see you tomorrow, then," he said.

A car was waiting for him outside. As he stepped into it, he could hear Sherlock starting a melody from Paganini on his violin, the liquid notes trilling through the air and breaking the cold stillness of evening.

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Author's Notes: The details concerning Sherlock's beloved Stradivarius is lifted from ACD's "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box".
Chapter 24

Author's Notes: I realize that, apart from the short observations jotted down by John in chapter 3, we have not really seen much of his personal notes. My apologies. This chapter makes use of them now. More author's notes can be found at the end.

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From the personal notes of John H. Watson, MD FRCPsych

Monday, October 29

Well, he did not show up again today. Second cancellation. Probably more to come. Probably won't see him ever again. But then what was I expecting, after the Dream? I must be mad, thinking he'd ever want to see me again after that, but that's all I ever think of. I see him everywhere, or wish I actually can.

Must be getting transparent in my old age. Mrs. H was all clucking sympathy when she presented me with the list of patients for today, a line drawn over that one name again. Hideously embarrassed.

Still can't believe I'd ever own up to how I really feel about him. Yet it lends me a certain relief, to release that thought from my mind and just let it go. I feel so much better, for some reason.

Whenever I think of our situation, I am reminded of William Blake's twin poems about the tiger and the lamb.

    Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
    In the forests of the night,
    What immortal hand or eye
    Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

    In what distant deeps or skies
    Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
    On what wings dare he aspire?
    What the hand dare seize the fire?

    When the stars threw down their spears,
    And watered heaven with their tears,
    Did he smile his work to see?
    Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Can the Maker really create two such diametrically opposed creatures and set them to live together in one world? The tiger would never lie down with the lamb. One would say it is the way of the world for one to prey upon the other, and yet there have been exceptions to the rule.

Remembered seeing a National Geographic special some years ago, about a lioness capturing a baby wildebeest. Instead of eating it, she had chosen to stay with it for a few, tense hours before simply going off her own way. Unnatural it may be, but there it was.

Exceptions, as I have told SH. There are always exceptions to everything. Sometimes they make all the difference in the world. Don't ever believe that we can sing or dance to only one tune. Would he ever understand?
By his very nature, he is so different from anyone else. Beautiful as a tiger is beautiful, and just as lethal. But does one hold a tiger's nature against it? It is what it is, as God had intended it to be. He is what he is just as I am what I am. And though perhaps we may never share a single point of likeness, that doesn't mean I cannot strive to understand him. Failing that, I shall simply accept him for who he is. There is so much about him that I do not know. All I know is that he is so vital and alive, as elemental as lightning, that one cannot help but feel revived and restored by his very intimidating presence. Every moment of our acquaintance, that feeling of danger surrounding him exists to knock all my other problems into perspective and lends one that unique view of what truly matters and what doesn't.

To have been courted by such an enigma...can't really express what it felt like. Perhaps that was how the baby wildebeest had felt as it rested between the lioness's paws.

His kiss from the Dream haunts me still. I've never known anything quite like it, as heady and alarming as anything else attached to him. The slow burn of it in one's head. Terrifying. Yet having had a taste, I now crave for it, constantly.

Thought about the scary meeting with his brother. Still couldn't believe I'd meet him. What did it all mean? I can't—

John hastily closed the journal that he had been scribbling on by pure reflex and looked up just in time to see Sarah enter.

"You remind me of someone who's got a guilty pleasure of writing romance stories and not wanting anyone else to know about it," she said with a knowing smile.

John merely raised his eyebrows and fought to keep his expression straight as he deadpanned, "Not romance. Just plain smut, thank you."

Sarah laughed as she moved to stand in front of his desk. "You busy?"

"No," he said, placing the journal to one side of the desk. "Just doing some notes."

Sarah smiled. "You're probably one of the last people in England to still be jotting things down in a journal. Ah, the dying art of it," she said, shaking her head.

"I can't post this on the internet," he said. "Too much personal info about my patients to put on a blog. I might get sued and my medical license suspended."

Sarah laughed. "I see."

"Has Harry been to see you yet?"

Sarah's smile faded. "That's what I came here to talk to you about," she said. "She did set an appointment for last week but she never showed up."

"Oh." That hollow, sinking feeling inside him was very familiar.

"It's been almost a month," said Sarah almost apologetically. "Something might really be up."

"I'll talk to her."

She wasn't answering her phone, so John had no choice but to call Harry at home. He usually didn't
like calling her at home because Clara might answer.

Which she did now.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Clara," he said, careful to keep his tone mildly, politely cheerful.

"John."

John frowned at her tone of voice. "What? What is it?" he asked, feeling the dread rise like bile in his throat. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing."

Definitely not nothing, not from the tight, resigned tone of her voice, already long past the stage of weeping.

"Where's Harry?" he asked carefully.

A pause.

"Didn't she tell you?" Clara said finally. "She moved out more than a month ago."

He knew he was making a racket, but when his knocks on Harry's studio door went unanswered after a few minutes he had resorted to banging on it.

_Goddammit Harry, open the goddamn do—_

"What the bloody fu—" Harry slurred as she opened the door a crack. She moved to shut the door after registering who was on the other side of it, but John had already elbowed his way into her studio.

If she could still get up to answer the door then she had not yet reached her usual levels for the day. Good.

John marched in, stopped and turned around to look at his sister, his shoulders heaving. He was speechless with rage.

God, she had been shacking it out in her studio for an entire month and he had not even known! He had been so caught up with Sherlock that Harry had slipped off his radar. How could he?

They regarded each other in thick silence for a moment before Harry said, "Yeah, go ahead and say it."

"Say what?" bit out John, hands on his hips.

"Just say whatever it was you came to say," she said, her voice rising. "To the general tune of 'I told you so' or 'I knew this would happen,' or 'I knew it would be too good to last—'"

"You'll find this hard to believe, Harry," he ground out, "but I never once thought to think of those things about you and Clara. You, on the other hand, apparently did."

They were starting The Argument again. Always, always the same opening lines. John could
almost feel her curling the hurtful words around and around, like a whip, before she lashed out at him.

"Oh please—"

"And don't even think about telling me again how envious I was of you because I had the hots for Clara and how I've never wanted this to work out between the two of you," said John sharply, feeling his self-control slipping inch by inch as he looked Harry over. "That is just bullshit. Right now, this is a huge fucking tragedy and there's no other way for me to feel about it than to be immensely sad."

That was new.

He did not know what had made him say it, he had been meaning to say something else, something more generic, but there it was. Harry must have been expecting something else too, and was silent as she took in John's words.

John heaved a sigh of defeat. "Why?" he asked. "After everything that you and Clara went through, after what you've fought for. Was she not enough?"

"How would you know anything?" snapped Harry, exasperated.

Same old line. They were starting down that path again, yeah?

But his next words took him entirely by surprise once again: "Or did you think you were not enough?"

Apparently, Harry was also surprised. Surprised enough to stop at whatever it was she was going to say.

John shook his head. "I don't know where you got that notion," he said, "about how you're not good enough for anything. I don't understand why you would think that of yourself when you've got talent dripping off the ends of your fingers and your mind is just a treasure trove of ideas and stories and images of the most spectacular things and beings. And you have somebody like Clara. I don't understand—"

His voice broke and he had to stop for a minute and look away, feeling his throat closing up. He swallowed convulsively.

"You think I don't understand what you're going through, that I don't care," he said when he felt it safe to continue. "I do, you know. I do because I know you. Deep down inside, I know the big sister I'd worshipped for as long as I could remember is there. She's there, and she's hurt very badly, and it hurts me to see her like this.

"You don't think I like you. You think we lost each other somewhere along the way while we were growing up. You're wrong. I don't like you; I love you. I always have. Always, Harry," he said. "And you know you can always count on me to be there if you need me. I'm not going to let go."

He saw Harry's face scrunch up, saw her hand go to her mouth.

"I never meant to say you envied me because you wanted Clara," sobbed Harry, as if that was the only thing she could think to say after John's oratory. "I never said anything like that to you, did I?"

John shook his head. "It doesn't matter, Harry," he said softly.
Harry looked stricken. "I did, didn't I?" she said.

"It doesn't matter," repeated John as he moved in to take his sister in his arms. "Not anymore."

"You did good," said Sarah as John related the events to her a few days later.

"I didn't know what made me say things that way," said John, shaking his head ruefully. "It just came out. I'm still reeling from it."

"Doctor's intuition," said Sarah approvingly.

John sighed. "I didn't know I still had it, to be honest," he said.

"Well," said Sarah, tilting her head slightly as she considered John. "You know, this entire month, I felt like you were coming back from wherever it was that depression had exiled you in. I feel like you're reviving, little by little."

John smiled. "That's a very nice thing to say," he said.

"No, I mean it," said Sarah. "You look more 'here' now than all the previous nine months put together. I'm so glad. I've missed you, John. Welcome back."

"I'm glad to be back," John said.

Reviving, he thought.

Thursday, November 1

Harry doing well with last alcohol intake 3 days ago, thank God. Still, have to be careful as withdrawal might occur. According to her she had been drinking irregularly for the past five to six months, and regularly for the past month. Cannot be sure of the amounts taken in, though have an idea from the way she had carried on in the past. Definitely not good. Noted her hands trembling earlier while visiting, started her on some diazepam just to be sure.

She looked a bit like hell, but otherwise felt fine, she said.

Sober, I could tell. Before leaving she told me, "Just watch me, Johnny. I'm going to beat this."

Warmed me immensely to hear that from her. Thought about it on my way to the clinic, about the situation between me and Harry. How I should have just done this years ago and perhaps saved us both from all this trouble. Just never had the chance to do it, never found the right time, the right inclination; her razor tongue setting my temper off before I could get a word out, my passive aggressive silences eating at her nerves, and the entire cycle just kept repeating itself. What happened three days ago was an alignment of all the right things at just the right, crucial time, never to be repeated. Immeasurably glad it happened.

Will schedule her with Sarah and possibly some marriage counseling as soon as she could get on her feet. Difficult to talk to her about Clara, afraid will mess up and ruin this special chance at a reconciliation. Need this to work like never before.

SH cancelled his appointments for the rest of the week. Knew it, just knew it. Don't have anything else to say about him, except read the papers the other day about some disturbance involving one
James Moriarty, 22nd Earl of Westwood. The police did a raid on his property in relation to the disappearance of a boy some months ago and came away with details about how he's dabbling in witchcraft. Right weird stuff. Instantly thought about SH when something weird like that happens. The two seemed to fit, and he did say he has enemies.

Ah, don’t want to think about him, but cannot seem to stop myself. Am filling the pages of this expensive, leather-bound tome with the silliest entries normally reserved for 12 year old schoolgirls; like a crazy, lovesick fool, and just CANNOT seem to break out of it.

Miss him. Quite badly.

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Friday, November 2 (John's last entry)

Had a nerve-wracking morning. Came into the clinic with instant bad news from Mrs. H. Seems like somebody had been at the clinic computers sometime during the night and portions of certain patient charts had been erased from the hard drive. Strangest thing is, all the files affected belonged to my patients.

And one patient in particular.

But then even before coming to Baker Street, something had occurred to bring on my current state of unease.

I actually saw him—SH—as I came out of Bart's to head to the car. He was just standing there on the opposite side of the street, staring straight at me. Couldn't have mistaken that figure. Standing there all tall and straight and regal, feet together and hands in the pockets of his dark coat which was buttoned up for once and dark blue scarf wrapped around his neck. He wasn't smiling, just stood and looked at me like a total stranger. Gave me the chills. Unresponsive to my call from across the road. Tried to cross the road only to be driven back by a passing double-decker. Looked back to see him gone. But I knew he was there.

Trouble ahead. Can see it coming. Am sure will be seeing him again one last time. To see him looking at me like that, I can see he's put the Dream aside. Deleted it from his memory, more like. The way he had deleted himself from my computer files. It doesn't take much to figure that he's leaving, moving on, and he'll have to take care of loose ends, myself included. From the way he had looked at me, I can see that I may need to fight him for my life.

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Author's Notes: William Blake's poems "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" are found in "Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" (1794), a volume of his collected works. I thought the two contrary states of the human soul very aptly reflected the characters of Vampire!Sherlock and John as well.

The part about the National Geographic coverage of the lioness as temporary surrogate mother to a baby wildebeest is true. For more details, please search under the heading "Saved by the Lioness".
Mrs. Hudson never connected the curious incident of the deleted patients' files with Sherlock. He was, after all, only one of several whose files had disappeared. In fact, she was inclined to think that a glitch in the system had been the culprit. Besides, the actual charts were intact in her filing cabinets.

But John knew. After seeing Sherlock in the street outside Bart's, like an omen of things to come, he knew. Sherlock had deleted the files in the computer because these were transferrable data. The handwritten charts could be stolen, of course, and John had no doubt they would be very soon, but the computer files had to go first. The being he was in love with was not stupid—he would not invite attention to himself by doing away with both files at the same time. Afterwards, John himself would be taken care of. Then, after a period of time after the furor over his death had died down, Sherlock's chart would quietly disappear.

That was how John believed the chain of events would unfold. He knew enough of Sherlock by now to read volumes in his stance as he stood in the street, staring at John. That, in itself, was nothing less than a provocation. The cool, expressionless mask that was Sherlock's face did not fool John for a second.

He knew Sherlock was angry.

Angry at John for exposing a conceived weakness, a flaw in his person, by his inability to control himself around him. Angry at John for what he did to him in the dream. Angry at John for kissing him.

Well, fuck him. John was angry too. He had more cause to be angry than the bastard. It served Sherlock right that he was getting a dose of his own medicine at last. He didn't like it? Too bad. That was one of the points of the entire exercise.

Only, John wished he was not so emotionally invested in the whole thing. He wished he would not see Sherlock and feel that odd contraction of the heart, of equal parts pain and pleasure. It did not bode well for future events.

He considered his options.

He could go to the police. He could tell someone and plan some sort of contingency measure to make sure his death would not be mistaken for an accident, or worse, suicide. If he was going down, then he must bring Sherlock down with him.

Only, try as he would, he knew he wouldn't be able to do any of the above. Sherlock was his and nobody else's. Nobody could know about him, and he was willing to take this secret with him to the grave.

God, listen... just listen to himself! He wasn't making much sense. He just felt so tired. He had been fighting Sherlock for the past three weeks without fully realizing it, and he was just so tired.
Perhaps it would be so much better for all concerned if he just gave in quietly and took whatever he could from Sherlock before he got killed. Sherlock’s brother had correctly read that fatalistic streak in him.

Yet, he had never felt so alive, had never felt so much in possession of himself than in the past few days. The mixture of danger and high emotions had served to keep him on his toes, had revived him from the stupor that depression had placed him in for so long. He could not deny the change occurring within himself because Sarah had noticed it. He liked the feeling.

*Welcome back, John.*

John sighed. What to do then…

There wasn’t much that could be done until Sherlock showed his hand.

Perhaps the only definite thing he could do was to sort out his will.

In the end, John was not able to do anything. There simply wasn’t time.

Late that Friday night he had to admit a patient at Bart’s, an emergency case of a schizophrenic patient who had slashed his wrists, requiring surgery. He had arrived back at his apartment at one in the morning and crashed in his bed.

He woke up a few hours later, a part of him feeling vaguely amazed that he was still alive. So he had not had a visitation while he was asleep.

The insistent ring of his phone. That was what had awakened him. He felt his senses snap to attention as he reached out to take the call.

Bart’s. Again. He was needed by his residents.

He only had time to take a quick shower and a cup of coffee before he was on his way back to the hospital.

Two emergency admissions again in the course of the morning, three more toward lunchtime. He wondered if there was a full moon tonight. Of course, the residents could handle them, but he was the consultant on call until seven that night. All admitting orders and medications would have to go through him anyway, so there was very little point in staying away and waiting to be summoned back. Besides, he needed to make his rounds.

He was feeling slightly dizzy from hypoglycemia by early afternoon, and that was when Harry called.

"Jo-John."

John felt that horrible sinking of the heart, normally reserved for Sherlock’s gravest transgressions. "Harry, are you okay?"

"No. I don't know. I-I don't feel well," she said.

"Tell me," said John, feeling a chill run down his spine.

"I'm sha-shaking. I can't help it, I feel s-so bad," Harry said, her teeth chattering.
"Harry, listen to me," John said, careful to keep his tone even. "I gave you valium. I gave you those pills yesterday. Did you take them?"

A pause. John already knew what she was going to say. "I didn't t-think I'd need them," she said after a moment, her voice miserable. "I'm s-sorry Johnny."

Fuck. Oh fucking hell. John closed his eyes, counted to ten.

"Okay. It's okay," he said, breathing out a heavy sigh. "You were right to call me. Just sit tight. I'm going to send an ambulance there right now, all right? I'll meet you here at Bart's. That will save us time."

As soon as he hung up he placed the emergency call. "This is Dr. John Watson," he said into the phone. "I have a 45 year old female patient, a chronic alcoholic with symptoms of possible delirium tremens. I need a team over at this address right now…"

It really was beginning DT.

John had to admit Harry directly into the ICU after she was seen at the emergency room. He called his parents. He called Clara. Harry was being sedated and he did not think it would be good for her to have visitors for now, so they did not need to come until tomorrow. Everything was a right royal mess and although he knew nothing could have been done to alter the course of events, he somehow felt responsible.

He should have explained it more clearly to Harry yesterday why he needed her to take the valium. He thought he had but it seemed she had not properly understood what he had been trying to tell her regarding the possibility of developing the shakes when a chronic alcoholic suddenly stopped drinking. Or maybe it was because she was family and it was always so difficult to treat family members precisely because they just never listened to you. He was too tired and shaken to feel angry. Deep down, he knew that Harry had been trying to prove she could kick her habit by sheer will power alone. At least that was a step in the right direction, though it very nearly ended in disaster.

"Doc, you really need to eat something," said one of his on-duty residents. "We can hold the front for a while. Get some dinner."

"Okay, thanks."

Dinner was a tasteless affair of pork in brown gravy and bland mashed potato at the hospital canteen. Nevertheless, he felt a little better after having taken in some food.

Before he knew it, it was already after seven in the evening and he was endorsing to his successor for the night. He visited Harry one last time in the ICU. She was awake, still trembling, although the benzodiazepines they had given her were starting to take effect.

"Hey," he said, smiling.

"H-hi."

"I'm off for tonight. I've got to leave soon," said John. "I just want to tell you…"

He looked down. "I love you, Harry," he said softly, "you know that, don't you?"
She gave him an unsteady smile. "I know," she whispered. "I l-love you too, kid. Thank you, Johnny."

He gave her a tight smile. "Get some sleep," he said, giving her hand a brief squeeze. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

*If I'm still alive tomorrow,* he silently added.

He did not want to go home just yet. Somehow, after the horrid day, he knew this was the night he was going to have a visitor. The Visitor. Doctors were superstitious that way. Once it rained, it poured. And it would continue to pour until the day was finally finished.

He ended up in the parish chapel of St. Bartholomew-the-Less, the church within Bart's. He sat on one of the pews at the back and gazed at the altar of the small chapel blankly. Tiredly.

John was not a religious man. He did not really have any strong beliefs one way or the other regarding the afterlife, although he did believe in doing good in this life and giving it as good as one got. That was the main belief that sustained him, but he did not think it was going to help him now. So he did the one thing that countless people before him had done in this little chapel: he prayed.

*Please God, let me live...let me survive Sherlock...but how?*

No answer was forthcoming.

His phone chimed. An incoming text message.

He held the phone up and looked at the screen. An unidentified caller ID.

And his last summons for the day: *Come home, John.*

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John was strangely calm on the ride home. Was this how condemned men felt as they bowed to the inevitable? Everyone had to go through it, at some point in life. Everyone had to die.

It was journey's end.

He alighted from his car and walked into his apartment building. Inserting his key and typing his code into the security system at the apartment lobby, he wondered how Sherlock had managed to get past the sophisticated equipment. He must make a point to ask about that, at least.

The elevator ride up was at its usual sedate pace, yet it very quickly became a thing of the recent past as John arrived on his floor. In no time at all, he was outside his apartment door. There would be no more use for his key. This was the last time he was entering his rooms, and he knew it would be unlocked for him. He turned the knob and swung the door open.

Hushed darkness inside, like a tomb.

But not empty.

Never that. Not when he was there.

No use lingering outside. John walked in and let the darkness swallow him up as he closed the door firmly behind him. He made his way in the dark to the living room with the sure, smooth movements of a blind man in complete familiarity with his surroundings. He turned on a tablesid
lamp. Warm, mellow light flooded the intimate living space that he had moved around in for years.

"Evening," he said to the still, black figure seated at the far end of the sofa.

"You took your time," said Sherlock.

"Can't be helped," said John with a tired shrug. "Had an emergency. My sister's at the ICU in Bart's."

Although he had been expecting him, seeing Sherlock here, now, in his personal space, was a bit overwhelming for John. The sudden, frantic beat of his heart was so loud in his ears that he was sure Sherlock could hear it from across the room.

"So," he said in an attempt to drown out the roar of his blood in his ears. "How did you get past the security system downstairs? Unless you can change yourself into a bat and flap in via an open window, I can't imagine how you could have done it."

He could see Sherlock's lip curl upwards in a small smile. "Elementary, John," he drawled. "I simply waited for one of your neighbors to come home and slipped in with him."

"Ah," said John, smiling despite himself.

Silence for a few heartbeats. Then he said, "I read the news, about the Earl of Westwood. I thought that might be connected with you, somehow. So you're packing up, seeing to loose ends before you leave London?"

"Yes," said Sherlock. "You know why I've come."

"I don't suppose it's because you wanted to say your farewells to me personally."

"Two things I must have from you," said Sherlock. "The bill of health for Manchester, although I have already informed Mike Stamford that I will not be continuing my work with his team. Still, he will need it for my file, and for any possible ventures that I might care to undertake in the future."

"Okay," said John, "and the second?"

"Your personal notes about my case," said Sherlock. "I've seen my chart at Baker Street and know those are not the only notes that you've made. I've searched this apartment and your computer while waiting for you. You didn't keep them in the computer so they must be hidden in your locked study table drawer."

"Why didn't you just force the lock open then?"

"I want you to give the papers to me personally. And I've inspected the lock and know it will not be easy prying it open. There's no need to leave scratch marks on that beautiful antique mahogany table for the police to find tomorrow."

John forced himself to remain calm as he heard the last words, spoken without so much as an inflection out of place.

"Right," he said, nodding. "My computer and printer as well as some stationery with my letterhead are in the study…"

John moved towards the direction of that room, Sherlock trailing a few paces behind him.

He took out the key to his table and opened the drawer. He drew out the leather bound journal
where he had been scribbling his thoughts during the fevered days and nights of the past three weeks and silently handed it to Sherlock.

Sherlock flipped the book open and John watched as his pale eyes ran along some lines on the first page. After a moment, Sherlock lifted those expressionless eyes back to him and said, "The letter, John."

"Right." John turned on his computer, clicked on the word program and started typing.

"I told Mike I was attacked by a mugger. You might want to use that, for the sake of consistency," Sherlock murmured as he moved with slow grace around the room, his eyes back on the journal that he held open in his hand.

John typed steadily. "...temporarily displaced by severe shock following an episode of armed robbery and personal assault...exhibits a strong personal drive to overcome his emotional obstacles..."

"I didn't know you read poetry," remarked Sherlock some minutes later. He must have come across the William Blake poem.

"I do, on occasion," replied John. "When the mood calls for it."

"And did our association invoke such a mood?" asked Sherlock.

John stopped typing enough to meet his gaze from across the table. "Yes," he said simply. After all we've been through, how could you even ask...?

"Poetry is quite useless, to be truthful," Sherlock said. "To trap emotion in metered words— while I do appreciate the exactness of the metered phrase, one does wonder what is it really all for?"

"That's rich, coming from you," muttered John. "Music is but emotion trapped in metered sound, yet I don't see you shirking away from it."

Sherlock was silent for a moment, and John was sure he was recalling the night they had come across each other at that candlelit concert at St. Martin-in-the-fields. So very long ago, it seemed.

"Clearly it is an anomaly on my part. One of the many defects I have somehow imbibed in my dealings with you people," said Sherlock, the sneer evident in his tone of voice. "What ultimate purpose does it serve, after all?"

"Maybe none at all," said John with a shrug, "although there is a saying that 'Music has charms to soothe a savage breast', and very likely tame a savage beast, as well."

Beats of silence. John returned Sherlock's cool stare, unflinching and unapologetic.

"Continue your letter, John," Sherlock said finally.

John glanced back down on the keyboard.

"You're wrong, you know," continued Sherlock, "to liken yourself to the lamb. You're no lamb, John."

"Am I not?"

"Definitely not. There's nothing soft or weak about you. During our time together, the fear is there, most certainly, but not enough of it. I can't imagine you quivering."
John felt the first stirrings of annoyance. "Do you want me on my hands and knees, begging for mercy, just to show you how terrified I really am?" he asked.

If the sarcasm registered with Sherlock, he ignored it. "No," he said thoughtfully. "I can't imagine you doing that either."

John felt that familiar, tight squeeze around his heart and shuddered out a breath. "It's done," he said. "Do you want to read it before I print it out?"

Sherlock moved to stand behind John, leaning in to look at the computer screen, his face only inches from John's right ear. John closed his eyes briefly, feeling his blood singing through his veins at the proximity.

"Good," said Sherlock at length. "Print out two copies, please."

John did as he was told, signing the letters before folding them neatly and placing them in envelopes. Sherlock took the letters from him and placed them inside John's journal.

He gestured with a slight jerk of his head. "Outside, John," he said, his voice a low murmur.

John got up from his chair slowly, his legs betraying just the slightest tremor, and followed Sherlock back to the living room.

"What now, then?" he said softly. "A well-coordinated suicide to make sure I don't talk?"

Sherlock was by the tall windows, looking out. John watched him, watched how the soft lamplight illuminated his profile, casting shadows under his brow and cheekbone. Beautiful. Then he saw Sherlock reach out to open the window, large enough to accommodate a man. John felt the cold November air drifting in. There were safety railings out there, of course, but John doubted they would help much if he was about to be thrown over.

"Do you know, John, that the suicide rate among psychiatrists is the highest in the medical profession?" said Sherlock conversationally as he turned to look at him. "I looked it up, to be sure. I will not feed from you. I've hunted earlier, and had dinner before coming over. It looks like you won't be paying me back with a meal, but a fall will even things up nicely."

John stared at Sherlock and felt something kicking in deep inside him, fueled by the adrenaline rush of the day. He felt reckless. After all, he had nothing else to lose at this point.

"I'm sure I don't owe you anything," he found himself murmuring. "Certainly not a fall from my window, no."

Sherlock raised his eyebrows at him. "I hardly think you'd have any say in the matter, John," he said.

"I can't die. Not just yet," returned John evenly. "Far too many people need me— my patients, my family—"

Sherlock laughed softly. "For someone who had been depressed enough to have entertained the idea of terminating one's existence, you seem to have acquired a sudden zeal for life," he said. "Don't tell me this is new to you. Surely you've known there can only be one outcome to our association. You must have realized you've been dancing on the edge of the precipice with me when you encouraged me to talk about myself. You cannot possibly think you can survive my confidences."
"No," said John with a shake of his head. "I've always known that I cannot make myself safe from you. Anymore than I can protect myself or my loved ones from life's many other dangers. But that concept doesn't have to apply in your case. You need not consider me a threat to your existence. You don't need to make yourself safe from me by getting rid of me."

"You can't be allowed to continue, John," said Sherlock. "You know far too much about me, about my life—"

"Yes," said John, "a long life to be lived still, and not mine to jeopardize."

"You've already jeopardized it to a great degree. I was a fool to have let you in and destroy whatever distance was necessary to keep my objectivity intact."

"No," said John, shaking his head.

Sherlock scoffed, frowning. "No?"

"Nothing is created. Nothing is destroyed. Everything is just transformed into something else," said John. "Some people believe that's how life works. What we went through together was nothing more than a life process. You don't need to be afraid of it, in the same way you need not fear me."

"I'm not afraid of you, John." The words were a soft growl.

"Yes, you are," said John in the same even tones. "Hence your need to get rid of me."

Sherlock stared at him for long minutes. "You tempt me to it," he admitted, his voice edged with a kind of roughness that John could not quite define. "To leave you alive behind me, the threads of my existence and our time together woven into your memory for the remainder of your little life. I'd like to be able sometimes to think of you thinking of me, but the risk is too great."

"Sometimes it's good to take a risk, let it run its course and see where it may lead," said John.

"And where do you suppose this may all lead to?"

"Bed," John heard himself say distinctly, feeling that finely tuned instinct inside taking over him, releasing him from all the hampering inhibitions and fear and making him say what he had wanted — needed — to say all along. "Sherlock, come to bed with me."

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Author's Notes: Delirium tremens (DT), or "the shakes" in layman's terms, is an acute episode of delirium following the abrupt cessation of alcohol intake among chronic alcoholics. I took some liberties with Harry's episode, as DT is not very usual, and is found among cases with alcohol intake of more than ten years.

John's quote, "Music has charms to soothe a savage breast" (which gave rise to the famous misquote "Music has/hath charms to soothe/tame a savage beast"), was originally coined by William Congreve, in The Mourning Bride, 1697:

Musick has Charms to soothe a savage Breast,  
To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.  
I've read, that things inanimate have mov'd,  
And, as with living Souls, have been inform'd,  
By Magick Numbers and persuasive Sound.  
What then am I? Am I more senseless grown
Than Trees, or Flint? O force of constant Woe!
'Tis not in Harmony to calm my Griefs.
"Sherlock, come to bed with me," said John.

He saw Sherlock jerk his head back in surprise at his bold words, seemingly loud in the startled silence that filled the room.

"What's this, John?" Sherlock asked softly, his eyes narrowing. "I didn't realize you're the type to get turned on by the sight of an upraised fist."

"I'm not that twisted yet, thank you," retorted John. "But you have to admit this is the right— and logical— conclusion to our time together. You know how I feel, how I'm drawn to you from the very first moment I met you. Don't say you don't understand, even to some small degree. Not after what's happened between us during these three weeks. Not after what happened in that dream."

"Hmm," said Sherlock. "I've…wondered about it. Is that why you've never been able to feel afraid of me? Because you're attracted to me? I've had other people who wanted me before but fear had always gotten the better of them once they found out what I really am."

John stared at Sherlock for a moment. "No. That's not it. Not exactly," he said. "Must I spell it out for you?"

"Indulge me, John."

"Perhaps the reason why I'm not afraid of you," said John slowly, clearly, "is that. I. Am. In love. With you. You idiot."

He looked at Sherlock carefully. "Is that clear enough?" he asked softly.

For a time, Sherlock simply stood there. A statue could not have been more still.

John looked away after a while, biting his lip. "I'm not expecting anything in return," he said in a low voice. "If you're unwilling or incapable of reciprocating, that's fine. I'm not expecting you to. You may not even experience it the way humans do. But at the very least, I thought you'd want to satisfy your curiosity."

"Love is a chemical defect found on the losing side," Sherlock finally said.

John tilted his head, thinking it over. "That may be true," he said, "but it's not your side so why would you care?"

"It's not an advantage."

"I'm not looking to take advantage of you."

"And it's not convenient."

"It very rarely is," agreed John. "But that's never stopped people from loving, anyway."

"What are you up to, John?" asked Sherlock suspiciously, looking at John as though he were an equation that defied solving. "Do you think you can bribe your way out of this dilemma by saying you love me? Do you think it can save you from me in the end?"

"No. I don't think it can," said John, finally losing his patience. "And I'm not up to anything. My
feeling for you is real—it's not a bribe, or a ploy or a kink. If you think that killing me would still be the best solution, then let's just both shut up right now so that you can get on with it."

John held Sherlock's gaze as the tense silence unspooled between them. In the coolness of the room, he could feel perspiration gather and trickle down between his shoulder blades. When Sherlock remained silent, he continued, "But if you can spare me, if you can simply let me go, then this is the completion that I want. Surely you must feel something enough to want it, too. I know you can feel that way, even if just a little."

Another long minute of silence before Sherlock murmured, his gaze turning a bit sly, "What about your precious sexual orientation?"

"Fuck my sexual orientation," replied John. "I've realized just how rarely love comes along in this life. Whatever form it takes, whenever and wherever it occurs, it ought to be seized upon before it's lost."

Sherlock said nothing as he continued to gaze at John.

"Anything else we ought to clear up?" prodded John after a moment.

Sherlock smirked. "Isn't it unprofessional to proposition a patient?" he asked, his voice a low purr.

With those words, the air around them seemed to lighten.

"Very," said John, a slight smile on his face. "And I never do. But this feels…logical. You're also being unprofessional by engaging in a courtship that does not end with a meal and your partner's death. Let's be unprofessional together."

More silence as the moment drew on and slowly turned awkward.

_Is that it?_ John wondered. It seemed that way.

They would have carried on staring at each other if John had not decided to take matters into his hands and stepped up to Sherlock. Just a few steps, and he was suddenly in Sherlock's space, their faces only inches apart. He saw Sherlock lift one hand and for a moment it hovered in the air uncertainly. That thin, elegant hand with its long fingers that could have shoved John out the window with very little effort ten minutes ago now chose to settle on the side of John's face, cradling his cheek as if it were something fragile.

"How do you do it, John?" asked Sherlock, his voice low. "This never figured in my plans at all, when I came earlier."

That odd, squeezing pleasure/pain inside his chest again as John took in Sherlock's words. He merely shook his head in response. _I don't know either._

Slowly, John reached up to cover Sherlock's hand with his own as he turned his head to kiss its palm—a small, open-mouthed kiss with just a touch of the tip of his tongue on Sherlock's skin. John saw Sherlock's mouth part, saw his pupils dilate so that his pale eyes appeared dark in the soft light of the living room.

John carefully lowered Sherlock's hand from his face and turned away from him.

There really was a full moon tonight.

Soft moonlight came through John's bedroom windows, enough to dispel the heavy darkness that
would have invaded his bedroom completely. John sat on his bed as he toed off his shoes and peeled off his socks. He slowly shrugged out of his jacket and raised his arms to remove his jumper. Despite his earlier bravado regarding his sexual orientation, John was acutely aware of the cold panic building inside him. He had only acknowledged that he was in love with Sherlock a week ago, and this—what they were about to do—was actually too high a hurdle for one to leap over in such a short time.

He knew about gay sex in theory, of course, but to actually engage in the act was something else entirely. It was going to hurt. He wanted it with Sherlock, but it was deeply frightening, and even more frightening was the possibility that he might disappoint. Between them, it was clear who had more experience in the matter. And given Sherlock's general impatience with all things slow and inefficient, John could only wonder what was going to happen as the night progressed.

But he was getting way ahead of himself. He hadn't even made it out of his clothes yet.

He was undoing the buttons on his shirt when he noticed Sherlock hovering uncertainly by the doorway. That touch of diffidence, so uncharacteristic of him, went straight to John's heart.

"Come on in," he said softly.

Sherlock entered the room slowly and sat down on the edge of the bed next to John, watching him. He would have lain down fully clothed if John had not said, "You can undress. Nobody's going to come barging in so that you have to run for your life."

Sherlock stood up and seemed to make up his mind. He began to strip methodically, placing his clothes neatly on a nearby chair. Once he started, he seemed unhesitant and unembarrassed. John tried not to stare as Sherlock finally divested himself of his trousers, his underlying pants.

He was marvelously made—all pale skin and long limbs roped with muscle, as slender and graceful as a Grecian statue. Moonlight accentuated his paleness, casting a soft, opalescent glow on his naked skin. John slowly stood up and reached out a tentative hand to touch Sherlock's chest. His flesh felt warm and firm, definitely not made of cold marble. Beneath the palm of his hand, he could feel Sherlock's heart beating steadily. How Sherlock could manage to be so calm was beyond him.

He could feel Sherlock's eyes on him, but he found that he couldn't meet his gaze. Instead, he concentrated on the path that his hand was taking as it slid on Sherlock's skin. Slowly, his fingers drifted down to trace the newly healed scars on Sherlock's midriff, courtesy of Irene Adler's gun, feeling the raised knots of scar tissue. John swallowed hard as he stopped his hand and his gaze from progressing lower, suddenly feeling very shy and inadequate. He could feel his face flaming up. He finally raised his head to see Sherlock regarding him with quiet amusement.

"Somebody's still got too many clothes on," Sherlock murmured, his voice sonorous and deep.

He lifted a hand to undo the rest of John's shirt buttons and stripped the shirt off him before settling on John's belt buckle. His movements were precise, unhurried. John felt his trousers settle in a heap around his ankles and he stepped out of them. His hand went to still Sherlock's though, as he felt those strong, sure fingers skimming over the elastic band of his briefs.

He shook his head mutely as Sherlock gave him an enquiring look. *Too fast. You're going too fast, and I'm too new at this...*

Sherlock nodded, as if to indicate that he understood. John breathed out a soft sigh of relief which
turned into a startled gasp a second later as he felt Sherlock's long fingers brush teasingly over his still-clothed erection.

Oh God…! He felt his forehead landing hard on Sherlock's chest, eyes squeezing shut, hands gripping hard on Sherlock's hips as his body leaned into that one, delicious point of contact.

He breathed through his mouth— shallow and labored breaths. It had been too long. His body had been starved of physical affection for so long that he felt he was going to come with just the touch of Sherlock's fingers on him.

The touch was maddeningly light, not keeping still enough to satisfy. John's eyes bloomed open as he felt Sherlock withdraw his hand from him. Dazed, he peered up at Sherlock's face and saw his smile in his eyes as he leaned into John.

"You don't suppose I've lived this long without having had certain experiences," drawled Sherlock, reading the unspoken question on John's face, his breath warm against his ear. "Even if I derive no satisfaction from them, I've learned some things along the way."

He turned his head a fraction so that his lips were against John's skin as he whispered, "Want to see some more?"

John's eyes flitted shut as he moaned, "God, yes."

The crisp, cool sheets of the bed were a shock on John's skin. The sensation registered only briefly as he quickly turned his attention elsewhere— to the feel of Sherlock's skin beneath his hands, his lips skimming lightly along Sherlock's throat. Sherlock swiftly averted his head when John moved to kiss him.

That initial reluctance to kiss had not been lost on John in the dream, although Sherlock had done very well once he got started.

Of course... John thought as an idea occurred to him. The mouth is mainly for feeding. He's not used to it being applied for something else...

He touched his finger to Sherlock's lips to show that he understood and moved down to kiss his chin, his throat, his collarbone.

This, all of this was so new to John. Before tonight, he had not been able to imagine touching another man without breaking into goosebumps, but this... all of this felt right. More than right. He needed to touch him. After that first kiss, nothing was going to stop him from touching Sherlock. And Sherlock was so beautiful, absolutely breathtaking as he let John explore his nakedness with his hands and lips.

John felt his confidence gradually building as he sensed the subtle shift in Sherlock's breathing, felt the muscles of his abdomen tensing as his fingers explored over him, ghosting a pattern down his chest and stomach.

"Touch me, John,' he heard the rough command, and he felt an incredulous thrill as he finally took Sherlock in hand, the feel of him hard and heavy and substantial in his palm.

He felt Sherlock's hand closing on his own, showing him how he liked to be touched, and John felt a wave of awe wash through him as he heard his lover moan underneath him. A few moments more and Sherlock was bucking into his hand, his breath hissing through clenched teeth.

Sherlock abruptly pulled John's hand away and he felt Sherlock's hand shifting toward his side,
pulling him underneath as Sherlock rose to loom over him. His kisses were nowhere near John's—they were confident, impatient, irreverent. John felt them, open-mouthed and sharp with a hint of teeth, against the tender skin of his neck, down his chest, with Sherlock pausing to anoint his nipples with his wet tongue. He could feel Sherlock smiling into his skin upon hearing him gasp as the sensations flooded through him.

Sherlock's pace was relentless. John felt that hot mouth and flickering tongue trace a line of fire down the soft skin of his midriff to his belly, dipping briefly into his navel, never stopping as it made its way farther down, and—

"Sherlock!" The cry was torn from John's throat as he felt the moist heat of Sherlock's mouth through the damp cloth of his briefs. He felt a jolt go through his body as he felt the almost-there sensation of lips and tongue on him. Almost there, but not quite. The feel of that thin, clinging barrier between his skin and Sherlock's mouth was the ultimate tease, sending John almost to the brink. At the back of his mind, he knew this was Sherlock's way of putting one over him when he had initially refused to let him do away with his underwear. The guy was a bastard, a fucking brilliant one.

As if to prove John right, Sherlock was softly laughing—laughing!—as he raised his head briefly to look at John's disheveled, tangled form spread beneath him. Hands fisted in the sheets, body arched convulsively toward him, eyes narrowed into slits and lips curled in a snarl, John looked utterly gorgeous.

"Had enough, John?" he asked, voice deep with arousal, fingers biting on the sensitive skin of John's inner thigh.

John made a choked sound in his throat. "Don't you fucking dare stop now!" he gasped.

"You'll have to say it, then."

"Say what?" John sounded dazed.

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. "The magic word, of course, John."

"Please," panted John. "Oh, please—"

Sherlock shook his head. "No, that's not it," he said.

He felt John's body collapse abruptly underneath him. "What then...?" John exclaimed, his voice almost a wail of exasperation.

"Who do you belong to, John?" demanded Sherlock. "Tell me!"

"You," said John, almost sobbing the word out. "I belong to you. I'm yours, Sherlock. All yours."

"Mine," agreed Sherlock with a growl. He moved to strip John of his final article of clothing and took him into his mouth at last.

"Oh my God!" John cried as the heat and wetness enveloped him. His head fell back, eyes squeezing shut as he arched into Sherlock's mouth, involuntarily thrusting as he felt Sherlock slide his tongue around and under him, sucking him farther in.

Oh God. This felt so good. So very, unbelievably good. He couldn't...he wouldn't be able to last if Sherlock kept it up. John tried to tell him, but his words came out as an incomprehensible garble of sound. Sherlock ignored him, increasing the pace and pressure of his lips and tongue mercilessly
on John until he was suddenly right there, hovering on the brink.

And then he was falling, hurtling down the precipice as Sherlock devoured him, never stopping his movements even as John crested and came in wave after glorious wave in his mouth, John's shout ringing through the quiet room.

"Oh God…oh God, Sherlock…" panted John, trembling as the rigidity finally left him and he sagged back bonelessly onto the rumpled bed. He did not realize that he had fist a hand into Sherlock's hair until he felt Sherlock move his head up. His fingers untangled themselves from those silky, midnight curls as he gazed into those pale eyes— dark now, still hungry.

John felt his racing heart give an odd lurch as he watched Sherlock lick the moisture— his moisture— from red, swollen lips, watched his throat working as he swallowed the rest of him down. The notion that Sherlock only ever used his mouth for feeding flew straight out the window then.

John's hand trailed from Sherlock's hair down to the side of his face, his neck, his chest as Sherlock rose slowly until he was on top of him, his powerful thighs straddling him. John let his hand drift down farther, but Sherlock caught it and brought it back to his chest.

"But, you're still—"

He saw Sherlock shake his head. No, not that way…

"How, then?"

Sherlock bent down and slowly touched his lips to John's. As in the dream, his first kisses on John's mouth were gentle, chaste, so unbelievably light.

John shivered as he opened his mouth and traced the outline of Sherlock's lips with his tongue. Sherlock suddenly jerked back and turned away, resting his forehead on John's as he heaved a heavy sigh.

He's trying to stop himself from kissing me. Why?

"Tell me why?" whispered John, their mouths almost touching and their breaths mingling as Sherlock struggled to contain himself.

"I can't. I musn't," whispered Sherlock, his eyes closed, brows gathered together in a deep frown. John could almost feel the effort it took Sherlock to rein himself in. "It would be wrong."

"How can it be wrong?" asked John wonderingly.

He saw Sherlock's eyes open to gaze into his. "Oh John," he groaned. "If I kiss you long enough, or deeply enough, I will end up Bonding with you. And that is not something I would want you to go through. I will hurt you."

"What is it?"

"Bonding. The two of us together, our thoughts inextricably linked," said Sherlock. "The ultimate consummation. It's too painful a process. I can end up consuming you. I can't…"

John's answer was quick and certain: "I want you to do it."

"No!"
"I want this, Sherlock. Want this with you."

"You don't know what you're saying, John—"

John caught Sherlock's face in both hands and kissed him hard. "Do it," he whispered against his mouth.

"John—"

John said nothing, merely deepened his kiss. Sherlock broke away after a moment, panting. "John, you're not making this any easier—"

"Hush, love." John angled his head and sought Sherlock's mouth again. "Since I met you, you've turned my grey world upside down and inside out. You've pulled me out of the ashes of my existence and made me want to live again."

John stared up at Sherlock as he looked down at him wonderingly. "You did all that and more, Sherlock," he said. "Terrifying as you are, you're also essential to me. You broke down the ruins that was my life, forced me to rebuild anew and see everything in a totally different light, and in the process you've healed me and made me a better man."

Sherlock shook his head, his mouth a thin, unhappy line. "Oh John," he breathed. "I didn't do anything but try to break you. Every single instant that I could, and you're just…unbreakable."

"That's me," whispered John, smiling. "So just shut up already and do it. You already have it on record that I won't break easily."

This time a reticent look crossed Sherlock's face. "I've…never…"

"What? You've never done this before?" asked John in amazement. Both of us, virgins in our own ways. How is that possible?

"I've never met anyone truly worthwhile to engage in it before."

"What does that make me then?" asked John, a small, pleased smile on his face.

"Truly, truly special." Sherlock punctuated each "truly" with a kiss. Their mouths met again, lingered, the kiss gradually deepening on its own.

John sighed as he coaxed Sherlock's tongue into his mouth, the kiss slowly becoming rough and hard as Sherlock began to let go. He dragged his lips away long enough to murmur, his voice a mere breath, "How did you become so real, John? The more I talked to you, the more real you became."

Then he was kissing John hungrily, all restraint forgotten. Such kisses as John had never experienced— savage, thorough, almost unkind. Utter bliss. John never wanted them to end.

Yes, oh yes…thought John as he gave in to Sherlock's brutally sensual kisses, trailing one hand down his lover's straining back to clasp at his buttocks and thrust his hips against his, feeling Sherlock's arousal against the flat, moist planes of his stomach. He felt his mind growing heavy as he felt the blood pounding through his brain. He felt Sherlock break the kiss and ease up a little to look at him.

"Alright, John?" he heard Sherlock say as if from far away.
"Yes," he said. "Don't stop."

He felt Sherlock lace the fingers of one hand through his and held their joined hands tightly above their heads as he leaned in once more to kiss John deeply.

The pressure in his head spiked, and he fought to keep from gasping out loud. From somewhere deep inside his mind, he heard Sherlock: "Let me in. Let me in, John…"

And he did.

And felt that singular sensation of an indefinable force thrusting deep into his mind. John did not know if it was as hot as fire or as cold as ice, if what he was feeling was agony or ecstasy. All he knew was that this felt oh, so much more intense than any orgasm he had ever experienced. So very much more. He could feel that Sherlock was coming even as he took full possession of him, and he felt himself being tossed up in a powerful wave of pure feeling as he realized that he was coming again, no matter how impossible it was physically.

But then they had already left the physical far behind to enter the realm of the senses.

Amazing. Just, absolutely amazing… thought John as he felt Sherlock begin to shatter, fall apart in his arms. And he's all mine. Just as I am his. Body and soul.

John watched with fierce pride as Sherlock arched away from him, shuddering his release as a cry escaped him, guttural and deep—a roar: "John!"

His name on Sherlock's lips was what pushed John over the edge. He wrapped his lover around him more securely with his body and his mind as they both leapt off that high cliff together and took flight.

Author's Notes: Just a brief note regarding the role of the full moon on the increase in psychiatric hospital admissions (please see the last chapter where John wondered whether there was a full moon during that extremely toxic hospital duty of his): I swear psych residents adhere to that age-old belief that the cycle of the moon has got something to do with people going crazy (hence the term lunacy), even if they will deny it when asked directly.
Mycroft sat on the sofa chair in Sherlock's living room and looked at his watch for what seemed like the thousandth time that night.

Almost 3 o'clock in the morning.

This was not good. Definitely not good.

He had arrived at Sherlock's rented house at around midnight and had found him gone, presumably to take care of the doctor. His last errand in London.

Taking care of John Watson would not take a long time, so Mycroft had settled down to wait.

And three hours later, he was still waiting.

Mycroft had been through enough during his lifetime to allow anything to unsettle him easily, so he continued to sit placidly, staring ahead at nothing. His calm appearance belied the ferocious speed at which his thoughts were taking shape in his mind.

Like a true statesman, he trusted Sherlock would do what was best in the situation, never mind if it was the right thing to do or not. Being right was a relative thing, anyway. It would always depend upon the situation one was placed in and what outcome was necessary. What harsh decisions could not be justified, if one's survival or the defense of an entire nation against a hostile force were at stake?

He firmly refused to think something may have happened to Sherlock while he dealt with John Watson. It was, after all, inconceivable that Sherlock would come to any harm in the doctor's hands. On the other hand, he had met John, had seen the peculiar effect the man had on his inexperienced brother, and he could not discount the very real possibility that John could break Sherlock's resolve— something that would have huge repercussions for all concerned. He wondered whether it had been wise of him to hold back and let Sherlock deal with John, knowing his weakness for him.

Such worrisome thoughts indeed, but quite useless to be contemplating them. Mycroft did not believe in making conjectures in the absence of reliable data, and he was not about to start now.

At last, he heard the front door opening and shutting. The familiar, quick footsteps sounded on the wooden floor just behind him, and then Sherlock was brushing past him, tossing down a leather-bound journal on the coffee table. Mycroft took a breath in and closed his eyes even as Sherlock took to pacing across the room in front of him.

His fears had just been realized: Sherlock had lost. Lost to John Watson.

"So you've not been able to get rid of him," Mycroft said at last, opening his eyes wearily. "And not just that, you've actually Bonded with him. Despite all my warnings. Congratulations. You've just made things so much more difficult now."

Sherlock stopped, his back turned to Mycroft. "Have I really become that obvious?" he asked softly.

Mycroft rolled his eyes heavenward. "Seriously, what is the matter with you?" he said, his voice hardening. "Don't tell me you've lost your mind together with your heart, all in one night."
"Your scent, as you passed by. Your hair is damp, and you smell of soap. At three in the morning. Soap! Wouldn't you agree that's more telling than your coming back, smelling of sex? At least with the latter I wouldn't have been able to properly deduce Dr. Watson's fate…but soap, Sherlock!"

The very word seemed to offend Mycroft beyond all imagining. He would have wanted to say more but he caught himself in time. He schooled himself into silence as he collected himself. He had never been this upset, not for a long, long time. Trust Sherlock to disrupt his unassailable equilibrium within minutes of their meeting.

"Soap," repeated Mycroft, when he felt he had recovered sufficiently to maintain his civility. "If you had done away with Dr. Watson, with or without having had sex with him, you wouldn't have been stupid enough to clean up in his bathroom and leave possible evidence behind. Therefore, the fact that you were able to take a shower at his place meant that you have decided to leave him alive, and why take a shower at all if not to erase traces of the activity previous to that? And if you were able to achieve physical consummation with the doctor, then I find it very hard indeed to imagine that you can stop yourself from Bonding with him as well!"

Mycroft abruptly stopped his tirade and took in a breath to steady himself. He could see Sherlock's shoulders shaking with silent laughter and instead of feeling angrier, he suddenly felt sad.

_Yes, go ahead and laugh, Mycroft_ thought grimly. _While you still can._

"Bravo," said Sherlock as he finally turned around to face his brother. "Impress me some more, Mycroft."

"You couldn't kill him, so you've decided that you will protect him," continued Mycroft as he stared hard at Sherlock. "Protect him from me, first and foremost."

Sherlock sat down on the sofa chair opposite him and linked his hands together in front of him. "Think of it as a kind of insurance, brother dear."

"You don't trust me at all, do you?"

"Oddly enough, no," returned Sherlock. "Not after everything we've been through."

Mycroft sighed. "And it never occurred to you that I only want what's best for you?"

"You could have taken it upon yourself to eliminate John and say that it was for my own good," said Sherlock. "You've done it before— take away something or someone I liked and insisting that you did so because you knew better. At least this way, I can be assured of your cooperation toward John in the right manner."

"And giving you my word that I will not harm John Watson is not enough?"

"We both know just how much your word is worth when the crucial moment comes." Sherlock leaned forward in his chair. "If I can't kill John Watson, nobody else can."

Mycroft shook his head. "And Anthea?" he asked softly. "Have you stopped to consider whether John could go the same way as she did? You may not be able to kill him, but rest assured that by Bonding with him you may already have paved the way to his death."

Sherlock fell silent for a moment at the mention of Anthea.

"John is strong," he finally replied, his voice curt. "I will just have to trust him to be able to bear it. Nobody's borne me as well as he has, so far."
"Indeed." Mycroft’s sigh had an extinguished quality about it. "Very well. Since you've taken such pains to prove that you are your own master, let it all be on your head then. At the very least, I trust you have explained everything to John regarding Jim Moriarty?"

"We are going to leave John out of it," said Sherlock flatly.

Mycroft seemed to deflate into his chair. "Now look who is being foolish," he murmured.

"I am leaving London, leaving John behind. Isn't that enough?" Sherlock said.

"Evidently not," muttered Mycroft. "You've Bonded with John only to turn him away? I don't think so."

He eyed his younger brother narrowly. "You've made plans. I would suggest that you tell me what they are immediately," he said.

"I'm not privy to all your plans so why should you be privy to all of mine? Just perform your tasks and I shall perform mine."

Mycroft grit his teeth but thought better of shouting. "Has it not occurred to you that I am on your side?" he asked. "Otherwise, why should I even bother helping you at all?"

"Since when have you ever been fully on my side?" asked Sherlock. "And isn't it obvious that you have a personal stake in this?"

"Is that part of the reason why you Bonded with John Watson?" asked Mycroft as an idea suddenly occurred to him.

He stared at Sherlock, and the exultant look that he saw on his brother's face made Mycroft look away, pained. "Oh, Sherlock," he said softly. "What have you done?"

Sherlock said nothing, merely continued to stare at his brother defiantly.

"And even if John were to survive you and this adventure of yours in one piece, how long do you suppose you have with him?" asked Mycroft. "Give him forty, fifty years at best— the summer of a dormouse— and once he's gone, what are you going to do with the remnants of your heart? There is a price to be paid for being survivors, after all."

Silence, then Sherlock asked, "Did you stop to consider that when you Bonded with Anthea?"

"No," Mycroft admitted. "But I was hoping you would learn some valuable lessons from what I went through. I loved her, and I lost her. Believe it or not, I wouldn't want you to go through the pain of that kind of loss. No matter what I said all those years ago."

"Did you regret ever having had Anthea then?" Sherlock's voice was soft, with no hint of derision.

Mycroft was silent for a moment, his mind steeped with sudden memories from a lifetime ago. He finally shook his head mutely.

"My answer, likewise, as far as John is concerned," said Sherlock.

He suddenly stood up. "I suppose it's time we're going to…wherever it is you're taking me," he said, clearly marking the end of their conversation. "Shall we?"
Of course, Mycroft could not leave it at that.

He was back in London several hours later, the light Sunday traffic making the ride so much shorter. Knowing John would be in the hospital to visit his sister, he had his driver wait outside Bart's.

John finally came out of Bart's sometime a little after lunchtime. He looked tired and drawn, but his steps were light, his entire manner at ease. He stopped abruptly upon seeing the black car glide once again toward him to block his path. The rear door opened automatically and, upon seeing who the passenger in the back seat was, John got in without another word.

"Afternoon," he said, eyeing Mycroft warily.

Mycroft did not return the greeting, merely nodded as the car smoothly pulled out of the curb.

"Well, this must be pretty important," said John, eyeing the interior of the car, "if you've decided to come in person to see me."

"Too many prying eyes, John. Not to mention ears." Mycroft gestured at the glass shield separating them from the driver. "He won't be hearing us, and the windows are tinted."

He finally turned to look at John when the car had eased into the main traffic. "How are you, John?" he asked.

John cleared his throat. "Fine," he said. "I'm fine."

"You don't have to lie," said Mycroft quietly. "You now have Sherlock Holmes inside your head. How fine can you possibly be?"

John said nothing, merely gave Mycroft an inscrutable look.

"I suspect the headaches will ease up a bit now that Sherlock has put some distance between himself and you," said Mycroft, "though you will also notice that you won't be able to use your new-found link to communicate with each other. They are all distance-dependent, you know."

John opened his mouth, but it took a while for him to get the words out: "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I suspect you have questions," said Mycroft. "Questions that your lover, my brother, will not be able to answer. He is, after all, new to this himself."

"And I take it you're doing this out of the goodness of your heart?" asked John.

Mycroft chose to ignore John's sarcasm. "If you've asked Sherlock about me, I am sure he will tell you that I do not do anything without a proper motive," he said in an equable tone.

"And may I ask what your motive is, in this case?"

"To prepare you for whatever is coming ahead, my dear John," said Mycroft. "My brother believes that he should leave you out of this. I think differently. I believe that from the moment he chose to spare your life and Bond with you, involved is what you are."

Mycroft stared at John. Not a shift in his expression, his blue eyes remaining calm and steady as he returned Mycroft's look. Admirable.

"Tell me, John," said Mycroft softly. "How much do you love him?"
John looked away, an incredulous smile flitting across his face. It was clear what his thought was just then: *There’s no way I’m telling you.*

But answer Mycroft’s question he finally did: "With my life."

"Hmm," said Mycroft, pursing his lips. "Glad to hear it. I trust that I can hold you to your word, John, if the need becomes pressing."

He turned to the suitcase he had beside him and opened it. Drawing out a folder thick with papers, he said, “How well do you know James Moriarty, 22nd Earl of Westwood?”

John shook his head. "Only as much as what the papers said," he said. "Some eccentric aristo delving into amateur black magic."

"Then you know almost nothing about him," said Mycroft curtly. "Go ahead and read the portfolio."

He watched as John silently perused the contents of the folder. "Yes," he said as he saw John's eyebrows lift in amazement. "Formidable, isn't he? One of the leading technocrats of the country, with vast wealth and resources at his disposal. He also happens to be the head of a secret organization— a cult, if you would like to call it that— of devil worshippers spanning the entire continent. Top secret. Absolutely hush-hush."

"And he was the one who held Sherlock captive?" said John, turning to look at Mycroft.

"Yes."

Mycroft watched as John let out an explosive breath and leaned back in his seat. Mycroft could feel the anger slowly coiling within him. *Good. That was good.*

"People like him, we know about them, we watch them," said Mycroft slowly. "But this one. This one and his secret life managed to evade my attention until it was nearly too late. You must realize how difficult a feat that is in itself. I am not pleased."

"So where is he now?" John wanted to know.

"Good question. I don't know where he is. We've not been able to track him down."

John let out a sigh of disbelief and stared out of his window for a while, watching London slide by and not actually seeing any of it.

"He's out there somewhere. Out to get Sherlock. He can strike anytime, and he will," continued Mycroft. He allowed a few more seconds of silence to slip by before he began carefully, "I realize that Sherlock may have developed a plan. Unfortunately, he does not think it necessary for me to know what it is."

He held up a hand before John could say anything. "You don't have to feel obliged to tell me, if you are unwilling," he said. "Perhaps you have made a promise to Sherlock about it, and it's too early to start breaking your promises, don't you think? All I'm asking you to do, John, is to listen to what I have to say. I will leave you to consider it."

John stared at Mycroft. "You have a plan?" he asked.

"Yes."
"Okay," said John after a moment. "I'm listening."

Mycroft had finished what he had to say by the time the car pulled up in front of John's apartment. "I'm not asking you to agree immediately," he said. "Just give it your careful consideration, John. Hopefully it will fit somewhere in Sherlock's plans. That would be the best thing."

John said nothing, merely stared ahead of him. When he finally opened his mouth, it was to ask, "You said you can provide me with answers about Bonding—answers that Sherlock would not know about."

"Yes."

"Good. I've got some questions."

Mycroft shifted in his seat, the better to look at John fully. "I thought you might," he said.

Author's Notes: Yes, I know what some of you are thinking: Where's the morning-after scene?? Not to worry, my dears. I did not forget it. That will come in the next chapter. The reason behind this arrangement of the scenes will become clearer then. Thanks a lot!
Chapter 28

The conversation with Mycroft took a while. Afterwards, John carefully alighted from the car and went into his apartment.

He felt curiously empty as he made his way from the living room to his bedroom. Stopping at the doorway, he stared into the room at his unmade bed. Images from last night, of Sherlock on that bed, wrapped around him, instantly sprang into mind.

Slowly, he approached it and sank down into its inviting comfort, its promise of sweet, temporary oblivion. The faint, lingering scent of last night’s encounter filled his senses as he stared at the ceiling, breathing slowly in and out, in and out.

He was still so tired. Earlier that morning, he had awakened once again to the shrill ring of his phone, to the reality of Harry in the ICU and his parents at the hospital wondering where on earth he was. So he had dragged himself out of bed, had taken a hasty shower and parked his body for a few hours at Bart’s.

Harry was stable, thank God, and that was all he really cared about. He had sat with his parents for a while, their shock and teary thankfulness that Harry was okay a welcome respite to all the negative feelings generated within the past few months, and John could only hope that this was the beginning of a turnaround in their relations with Harry, but deep down inside he was just too tired, too drained to get into the thick of things.

Of course his parents had noticed his detachment. They had asked him if he was feeling alright, but he had fobbed them off, citing fatigue—which had been true, anyway. They had believed him, thinking he had had a rough day yesterday, which had been true as well.

As he listened to them talk about just how very nearly they had lost his sister, a part of him had added silently, vaguely, that they would never realize just how close they actually had come to losing both their children yesterday.

A frisson went through him at the thought that he could very well have ended up bloodied and broken on the pavement outside his apartment last night. He would never know what had made him say those things to Sherlock that had made things end up differently.

So very differently.

Now, as he lay on his bed, the immediate aftermath of last night’s extraordinary union came into his mind once again—the details clear and sharp in his memory, almost as though it were happening again now.

Breathe, he told himself as he closed his eyes.

Breathe…

"Breathe," he heard Sherlock’s soft murmur. "Just breathe, John."

It felt like emerging from the deep end of the ocean. As he slowly regained consciousness, John
took in a deep, shaky breath and stuttered it out. He tried to open his eyes, but found that his vision was blurred, swimming. Groaning, he closed them again, fighting the urge to retch. He felt dizzy, nauseous—as though he were on board a ship in the middle of a wind-tossed sea instead of lying on a solid, unmoving bed in his room.

All the while, he felt a gentle hand running over his damp hair, smoothing it away from his forehead. The motions were rhythmic, soothing. Little by little he felt the vertigo ease up.

Eyes still tightly shut, he turned slowly from his side to lie flat on his back. He could feel his heart thundering away in his chest, working overtime. The throbbing in his head was like something alive, trapped inside his skull and rearing to get out. He licked his dry lips and, when he felt he could manage it, said in a low, hoarse whisper, "Tell me I didn't just faint."

He felt the smile in Sherlock's voice as he heard him reply, "Unsurprising. After all, what just happened was rather...intense."

John felt the corners of his mouth tilt up in a smile of his own, all the while feeling the strangest mixture of emotions—elation, fulfillment, an overwhelming feeling of gladness and relief, also concern and worry. So strange, especially these last two feelings. He was sure he wasn't feeling anything remotely like worry, and yet he did.

Opening his eyes slowly, he saw Sherlock's face above his own, looking down at him. It was blurred, a pale, oval haze.

"John."

John squinted, and Sherlock's face finally came into focus.

"Are you alright?"

John nodded. He felt the hand on his hair stop its soothing ministrations, drifting down to touch the side of his face.

He sighed as he reached up to grasp Sherlock's wrist. "I...don't know what to say," he said slowly, embarrassment creeping into the bewildering mix of emotions inside him.

"You don't have to say anything."

John paused as he stared at Sherlock. "Hold...hold on," he said. "You...you didn't open your mouth just now."

Sherlock shook his head. "No."

John gazed at him, frowning. "But, you—I..."

He swallowed, tried again: "You mean, I can hear you inside my head?"

"As clearly as I can hear you inside mine."

John felt his eyes widen. "Oh," he merely said as the idea gradually sank in. "Is that all part of Bonding?"

"It must be." Sherlock smiled. "Problem?"

John thought for a moment, then said, "I thought there's no such thing as mind reading."
Sherlock shrugged. "Until now I thought so, too."

John closed his mouth and concentrated a bit. *You...are amazing,* he thought, smiling.

"As are you." Here, Sherlock's gaze faltered, and after a moment he dropped it altogether.

John's smile faded as he watched Sherlock, his heart sinking as he felt those emotions tumbling wildly inside him.

*Isn't it too early for that?*

"No. It's not that." Sherlock's gaze was fierce when he directed it back at John. "No regrets, John. Not on my part, at least. Only..."

*Only?*

"You do understand what just happened between us, don't you?"

John could feel the worry spike within him, and realized it wasn't his.

"You just placed yourself within my power, John. Always." Sherlock looked at John searchingly. "Always. Do you understand? I'll never be able to let you go. When it comes to you, I won't be able to hold myself back even if I want to, now."

John grinned. *Since when were you able to, when it came to me?*

"I'm serious, John. You wouldn't be able to do anything to get rid of me now."

John stared at Sherlock, feeling the worry swirl around his throbbing head. He finally brought a hand to touch Sherlock's chest, warm satisfaction slowly coursing through him as he felt the fast, unsettled beat of his lover's heart against his palm.

His lover.

He did not think he would get tired of referring to Sherlock by that term.

He stared back at Sherlock. *I never thought I'd admit this, but I've been your prisoner from the very first moment we met. I've not been able to escape you, and what's more, I don't want to.*

He watched as Sherlock closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh. He felt that mass of broiling emotions press into his mind again, squeezing at his heart. He had not known that Sherlock could feel like this— a multitude of conflicting feelings, almost all at one time. It was overwhelming.

"Oh, John. How could you possibly think to say things like that."

John could not resist grinning again. *Blame it on all the novels I've ever read.*

He reached up to meet Sherlock halfway, their kiss gentle this time, and slow. John ignored the heavy throb in his head as he pressed his lips against Sherlock's mouth.

He heard Sherlock's deep murmur in his head: "Definitely not a lamb."

*What am I then?*

He felt Sherlock's smile against his mouth.
"The tiger's own," Sherlock replied with his mind, as he slowly deepened the kiss. "My very own."

Sherlock did not stay long to hold or be held.

After a few minutes, John felt him disengaging from their loose embrace, getting up and leaving the room. Through the open bedroom door, he could hear the faint sound of the shower running down the corridor. He heard Sherlock return a few minutes later. He dressed without lights. All of this registered briefly with John as he lay in the center of a deep repose.

The throbbing in his head had receded, but he felt so exhausted.

So what happens now?

Sherlock pulled on his great coat, tied the blue scarf around his neck. "Now I must leave."

John swallowed uncertainly as he looked up at him. When will I see you again?

"When everything is ready, I shall send for you." Sherlock sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted a hand to run over John's hair one last time, a slow caress.

"My brave John," said Sherlock aloud, his voice deep and low in the quiet of the room. "Promise me."

Anything…

"Promise me, not a spoken or written word about me ever again. Keep me locked up in here." Sherlock tapped at John's forehead lightly. "Never let me go."

Okay. Yes.

"And promise me you'll remain strong, John. Whatever happens from here onwards. For me."

John smiled as he looked into Sherlock's pale gaze. Count on it.

"That's my John." He felt Sherlock's smile rather than saw it. Felt his lover's long, gentle fingers settle on his face, drawing his lids down over his drowsy eyes. "Sleep now, beloved."

Beloved…

Such a curiously archaic term, but John could feel himself flushing with deep pleasure at the sound of the endearment on Sherlock's tongue.

His thoughts returned to Sherlock's brother, to the conversation they just had in the car. To Jim Moriarty.

"I realize that Sherlock may have developed a plan. Unfortunately, he does not think it necessary for me to know what it is."
What he could not bring himself to tell Mycroft was that Sherlock had not divulged the plan to him either.

He wasn’t sure how he ought to feel about that, just as he wasn't sure what he ought to feel about the things Mycroft had told him.

As he felt his mind slipping off, John remembered once more his strange conversation with Sherlock's brother.

"Before anything else, just what is it that you do?" John had asked him.

"What do you think?" Mycroft had returned, an amused gleam in his eyes. It was a turn of phrase so very much like what Sherlock would use that for a moment, John had felt his heart give a startled leap.

John had held up the folder on Moriarty. "You have access to these confidential files. I'm thinking you're somewhere up there in the secret service."

Mycroft had made a gentle, self-deprecatory sound. "I am merely a minor government official, my dear John."

"Huh," John had said, exhaling a breath. "A vampire in government. You know, it's all beginning to make sense to me now."

Mycroft had lifted an expressive eyebrow but declined to say anything to that.

John had raked a hand through his hair. "I mean, vampires, for Chrissakes," he had said, shaking his head. "Just the very idea."

"Why not?" Mycroft had argued. "We've been around longer than people have, and we've adapted to be able to exist with you and through you. Call us whatever you like, we are nothing but a product of natural evolution, as are all living things."

"How did your kind manage to evade detection so successfully?"

"Did we?" Mycroft had asked. "We are all around you—in your lore, your fiction, your imagination, at the periphery of your consciousness. In your nightmares and dreamscapes. For as long as man can remember, we've been there alongside him. Granted that our relationship is not what you would call...symbiotic, we have learned long ago that concealment is vital—the less questions about us, the better. There are always misunderstandings to the point that we have been recast into strange, supernatural forms. But being launched into legend has its uses, and I trust you will not find it strange for us to take full advantage of it."

"But you are not supernatural."

"Anything but," Mycroft had agreed. "Nature has gifted us with an exceptionally hardy constitution, but put a stake through our hearts, cut off our heads and stuff our mouths with garlic, or put a bullet through the proper, vital places, and I can assure you we will die as certainly as human beings. We are mortal, John, just like you."

"There aren't many of you out there though."
"Predators are never as prolific as the herd they prey upon," Mycroft had remarked. "And our numbers had been dwindling for ages. Nature has selected us for extinction as surely as the dinosaurs before us."

"So…I take it your kind has never been able to breed with humans. Otherwise, we would have seen something…weird."

"No." Mycroft had shaken his head. "Obviously, our physical likeness to human beings is a form of protective coloring, the way certain animals would take the shape and colors of their surroundings to blend in. For all our physical similarities, we are genetically incompatible."

"And yet you're able to Bond with us."

"Call it an accident of nature. A freak occurrence. It does not bear any advantage to either party. It should never happen, and yet it does."

"Tell me what it's all about," John had urged.

"As you have probably figured out by now, it's a highly specialized form of contact unique to our species," Mycroft had replied. After a pause, he had added quietly, "Quite incompatible with humans, I should think."

"Why?"

"It is…intrusive, to say the very least. You actually have a piece of Sherlock lodged inside your mind, feeling his feelings, thinking his thoughts. It's quite obvious it can drive anyone mad before long."

"Is that what happened to your wife? Or is that wedding band merely a prop?"

Mycroft had smiled as he held up his left hand. "I see Sherlock's beginning to rub off on you already," he had remarked dryly. "No. I actually did get married, once. In two years' time, I shall be able to mark our 100th wedding anniversary."

"Hold on," John had said. "You got married…when…?"

"In nineteen-fourteen," Mycroft had replied quite calmly, as though he were chatting about something as inconsequential as the weather, "just before the Great War."

"Oh." John had finally said, eyes round and eyebrows raised. Then: "What happened to her?"

"She fell into a coma, six months after we've Bonded," Mycroft had said softly. "Of course, the doctors then couldn't really say for sure what happened. They thought she must have had some sort of stroke, or aneurysm. She died five years later."

Silence as John had stared at Mycroft's profile. "You think her coma was induced by the Bond," he had finally said.

"I don't just think it; I know it," Mycroft had said quite definitely. "The headaches got worse and more frequent, yet she wouldn't hear of my leaving. We couldn't bear to be apart for long periods of time, anyway, and then one day…"

Mycroft had trailed off, the lines about his mouth suddenly harsh.

"But how can you be so sure? I mean, it could have been because of an actual physical problem
that she had."

Mycroft had stared at John with something very close to pity. "I hope so, for your own sake."

There had been more silence as John absorbed what Mycroft had just told him.

"Aren't you afraid?" Mycroft had asked. "At least just a little bit? There is no shame in it. It is only natural to be so, under the circumstances."

John had scoffed. "More than a little bit afraid, to be sure. Yeah. I don't think we can shrug off fear for as long as we live. It's just that there are some moments when fear is useful, and some when it's not."

Mycroft had stared at him for a moment, the smooth hum of the car's engines audible in the quiet interval that followed.

"Don't be too harsh on Sherlock," Mycroft had said after a while. "He did it to protect you, you know. He must have known it was the only way out for you. Short of killing you last night, he really didn't have any other alternative."

John had looked away. "I know," he had said. "But it wasn't just his decision. I wanted it too."

"In any case, the symptoms—the headaches, the dizziness—are more manageable when you are apart from each other. But as I have said, you won't be able to talk to each other at great distances. You'll feel him though, and sometimes you can even hear him, in the same way he'll always sense you."

"So you're also Bound to him, then," John had said. "You're his brother, after all."

Mycroft had shaken his head. "He broke it off, a long time ago. I have no hold over him."

John had settled back in his seat. "Wait. I thought—"

"Needless to say, our Bond was of a very different kind," Mycroft had explained. "The easiest to break would be the kind we made as children. The most difficult kinds, if they can be broken at all, would be the ones we make in later life."

"And Sherlock broke it off between the two of you?"

"As soon as he could. So you can understand why you are important, John, apart from the fact that you are now essential to my brother's happiness. Consider yourself a link between us."

John had stared at Mycroft as he felt the hairs on his nape stand on end. "You know, I'm not sure how to take it, when you say it like that," he had said.

Mycroft's gaze had been unwavering as he answered, "Think of it as one other reason why you were spared."

John had opened his mouth, but had shut it again after thinking better of replying. A short, uncomfortable silence had ensued.

After a while, Mycroft had looked down at the wedding band he wore. "It will sound outdated and strange, but until now I still think of her," he had murmured. "That is the problem with our kind, I think. We tend to be very intense over our relationships. Human beings probably will not be able to grasp the way we form our attachments. The way we love…it is practically forever in human
years."

John had brought his gaze back to Mycroft. "So you guys can feel that way."

"Quite. It's not an advantage, and it's definitely not something we indulge in, but I would be lying if I said we are immune to it. At any rate, I was not myself for quite some time after my wife died. It was a most difficult time between Sherlock and myself. After Mummy—that is, our mother—died, I practically raised him. I did my best, but you have to understand I was also growing up myself. I will admit now that I made mistakes along the way. You can imagine how he had come to resent me over the years.

"Anyway, he couldn't understand what I had gotten myself into with Anthea. I was inconsolable, and I can see now that he had been upset by it, by me. Heated words were exchanged between us. I don't think he has forgiven nor forgotten what I said to him in the midst of my grief and misery. I…deeply regret it."

"What did you tell him?"

Mycroft had shaken his head. "I told him…I told him someday he will meet the same fate—meet someone who will sweep him off his feet and steal his heart, and then…then, he will know what it feels like to have his heart broken."

John had winced. "You didn't," he had said, casting Mycroft a weary, sidelong look.

Mycroft had just continued to shake his head. "I—I didn't mean it that way…well, yes, I did. Then,"

"Well, thanks a lot for making things easier for Sherlock now," John had said.

Mycroft had sighed. "Quite."

"Tell me honestly. You'd probably do away with me if Sherlock didn't Bond with me, wouldn't you?" John had asked, eyeing Mycroft shrewdly.

Mycroft's stare had been unapologetic. "In all probability, yes," he had said. "I don't expect people to appreciate what I do, but I do get the necessary things done. But Sherlock is my brother, and no matter what happened in the past, I am the closest that he has to a family in this world. The Bond has changed everything between the two of you. That doesn't mean things will get any easier though. Prepare yourself, John. Because whether Sherlock likes it or not, I have a feeling everything is going to go right through you."

John's reply had been soft, but his tone had been as firm as Mycroft's gaze: "Count on it."

He had moved to open the door of the car, then paused to look back at Mycroft. "You're wrong, you know," he had said.

Mycroft had turned to look at him. "Sorry?"

"You're wrong…about vampires and humans Bonding as an accident of nature," John had said. In as much as Mycroft scared the living daylights out of him, he had needed to say it. "There is no such thing as an accident of Nature. Nor is it a mistake. It doesn't happen that way."

"Oh?"

"If it's there, then it's there for a reason," John had said. "We'll just have to find out what the reason
He must have drifted off. When he opened his eyes again, the room was dark with the onset of early evening. He had slept the entire afternoon away.

The nap had done him some good though. He actually felt a bit better.

Sitting up on the bed, at first he wasn't quite sure what had awakened him. Then he heard it again.

Violin music, rendered by an expert hand.

The strains were soft, the tune sweetly melancholic. John followed the music to the living room, but of course, there was nobody there.

Sherlock.

Somewhere out there, Sherlock was playing the violin. He had said before that he played the instrument when he had time, and now John could hear just how well he could do it.

John sat down on the sofa, his elbows on his knees, a hand cupping his chin, absorbed in the ravishing night music only he could hear. Little by little, he felt himself loosen up, the music soothing his troubled thoughts.

The conversation with Mycroft had been disturbing on so many levels, but one in particular had made John worry. Despite all his confident words about Bonding not being an accident of nature, it was certainly true that it had more disadvantages than advantages. Mycroft had spoken of the Bond leaving a little piece of Sherlock in his head, but John had thought about it the other way around, of his leaving a little part of himself in Sherlock's mind. What would that mean to Sherlock?

John thought back on their therapy sessions, of Sherlock's anxiety verging on panic as he tried to cast away the unwanted empathy he had developed with him, with human beings. He had refused to acknowledge it before, but it was indeed a valid cause for concern.

And now, Sherlock actually had John lodged in his mind.

Had John damaged him? Damaged the tiger by taking his claws and fangs away, condemned the eagle by clipping his wings, and all because he had introduced a conscience into a predator? John had managed to rob Sherlock of his appetite just by a mere look before. How would he ever feed now with John's voice perennially inside his head?

Oh God…

What had he done?

John bowed his head and closed his eyes as he automatically did a breathing exercise to calm down, the violin music rushing in to scatter his thoughts.

Breathe.

Just breathe, John.
The moment of panic passed as John slowly gathered himself together.

He was going to deal with this just as he had all the other crises he had ever encountered in his life. Besides, there was Mycroft's plan to consider.

_Everything's going to be all right, Sherlock_, he thought grimly. _I'm going to make sure you'll be alright._

And miles away, in a little house in Oxford, Sherlock abruptly stopped playing as he felt something slide down his cheek to spatter on the Stradivarius that he held tucked under his chin.

He raised a hand to his face, and stared at it as it came away wet with tears.
Chapter 29

On Mycroft's next visit to Oxford a few days later, he found Sherlock disheveled and unshaven, curled into a tight ball on one of the sofa chairs, eyes hungry and desperate and miserable.

*Oh, for God's sake…!*

One look was all it took to bring Mycroft to the kitchen. Opening one of the cupboards, he grabbed a glass and headed back to the living room. Setting the glass down on top of the coffee table with a loud thunk!, he pulled out a silver flask from the pocket of his coat and poured out the dark red fluid.

*And so it begins,* intoned Mycroft in his head.

Fingers on the rim of the glass, he handed it to Sherlock. "Drink," he said brusquely.

Sherlock stared at the glass but made no move to accept it. Finally he said, his voice a gravelly rasp. "It's been a while since you made such a glaring mistake in your deductions, Mycroft. I haven't completely lost my mind so as not to be able to hunt and feed, thank you."

"When was the last time you did so?" Mycroft's tone was peremptory.

"Yesterday." The word was delivered snappishly.

"So what is this, then?"

"The hunger this time is…different."

Mycroft sat down on the chair opposite Sherlock. "John," he said succinctly.

Sherlock closed his eyes, a sigh rattling out between his lips. "I haven't been able to resonate with him," he said, his voice flat. "It's been almost three days and there has been nothing."

"It's never easy, even in the best of times."

"I want…" Sherlock stopped, swallowed. "I need John."

"Sherlock…"

Sherlock shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Is it always like this?" he demanded peevishly.

"In time, it will get better. For you, that is," said Mycroft slowly. "Once you're used to your partner's rhythms. Don't force yourself. It's going to be more difficult that way."

"Would you believe that John got me during his first try at resonance?" said Sherlock, a hint of a smile on his lips.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows. "I'm sure John Watson is quite extraordinary," he said. "At any rate, he passed my test."

Sherlock grew still. Then, he slowly turned to glare at Mycroft. "Say that again," he growled.

Mycroft exhaled a patient sigh. "I can't believe you'd still be surprised that I do my own fact-checking," he said. "Anyway, he passed with flying colors. You ought to feel proud."
"Mycroft—" said Sherlock warningly as he moved to get up from his chair.

Mycroft held up a weary hand. "Let's not get into the old song and dance, shall we? We both know what you're going to say, and we also know what my rebuttal will be, so why even bother going down that well-worn road again? I will only say that this time I agree with your choice. John Watson is most extraordinary. And trustworthy."

That seemed to mollify Sherlock a little. He slowly settled back into his seat, his gaze intense and watchful as he looked at his brother.

Mycroft stared off into Sherlock's bookshelves across him. "Interesting creatures, human beings," he said softly, almost more to himself than to Sherlock. "Most of them, of course, are inconsequential. Mere cattle and livestock. Except for their blood, one wonders why we even bother with them. But every once in a while, someone comes along who can stare upon us and not turn to stone."

"Yes."

"A most dangerous trait," Mycroft said, turning to look at Sherlock. "You do realize that the description also fits the enemy."

Sherlock gave a soft grunt as he straightened himself in his chair. "He's definitely not common, yes," he conceded.

Mycroft took out a pile of antique papers from the inner pocket of his coat. "I think I know where he is," he said. "As you have mentioned before, he's out book-hunting, and I suspect I may even know what book he's after. If so, then I think he's after these."

He gave the papers to Sherlock. "Take care of it," cautioned Mycroft. "If it falls into the wrong hands now then all will be lost."

Sherlock thumbed through the fragile papers, the beginnings of a smirk showing on his lips. "When did you get these?" he asked.

"Just after the Inquisition. The Spanish one. During the Basque witch trials, they actually got to catch and burn a witch and his earthly possessions, but they missed some of his books, dispersed into very private hands. I managed to track the most damaging one down and did the Inquisitors a favor by tearing out the relevant pages for them without anyone the wiser," said Mycroft serenely.

"Why didn't you just get rid of the entire book?"

"You will find now, dear brother, just how valuable a nasty, useless old book can turn out to be after several centuries. As bait for so-called witches, if nothing else. Time to lure the catch in."

Sherlock's chuckle was dark and rich.

Mycroft smiled. "Devil worship. Such absolute nonsense," he said derisively as he leaned back into his seat. "There's nothing worse than certain kinds of men and the hearts of darkness lurking inside them."

"And yet there are some who seem to possess nothing but light."

Mycroft sighed. "True," he said. "But then that's how the world has always been, isn't it? Tigers and lambs, all bunched into one, tiny world. Sit back and watch the butchering begin."

Sherlock looked away as he muttered, "There are exceptions, Mycroft."

Mycroft stared at Sherlock for quite some time before he nodded. "That's John talking right there," he said softly.

Sherlock ignored him.

"You didn't see this coming, did you? With John?"

"If I had, I would have avoided him like the plague."

"Well. Too late now," Mycroft said, sighing once again.

"But I'm glad I didn't miss him, miss this chance," finished Sherlock, his tone defiant.

"Let's hope you shall continue to feel that way," said Mycroft grimly.

Silence for several minutes.

Mycroft sighed. "Are you sure you don't want to try some of this?" he asked, lifting the glass. "It's actually pretty good."

Sherlock looked at the half-empty glass and scrunched his face in disgust.

Mycroft shook his head as he took a sip from the glass. "Believe it or not, it's the trend of the future," he said. "Quite right, too. That purist attitude you've got towards feeding was what landed you into all this trouble in the first place. Think of this as a kind of diet modification. It's not as tasty, but then it's not going to kill you, either."

"Spare me the lecture, please."

"In the event of a nuclear war, human blood would be rendered useless for consumption anyway," said Mycroft. "So why bother preserving your hunting skills in anticipation of such an occurrence? Let's just hope we've had perfected the manufacture of synthetic blood by then."

Sherlock looked away, scowling.

"To each his own," said Mycroft with a light shrug. "At any rate, I'm glad you do not seem to have an issue with hunting and feeding after Bonding with John. You must have remembered how hard it had been for me when I was newly married. I nearly drove Anthea to distraction by my sudden inability to feed."

"John drove me to make…certain feeding adjustments soon after our acquaintance," said Sherlock. Mycroft nodded. "Good man, John."

"How did you test him?"

"By presenting the bald facts of the case to him," said Mycroft.

"And?"

"And he never once thought to consider placing his personal safety above whatever measures may be needed to be undertaken in future."

"Mycroft—"
"He told me he loves you. With his life." Mycroft said, finally cutting to the chase. "Even if we don't quite understand how human beings love, that is quite a declaration, wouldn't you say? You don't have to worry. I do understand just how much he means to you."

"We will need to protect him," said Sherlock.

"That goes without saying," said Mycroft. "As for the Bond…"

"What about it?" queried Sherlock as Mycroft trailed off.

"There is an aspect of it which I have heard about but have not actually experienced myself. It might come in handy. Do you wish to know about it?"

"Let's hear it."

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

By Monday, John realized just how much of Sherlock he had actually imbibed when they Bonded. He knew something was up the moment he started his rounds at Bart's that morning.

He had barely arrived at the nurses' station when he took one look at Alice, the nurse on duty, and had the startling realization that she was contemplating on breaking up with her no-good, two-timing boyfriend.

How that thought had arrived, fully formed, in his mind, he had no idea.

"Doc, you okay?" Alice asked after she had given him all his patients' charts to find him still staring, a bit wide-eyed, at her.

"Um, yeah," he said, clearing his throat and looking away. "Sorry. It's just—"

And the words were out of his mouth before he could even register what they were: "You're doing the right thing. And yes, he's done it to you before. Twice, as you've suspected."

Alice stared at him, slack-jawed, as he beat a hasty retreat. "You know what, ignore that. Just ignore me," he called as he all but bolted down the corridor to his sister's room. "And it's not what you think!"

Goddamit what the hell was the matter with him?

Well, he was wrong if he thought he was going to be safe in Harry's room, where she had been transferred after being released from the ICU on Sunday night.

Two pairs of eyes lifted to stare at him as he closed the door loudly behind him.

Taking Clara's formal, stiff posture as she stood several feet away from Harry's bed, arms crossed defensively across her chest, John did not need his newfound skills of deduction to notice that things were definitely not good between the two women, although he needed the lightning-fast train of reasoning to arrive at the conclusion that Clara had just asked Harry for a divorce. No, a trial separation. Clara would not be heartless enough to drop the subject of divorce while Harry was still recovering in the hospital, but she had stayed away for the entire duration of Harry's stay in the ICU and that had spoken volumes about the state of their relationship.

Clamping down hard in case his mouth would let slip another unfortunate phrase that would make
the situation worse, John said, "Sorry. I'll— I'll just wait outside."

Clara made to move away from Harry's bed, gathering her coat on a nearby chair. "It's okay, John," she said. "I think we're quite finished now."

And away she went.

John turned back to look at Harry, lying frail and worn on the narrow hospital bed with a drip attached to her arm. She shook her head weakly. "Trial separation," she croaked.

"Harry."

"No. It's my fault," she said, staring out of the window at a drab and grey London. "I started it. I made it happen."

"Stop it."

"I did," Harry persisted, beginning to babble as tears gathered in her eyes. "I was just so tired, and so fed up with everything. Work wasn't coming together. I wasn't pulling together, and I made it look like I was fed up with her—"

The tears spilled down Harry's pale cheeks.

John closed his eyes. "Harry…"

"What is the matter with me?" wailed Harry. "How did it all come to this? Where did this all start?"

A light bulb seemed to come on somewhere in John's head. "The Royal Institute of Art," he said.

Harry turned to stare at him. "What?"

"The Royal Institute of Art," repeated John, growing more convinced of his line of thinking by the second as the thought processes connected to give him the reason behind his sudden epiphany. "Back when you were twenty. You should have just told them to fuck off."

It was true, now that John thought about it. Harry had set her hopes on entering the institute, had worked hard to make sure she was ready for the tough entrance exams. Harry had the talent—everyone knew that. And yet, in the end, everything had not been enough. She had been rejected, and John could see now that it was the first rejection in her life—seemingly to come from nowhere—that had shaken her confidence to the core. It should not have, but it did. His parents and his sixteen-year old self had shrugged it off easily enough, but Harry had been devastated. It was clear now that that episode had been the first trigger.

And yet how to address such a problem? How to make Harry grow a thicker skin that would shield her from all the slings and arrows of life's outrageous fortunes? It was not something that John could do for her. She had to do it for herself.

John came out of his reverie to find his sister looking at him with a concerned frown on her face. "Johnny, you okay?" she asked.

He nodded, but he was not quite finished yet. "Tell them to fuck off," he said, "every single disappointment and frustration you have encountered, or will ever encounter. Tell each and every one of them to go to hell. Don't let them hold sway. If they threaten to overwhelm you, just stop the clock and revert to day one."
Harry shook her head. "It's not that simple, Johnny," she said. "There are just some things in life that we can't survive intact."

"Yes, it is." *If I can survive a vampire, there's nothing we can't overcome.*

"I don't think I can be as strong as you are."

"Then I'll be right here until you're strong enough," said John, squeezing her hand.

*Day one*, he thought.

Toward the middle of the week, John had lunch with Mike Stamford.

He told John about Sherlock's resignation from the project and tried to wave away John's sympathy and concern. John could tell that Mike was seriously distressed about the entire thing, making his efforts to make light of the situation even more gallant.

"There will be other scientists," he said, smiling. "In fact, I'm already scouring around a ton of resumes. Thanks for all your help, mate. Sherlock said you did great."

"You're welcome." *And thank you actually*...

A pause in their conversation as the soup arrived.

"So, Sherlock's back in Manchester to serve out his notice?" asked John casually.

He had not seen or heard from him in days. Not even in his dreams. John was starting to worry.

After having achieved it once, John thought resonating with Sherlock would be easy. It was turning out to be more difficult than he thought. His last dream had been quite a nightmare, with him going through room after room in a corridor made up seemingly of an infinite number of rooms, searching for Sherlock. Some of the rooms were locked, some were open and leading to fantastical interiors. All the while, he could not find him. He had awakened with frustration and disappointment so sharp that it had taken everything in his willpower not to grab his phone and just call Sherlock's number. Which had been erased from his phone's memory when he managed to check his phone later that day. Sherlock's doing, of course.

There was nothing to do but wait.

"He's asked for a few days to finish some business in Oxford before heading back to the lab," said Mike, chewing on a piece of roll. "Then, after he's served his two weeks of endorsements, I guess that will be the last we'll see of him."

"Yes," John said.

*No*, he thought.

John had very little time to contemplate about his new situation with Sherlock. As soon as lunch
was over, he had to go back to Baker Street and start a new round of patient consultations in the afternoon.

In fact, the next patient was already waiting by the time he arrived. A new one.

John glanced at the name printed neatly on top of the blank chart: BROOK, RICHARD.

"Mrs. Hudson," he said into his intercom. "Tell Mr. Brook to come in, please."

Author's Notes: The Basque Witch Trials was a true event, part of the Spanish Inquisition in the early 17th century which cost thousands of men, women and children their lives. The Royal Institute of Art as portrayed in this story is fictitious.
Chapter 30

John had that dream with the rooms again. He knew somehow that it was significant for him to be dreaming it repeatedly, and yet the meaning of it eluded him as he stared down the long corridor in dismay.

There were so many rooms, it was daunting. The familiar feeling of bitter frustration hounded him as he started going from room to room, searching for Sherlock. Where was he? Why was it so difficult to find him here? And yet, how could it not be difficult? The rooms were practically endless, stretching out on either side of John without a break as far as the eye could see.

John tried to be methodical, trying one room after another in the order that he found them, but it was hard to resist the temptation to try certain doors ahead of the others. For one thing, the doors themselves were different from each other. Some were made of wood, plain or with intricate carvings, while others were made of metal, even thick, frosted glass. Some were huge and dungeon-like, others were delicate, drawing-room types with gilt edges. All of them were firmly shut, and some were actually locked. They required that John turn each of their knobs to catch a glimpse of what lay inside.

And what lay inside were some of the most fascinating interiors that John had ever encountered in his life. He felt he could easily lose hours simply wandering around inside these rooms. From richly-furnished, medieval drawing rooms filled with antique books to modern living and work spaces of metal and chrome. From frighteningly dark, bare cellars to the brightly lit, austere atmospheres of laboratories. Then John would encounter rooms that had no décor at all, but instead had music and light, unseen voices and other intangibles.

Some of the doors did not lead into rooms at all, but to sceneries fantastical and surreal. One of the doors led John to a barren, windswept cliff overlooking a stormy sea, while another opened onto a peaceful meadow at night, with a bright, full moon and a sea of stars overhead. Some of the scenes could be lifted straight out of a picture postcard, others were dull and drab and monochromatic.

There were people in most of the rooms, some dressed in costumes straight out of period dramas, others in modern day garb. Men, women and children— an entire world of them— and yet none of them was Sherlock. John quickly found that it was useless asking them anything. They couldn't seem to see or hear him at all.

Where could he be?

John did not linger in the rooms he stepped into, feeling that inexplicable dread that somehow time was slipping away from him as each room he opened yielded no Sherlock. And there were still so many rooms to go through.

It was becoming essential that he find him. He had to tell him something. Something important.

He had just stepped into a bedroom with florid, Victorian wallpaper when he heard the loud banging of a door from the corridor, followed by a muffled voice cursing.

He stepped back out and peered along the length of the well-lighted corridor.

Empty.

He turned back into the room he had just entered and scanned the interior slowly, cautiously, as if expecting someone to emerge from a shadowy corner. It was dimly lit, the Victorian wallpaper
filling John's vision with intricate patterns that seemed to move and crawl on their own accord. Papers and books were scattered on the floor, and a general air of dishevelment pervaded the room, although the bed linens looked fresh and the blankets were carefully folded across the bed as though somebody had just turned the covers down.

That voice again—a low, angry mutter through the wall. John could hear someone prowling restlessly in the room next door, knocking things around.

Something about that voice made John say hesitantly, "Sherlock?"

Startled silence as the voice abruptly stopped in mid-rant. The very air around John suddenly seemed to be alertly listening, anticipating.

John tried again, louder this time, "Sherlock, is that you?"

"John?" The voice was suddenly plainly audible, although still faint, seeming to come through the wall to John's left. "John?"

John was instantly there, hands on the Victorian wallpaper, head pressed close to the wall. "Sherlock?" he said again, raising his voice. "I can hear you. You're in the room next to mine. Wait, I'll go out and—"

"No," said Sherlock quickly. "You'll lose your way. We won't find each other like that, not in here. Tell me where you are. Describe your room for me."

"Umm, it's a bedroom with a Victorian flower pattern on the walls. Two windows, a bureau, double-sized bed. A periodic table of elements on the wall."

"I know that room. Wait for me."

It took Sherlock a few minutes, but judging from the way his head was growing heavy, John could tell that he was finally close. Closing in on him. Strange how he almost welcomed the sensation of heaviness pressing down in his mind precisely because of what it heralded: the arrival of a lover.

At last, the door was flung open. In strode Sherlock, hands already working to undo the scarf around his neck. He had whipped it off by the time he reached John. Eyes narrowed and alight with a pale fire, John had never seen him look so hungry. Seeing Sherlock like that, John felt desire instantly flare inside him, banishing the earlier feelings of frustration and disappointment.

There was no time for an awkward greeting. No verbal exchange of any kind seemed possible as Sherlock crossed the room with a few strides. In a moment, he had backed John against the wall, hands on either side of John's head. John could feel the rough impact of Sherlock's lips landing against the side of his mouth. Sherlock's momentum made it impossible to aim his kisses accurately, but no matter. John merely needed to turn his head a fraction and he was kissing him back, his tongue breaking the seam of Sherlock's lips open to slide into the wet, warm interior of his mouth. He grabbed at Sherlock, hands fisting into his coat, and for a few seconds there was nothing more essential than their kiss—a wordless communion of feelings all concentrated in the touch of their mouths.

John finally broke away to whisper, "There's a bed somewhere around here. Just a few feet away. It would be a waste if it goes unused, don't you think?"

He heard Sherlock's low chuckle. "A positive shame," he agreed, his voice a guttural purr.

John felt Sherlock's hands on his shoulders, ready to stir him away from the wall, but he held
himself back, his own hands landing on Sherlock's face.

"Wait," he said, "I want to look at you."

"Later, John. That can wait—"

"No. Now. I want to make sure you're not doing anything stupid," said John as he forced Sherlock to stillness.

"Such as what?"

"Such as starving yourself by refusing to feed," said John, his gaze raking over Sherlock's features. Sherlock smiled. "You need not worry, John," he said. "You did force me to address that problem very early on, or have you forgotten?"

After a quick examination, John seemed satisfied. "Now where's that bed?" he asked as he pulled Sherlock in for another hungry kiss.

They had not really known where it was until it was suddenly behind them. A burst of laughter as they landed awkwardly on the bed with arms and legs sprawled in various directions. Sherlock sat up briefly to shed his coat, his fingers working swiftly to unbutton his suit jacket, his underlying shirt.

How is this possible? Thought John as he watched him. How can I miss him so much in just a few days?

Sherlock's fingers stilled from their task as he turned to stare at John. "Is that what this is?" he asked. "Missing you?"

Of course, John had yet to get used to Sherlock being able to read his mind, and vice versa. He licked his lips as he looked at Sherlock. "Yes," he said.

"I thought I was ill and dying," complained Sherlock, disgusted. "It felt like a kind of hunger that could not be satisfied by feeding. A thirst that could not be quenched. It felt—"

"Like wanting something constantly," finished John, "and not being able to have it."

"Yes."

"Well. I have just the remedy for that," said John as he reached up to pull Sherlock back down.

"How do you want me, John?" asked Sherlock. "Tell me. I'm yours to command."

"Inside you," said John hoarsely against Sherlock's mouth. "I want to be inside you. Let me, Sherlock. Please."

A throaty chuckle. "Yours to command," Sherlock merely repeated as he brought his mouth down to trail on John's throat, on skin newly revealed as he slowly peeled John's shirt away.

John felt Sherlock deftly working to free him of his shoes, his belt. He felt fingers hooking on the waistband of his trousers, felt the slide of the heavy fabric down his thighs and legs before he kicked them off. This time Sherlock did not seem to be interested in prolonged teasing, and John knew better now than to stop him as he eased away his pants in a single movement, leaving him bare for the touch of Sherlock's fingers and mouth. John caught his breath and released it in a long, drawn-out sigh as he lifted a hand to tangle into Sherlock's curls, pressing his head down and
silently urging him on.

Yes. Oh yes. Just like that...

Pleasure coiled inside John, sharp and intense. He strained against Sherlock, fighting to delay the rush of delight building with his skilled ministrations. A moment more and he felt Sherlock suddenly withdraw completely from him. A whisper of clothing as Sherlock finished disrobing. Panting heavily by now, John lifted his head in time to see Sherlock take hold of him once again, the feel of his fingers cool and slick with lubricant as he prepared him. John shivered at the touch.

Sherlock merely nodded his head at John's unspoken questions. "We're in my mind palace, John," he said. "I can summon anything here with a single thought. In fact, as this is a dream, we can even skip the lubricant, but it seems your mind is still reluctant to disengage from the practical necessities that reality demands."

John shook his head, unable to suppress a smile at Sherlock's explanation. "Whatever's going to make this more comfortable for you," he said.

Sherlock smiled as he gave John a light squeeze, making him jump slightly. "Ever the considerate lover," he drawled.

John watched, heart pounding, as Sherlock straddled him and slowly lowered himself down on his throbbing erection.

Oh God, the feel of it. Hitching in a startled breath, John's hands came up to grip hard on Sherlock's hips as he felt his lover start to move slowly, experimentally, on top of him. Gradually they established a rhythm—loose, easy, rolling. And so very slow. He felt he could not get enough as the pleasure surged through him at the intimate contact and he began to thrust back at Sherlock.

Sherlock looked down at John, saw the expression on that beloved face, and felt something new and alarming stir in his chest—a hard, squeezing sensation around his heart.


He'd been in this position countless times before, had witnessed his partners in the throes of ecstasy as they neared physical orgasm, and he had felt almost nothing, or perhaps only mild interest as he would accord a moderately absorbing experiment. Just a brief burst of pleasure that served for orgasm, very quickly lost. He had never considered it important. Aside from being a game of control and dominance, what was important was that sex was a useful tool for Sherlock in getting what he wanted, and what he had always wanted was his food. He had never felt an answering response deep inside him with anyone the way he had with John, had never felt the need for it before. He had thought it was simply not possible for him to feel anything remotely like what human beings felt, but it seemed he was wrong.

All of this went through his mind in barely a second, and yet John seemed to sense his thoughts. Never breaking their connection, he suddenly rose to a sitting position, a hand on Sherlock's hip, the other cradling the small of his back.

He smiled at Sherlock: Come here, you strange, strange creature...

Sherlock stared at John, not sure he had heard his affectionate, teasing tone in his mind correctly. From the look in his vivid blue eyes though, it seemed John was serious. Sherlock began to shake his head: "You don't have to, John. This is for you. It doesn't matter to me."

John's smile turned into a grin. Shall I make it matter?
"John…!"

John had reversed their positions before Sherlock was done protesting, pinning him down on the bed as John tipped forward slightly to lean his weight in, enabling him to thrust deeper into his lover. He ran his fingers lingeringly on Sherlock's length, careful to keep his touch light but constant- the way Sherlock had shown him before. Sherlock could feel the first stirrings of pleasure winding through him. John's thrusts began to quicken, taking on an edge, and Sherlock knew that he was close.

Sherlock was never one to relinquish control easily, but John was different in the same way he was different in everything and from everyone else.

He knew he could trust John with his life.

He stared at John as his mind formed the words: "Harder, John. As hard as you want to."

*God, yes.*

Sherlock wound his legs tightly around John as he reached up a hand to caress the side of his lover's face, marveling at the way he was fighting to stay focused, a fierce light in his eyes, never breaking eye contact with Sherlock as their rhythm slipped away from them, leaving their movements in hectic disarray.

Breath coming in harsh gasps, John leaned down to claim Sherlock's mouth and that was when things really began to spin and hurdle out of control. Sherlock felt that strange, heady sensation encroaching to wipe his mind of all thought completely—as potent as a drug, and as addictive.

And all at once it was there.

Rapture.

Sherlock felt John's arms around him as the pleasure peaked, holding him close, holding him through the wild, breaking waves of their orgasm.

Deep within his mind, he could hear John: *Let go, I've got you, Sherlock. Just let go.*

He did. Wrapping his arms around John tightly, he took his lover deep into his body, and deeper into his mind.

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"So. Mind palace, you said this was?" said John as soon as they could get their breath back.

"A concrete interpretation of it, yes," said Sherlock, his chest rising and falling rapidly still, the feel of John's body partially draped over him a pleasant weight. "It's only supposed to be a memory technique to allow me to rapidly access information stored over the years, but this is a dream after all."

He made a vague gesture at the room. "My bedroom during my graduate school days in Oxford."

"I've dreamed of this before, days ago," said John. "I couldn't find you in this labyrinth."

"And I couldn't find you as well," replied Sherlock. "We will need to work on it, work on finding each other no matter where we may be. There is a way, like leaving a mental trail of breadcrumbs for each other to find. Do you wish to try it?"
John looked up at Sherlock. "Okay," he said. "I'm game."

"There is one more thing, John," said Sherlock. "I'm hoping we will not need it, but it might be useful in the long run. It's a bit intrusive, but do you trust me?"

John's answer was immediate: "Yes."

"It's called transference. Would you care to involve yourself in a little experiment?"

"What? Now?"

"Yes."

John slowly sat up. "All right," he said. "Tell me."

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It was as Mycroft had promised: with their Bond, transference was a relatively easy thing to accomplish, but the experience was a distressing one, and John was glad when they had finished.

"Let's hope we won't need it," he muttered, running a hand over his damp hair.

"Are you alright?" Sherlock inquired.

John blew air out noisily through his nose. "I will be," he said slowly.

"Will you let me use it? In case we need to?"

"Of course. It's just..." John trailed off with a sigh, shrugging. "It just feels weird."

"It's only for emergency purposes."

John nodded. "You think Jim Moriarty will create an emergency," he said.

"Yes."

It was then that John remembered he had something to tell Sherlock.

"Promise me something," he said.

"What is it?"

"Promise me you will do everything you can to get away from him," said John. "Even if you have to lie and steal and cheat and— God help us— kill."

"Yes."

"Even if you have to leave me behind."

Sherlock stared at John. "What do you mean, John?" he asked.

John looked back at Sherlock, his gaze perfectly calm. "I think I've already met him," he said.

Sherlock started to open his mouth, but he was not going to find out what John meant, as Mycroft chose that particular time to shake him awake.

"Get up," Sherlock heard Mycroft say roughly.
Emerging from sleep, Sherlock immediately knew that something was very wrong the moment he took in Mycroft's features as he loomed over him.

"What is it?" Sherlock demanded as he stared up at his brother. "Tell me!"

"It's John," said Mycroft after a short pause. "He's missing."

Author's Notes: I know, I know. Possession is getting so dark, and it's going to get darker still. For those of you who would want a break, I have written a short Sherlock one-shot (unrelated to Possession), called Bargain Sale. It's for a fic challenge, and is a romance/humor fic centered around John getting a pair of red pants and what those pants trigger in Sherlock. Please drop by the story if you like. Enjoy!
"It's John," said Mycroft. "He's missing."

Sherlock's hand was around his brother's collar so fast and with such force that Mycroft almost fell headlong onto Sherlock's bed as he was yanked in.

"You promised you'd protect him," hissed Sherlock, his face inches away from Mycroft, pale eyes ablaze with fury.

Mycroft stared at Sherlock, his voice level even though his hands betrayed a slight tremor as he said, "There were two men. They took him right outside Baker Street. They had a van waiting. It happened so fast—barely under a minute—that before my men could respond they had him inside the van and were already tearing down the street. There were no other witnesses."

Sherlock flung Mycroft away with an oath as he made to get up from the bed. It was still dark outside his bedroom windows. Not yet dawn.

Mycroft reached up a hand to straighten his collar before turning to Sherlock. "I'm sorry, Sherlock," he said.

"What good would that do now?" Sherlock shouted as he started pacing around the room.

"We spent hours trying to track the van down through the cctv cameras. Nothing. It means it hasn't left London. They could have hidden it in any number of locations—"

"Or switched cars in some garage and made their getaway," said Sherlock with a snarl. "If they've thought to take such precautions then there is reason to suspect that they also know about you, or at least know that someone is doing surveillance on John. Your men have not exactly been invisible when they were tailing me around Baker Street."

"At any rate, I doubt if they will harm John right now," said Mycroft. "He's their only connection to you, after all. They will need him to get to you."

Something in Mycroft's tone made Sherlock turn around, eyes wide with a sudden revelation. "You planned this, didn't you?" he said accusingly. "This is part of your scheme—using John as bait."

Mycroft gave him a weary glance. "Please do not tell me the thought that John might be taken hostage has not occurred to you," he said softly. "Rather than allow it to be a disastrous impediment, we can actually use it to our advantage."

"You bastard!" shouted Sherlock.

"I would not have resorted to it if I think John will be harmed. At any rate, it's not as if consent was not obtained," continued Mycroft, unperturbed. "John was aware of my plan, and had agreed to it."

Sherlock growled as he made to lunge at Mycroft, but Mycroft held his ground, fixing Sherlock with a stern stare. "He will come to no harm," he reiterated. "That is, not yet. We will need to move fast and resolve this situation tonight at the latest."

He watched as Sherlock tried to rein himself in, hands fixed on his hips. "What is your plan?" Sherlock finally ground out.
"What is yours?" Mycroft threw back at him.

"Dammit, Mycroft—"

Mycroft sighed and said, "Nothing too sophisticated— just a little electronic bug attached to the doctor's person to track down his whereabouts."

Sherlock stared at Mycroft expectantly.

"The bug is not working," declared Mycroft flatly. "It may have been discovered and destroyed, or it may have met with some other mishap when John was taken."

Sherlock made an exasperated noise, raking his hands through his hair as he continued his restless pacing.

"I realize there was a huge possibility that it will fail," said Mycroft, "which was why I made other arrangements. So what is your plan?"

"The missing pages of that witch's personal book of spells— the grimoire," said Sherlock.

"That's your plan?" asked Mycroft in disbelief. "To entice Moriarty out by trading those pages?"

"To lure him out," argued Sherlock. "I had intended to use myself as bait."

"And then what?"

"I have set up a trap. One that he will not be able to resist."

"But he's sensed that it's a trap and thought to use John as a possible collateral," finished Mycroft, shaking his head.

"He is still doubtful. We will need something convincing to lure him in, then everything will fall into place. Your alternative arrangements," said Sherlock curtly. "I take it that it has something to do with that filthy book as well. You haven't told me everything there is about it. You tore out those pages and yet you left that book behind when it would have made better sense to destroy the entire thing all those years ago. Why?"

Mycroft smiled approvingly. "All right. I never expected that it would become useful, but it seems I may be wrong. It is a gamble— a huge one— but given our tight situation right now, it just might be the only way out. And something about Moriarty's delayed appearance tells me that he has been doing his own fact-checking with that book. Everything points to it. Tell me, were you able to engage in transference with John?"

"Yes. We were resonating right before you decided to wake me, and we were able to try it out."

"Glad to hear you managed it at the last minute. It is going to be crucial. Listen carefully, then, little brother."

With his dream of Sherlock abruptly terminated, John slowly awoke to find himself lying on his side, on a cold, hard surface. Turning his head a fraction, he winced as his vision wobbled, so much so that he had to shut his eyes again. His mouth felt sandpaper-dry. Swallowing was painful, the sour taste of vomit briefly registering in his numbed and tired brain.

He must have made a sound, a soft moan, for somewhere close to him he heard a reply: "Wakey,
Wakey, Dr. Watson."

With great effort, he peeled his eyes open a fraction to find someone crouched beside him. "You were out longer than six hours, and I was beginning to worry. The Colonel is always a tad too heavy on his sedatives, despite my repeated warnings," said the soft voice, now hatefully familiar.

John licked his dry lips and whispered, "Water."

"Sure," replied the voice readily. "You very kindly offered me some in the clinic, so I think it's only fitting that I return the courtesy."

The voice murmured something he could not catch. John's vision was still swimming, but he could make out that he was on the floor, in a cell. Somewhere. The lights were dimmed.

Jim Moriarty bent down once again to whisper to him: "Aren't you going to ask why you're here, or is it too early for that? I'm just so excited, though. I can't help it."

John said nothing, merely squinted at the blurred face looming over him.

"But then, you already know why you're here, don't you?" Moriarty continued.

The water arrived, and John felt himself being hoisted up to take it. He drank in gulps, water dribbling down the front of his shirt— not really his. He had been stripped of his clothes and was wearing unfamiliar ones.

"Sorry for the costume change," said Moriarty as he was lowered back onto the floor. "We needed to make sure you're not carrying anything...traceable."

John still said nothing, merely closed his eyes as he started taking deep breaths.

Moriarty gave out a theatrical sigh. "I'll leave you for a few hours more to wash that sedative out of your system, Doc. I'll need you to be fully alert and conscious. Then, we are going to have so much fun playing cat and mouse with a certain vampire. Always a favorite game of mine."

The sound of footsteps receding. The metallic sound of his cage door closing. If John were not drugged, then perhaps this would be the right time to start panicking.

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Thinking back, John should have known when he first laid eyes on Richard Brook that something was very wrong with the man. Well, of course he had known. But he had not really known.

Obviously, the guy— an out-of-work actor, flamboyantly gay and riddled with hate and anger management issues— had been unstable. Since he had walked into his office, John had seen all of that in a second. What he had not seen was that it had all been an elaborate act. That had been much harder to deduce because a huge part of the act had been wrapped around a layer of truth.

It had been clear that Richard Brook, a slight young man with hair dyed an acid blond (with sculpted eyebrows to match), shabbily dressed with a portion of his bright green underwear peeping out from his pants, was a deeply angry and bitter man. His anger had been real, although John had no way of knowing at the time that he was at the center of it. He had never met the man before in his life, after all.

He had sat across John for half an hour and gave vent to his many frustrations stemming from his state of unemployment, of talent wasted on ignorant, unappreciative entities who deigned to call
themselves critics. But the underlying cause of his need to consult a psychiatrist had been his lover — his ungrateful lover who had run off with another bloke, taking with him something that was rightfully his. What it was he had refused to elaborate.

He had been obsessed with this lover, and the man who had supplanted him in his lover's affections. He had seen his rival and could not imagine what it had been about him to drive his lover away from him and into the man's arms. And to flaunt their new relationship in his face! How dared they! He had been moved to the point that he had started to wish both men dead, but first he had to have his revenge. He had to even things up a bit, otherwise he had thought he would not be able to live with it. And that had been the reason why he had come to see a doctor, at last, because he had thought he was going to do something very naughty, something really bad — he wasn't sure what he was capable of under the circumstances — so help him, oh please Doctor Watson, help him!

The last bit of this performance — and John could not find a better term to describe it as anything but that — had been delivered in an increasingly hysterical tone that had made the hair on John's nape stand up on end. There had been something in the entire episode that John had found extremely repulsive, something gloating and hateful and filled with a deeper, ominous meaning that he had no idea of.

"Richard, calm down. Just calm down," John had said, attempting to soothe him when all he had wanted to do was to turn the man away in disgust. "You've worked yourself up into a frenzy, and we need you to calm down now."

"Oh, Dr. Watson," Richard Brook had moaned, hands on his head as he shook it slowly from side to side. "Help me, help me, help me…"

"I'm going to ring Mrs. Hudson for some water," John had said quietly but firmly. "I've got a pill that will help—"

"Pills again!" Richard had screamed, suddenly launching to his feet. "I've had enough of those! Can't you think of something better?"

John had stared at the man in disbelief. He had wanted to say that that was what doctors did — give medication — but before he could utter a word, Richard had continued with his rant: "Is that all you can think to offer, Dr. Watson? God! This is so lame. I should have known better than to come to you. But people said you were good, so I came. Now I see you're just…ordinary."

He had started shaking his head again in a disappointed manner.

"Richard—"

"Forget it," Richard had cried, waving an arm at John with an "away" gesture. "Just…forget I ever came, Dr. Watson."

With that, he had gone, slamming the office door loudly behind him.

"Richard, wait!" John had moved to follow him out of the office, past a startled Mrs. Hudson and some patients waiting their turn in the hall outside, but Richard Brook had made a run for it, and had disappeared down the stairs before John could do anything else.

Apart from Sherlock's antics, it had been the most bizarre thing to happen to him in years. It would have been quite funny indeed had he not detected real menace in the man.

He had been afraid that such a character could pose a threat to the streets of London and, in the
end, he had made Mrs. Hudson give the police a cursory call to register the incident and the man, but in the absence of any actual wrongdoing, he had doubted whether it would come to anything.

It had only been sometime late that evening, as he stepped out of the clinic, that he had thought about calling Mycroft. Mycroft had told John to call him if he noticed anything odd or out of place, and this incident had certainly rung some alarm bells in his mind.

Mycroft had given him his number, but had cautioned him against using his mobile to lodge the call. In fact, he had made John memorize his number so that he would not leave a trace of it anywhere except in his mind.

John had started walking down Baker Street in search of a phone booth when he had heard a familiar voice behind him say: "Dr. Watson?"

He had whirled around, heart pounding, to find Richard Brook standing just a few feet behind him.

"Richard," he had said, arms raised defensively in front of him.

"I'm sorry if I scared you earlier, Dr. Watson," Richard had said as he took a few hesitant steps toward John. John had found himself slowly backing away from him.

"Don't come any closer, Richard," John had warned.

Richard had smiled. Such an ambivalent smile. "You're scared of me, aren't you?" he had said softly as he took another step forward, forcing John farther back. "I don't mean to. Scare you, I mean."

"We can talk right here," John had said. "Just stop and we can talk all you want. Right here."


John had not heard anything, merely felt a sting and numbness blossoming on his right arm. He had only time to register a curious-looking dart sticking out of his coat sleeve before he collapsed on his knees on the sidewalk, his entire world going suddenly gray and unsteady. He had felt his body slowly folding over, felt his head hitting the floor of the sidewalk with a dull thud.

Even then he had not yet lost consciousness, could still see things around him even as his body had started to shut down. He had stopped beside a dark van parked just a few paces away in the street, and now the side door of this van had slid open. Somebody had come out to scoop him up and toss him into the vehicle as though he weighed no more than a child, and before darkness had finally claimed him, he had heard somebody whisper very close to his ear, quite gleefully, "Gotcha."

A few hours later and John was able to prop himself up against the wall of his cell. His legs still felt very heavy, but that was just the last of the sedative going through him. With the last of the sedative also went the last of the stupor holding off impending fear and panic.

John could feel fear brushing at his heart, a very different one from the kind he felt when he was dealing with Sherlock. This one threatened to overwhelm him completely. So he leaned against the wall and did a mental exercise.

79864712. 79864712. 79864712…

Repetition of the number gave him some balance of mind. It was Mycroft's number, tucked deep
inside his mind. It helped to imagine that he was calling that emergency number, like casting out an S.O.S. signal, because it also happened to be the code that he had agreed upon with Sherlock as they practiced that mind technique that would enable Sherlock to trace him mentally. The more he repeated it in his mind, the more likely Sherlock was going to hear it, even if he were miles away. His mental trail of breadcrumbs in the deep, dark, dense forest of terror closing in on him. Would it work beyond the realm of sleep and dreams? Would Sherlock be able to pick up on it?

No time to think about that now. Somebody was coming. In another moment, Jim Moriarty appeared again before his cell.

"Dark, isn't it?" he said, looking around the cell and sniffing disdainfully. "I would have wanted the lights on, but we're in a warehouse, and it's still dark out."

Moriarty sat himself down on a folding chair laid out for him. "By the way, we found this in your clothes," he said, holding up a small, coin-sized disc.

John said nothing, merely repeated 79864712 in his mind.

"So some obscure government office is interested in my activities, is it?" he said, examining the deactivated bug in his hand with distaste. "They think I pose some sort of threat to the country. Boring. We'll be transcending such earthly concerns before long. Eternity is just a few steps away."

79864712.

Jim Moriarty stared into the cell at the man sitting with his back resting on the wall. A tired-looking, emotionally wrung-out doctor fast approaching middle age, with nothing about him that would have made anyone look at him twice in the street. Certainly nothing astounding when it came to looks and manners. Nothing to make a vampire see him as anything but food.

So why had he been chosen?

"What did he see in you, John Watson?" Jim found himself asking. "As far as I can see, there must be a million of your ilk walking around on this planet. What makes you so special? What made him do what he did to you in that restaurant in Soho?"

He felt satisfaction surge through him as he saw a brief flare of surprise in the doctor's eyes.

"Oh yes," he said conversationally, his tone still light. "That was how we picked up on you…and him. That first public display of affection. Well, maybe we were aware of you well before that. But anyway, that little scene in the restaurant was so interesting that I had a little reconnaissance team break into your apartment a few days later to install a teeny bit of spyware while you were out working. Want to see some home videos?"

79864712.

Jim took out his mobile and called up a short video. A crude, grainy, slightly off-center shot of John's living room, bathed in lamplight, of John standing a few feet away from a familiar, black-clad figure. John watched himself on the tiny video as he closed the distance and stepped up to Sherlock, watched as Sherlock put up a pale hand hesitantly in the air before he brought it down to cradle John's cheek.

"Thank God you guys didn't decide to do it in the living room," said Jim, rolling his eyes, a disgusted note creeping into his voice. "That would have left scars in my psyche a mile wide."

He grinned as he saw John's lips thin out in rage. "That touched you, didn't it?" he said, pleased.
"Oh, judging from the ensuing noises in the bedroom, I can tell what a wild ride it was. Absolutely riveting. How dare you though?"

John stared as Jim hissed out the last few words as fury took over.

"How dare you claim him," continued Jim, voice rising with each word he uttered, "when he belongs to me!"

_Come on, Sherlock. 79864712…_

Silence for a time as Jim Moriarty gathered himself in. " Anyway, I will see to it that you make your reparations properly," he said, the smile back on his face.

But John was not listening anymore. He was turning inward, relief washing through him in cleansing waves as he finally heard a voice deep within his mind: _John_.

_Took you long enough, Sherlock…_

_Are you alright, John?_

Yes. Don't worry about me.

"I might have made a mistake with my initial approach to our special little friend," Jim was saying. "I will need you to set it straight with him."

He's mad as a Hatter…

_I know, John. Will you let me talk to him?_

What? You want to do that transfer thing now?

_Transference, John. It's called transference._

Whatever the fuck it's called. Just promise me you will send this batshit-crazy bastard to hell when you're done with him. He knows about us. Lie your arse off about me if you have to, just do what you have to do.

A smile in Sherlock's voice: _That's what I love about my John…_

"But first we will need to find him and lure him out," Jim continued. "I'll need to speak with him face to face. You will accomplish that for me."

"You need not bother using John to look for me," he heard the doctor drawl from across the bars of his cell.

Jim Moriarty stared in disbelief as John Watson sat up straighter against the wall, draping an elbow casually over one raised knee. John's blue eyes stared back at him with a startling intensity from across the cage.

"You wanted to say something to me." John's voice was suddenly very deep and cold, the accent clipped. "Well, here I am."

_Author's Notes: A grimoire is supposedly a witch's personal book of spells and incantations. It will play a larger role in succeeding chapters._
Chapter 32

Mycroft sat on the armchair, his hands resting on the wooden handle of the umbrella that he held before him, and stared at Sherlock as he lay on the sofa a few feet away. Quietly, he watched as Sherlock slowly sank into a trance, the pale hands held together under his chin as if in prayer gradually relaxing to settle on his chest.

Mycroft did not utter a word. Silence was crucial. It was essential that Sherlock maintain his concentration as he started searching for John deep in his mind. Even with their Bond, it was no easy task. It was a bit like trawling the floor of an entire ocean to look for a mollusk shell. An hour passed. Two hours. Outside the windows, the world was gradually lightening.

Mycroft turned his attention to his umbrella and thought irrelevantly that it was a shame that walking sticks had run out of fashion. He loved walking sticks and canes, had collected them for as long as he could remember— collected and discarded them at the end of every life he had lived so far. He was good at discarding things and people. It would not do to become too attached to anything or anyone. It was almost always a liability in the long run.

Take for example Thomas Moriarty, the first Earl of Westwood. All of this present mischief had stemmed from the journal of his one-time friend and colleague. They had been friends for nearly twenty years, had known each other so well and had kept each other's secrets at a time when certain secrets could mean life or death.

All except one.

Although Mycroft never told him, Thomas had correctly guessed at what he was. Thomas had been brilliant that way, and twenty years of being friends was a long time- Mycroft's first mistake. No matter how careful Mycroft had been, there must have been situations that had given Thomas moments of epiphany about his friend's secret. Certainly, Mycroft's appearance had not been the giveaway. By necessity, he and his kind were masters of disguise. He had been fastidious with the details of his looks and demeanor, intended to reflect a man aging gracefully into his position as a powerful Tudor lord as the years went by. Perhaps Thomas had caught him at a moment of weakness— a feeding session behind closed doors on one of the young men who had served as his pages? He would never know how his friend had become so convinced of his vampirism, and he had only himself to blame for not being able to put a fast and decisive end to his friend's speculations. He had been young and inexperienced, had loved Thomas to the point that he had contemplated Bonding with him early into their friendship.

But what Thomas had wanted was impossible. Human beings could never be turned into vampires. There was simply no such thing, yet Mycroft could not tell him that outright without risking the exposure of his true self. Even if he had been able to tell him, Mycroft had doubted if Thomas would have believed him.

So Thomas Moriarty had been deaf to his friend's denials, his explanations and exhortations to logic. He had become increasingly vocal with his demands to be turned. He had finally resorted to threats and accusations, clever traps to manipulate Mycroft into showing his hand. It had become an unbearable and dangerous situation.

Elizabeth I's reign had gone down in history as England's Golden Age, but Mycroft had known first-hand the terrible legacy that had been needed to ensure the nation's security against threats from both internal and external sources. There had been suspicion and spies everywhere, especially in the complex court circles that Mycroft and Thomas had moved in. Once-favored courtiers had
met death at lesser charges than what Moriarty had thrown at him. His superior, Sir Francis Walsingham, the Queen's spymaster and known throughout history for his ruthless single-mindedness in extracting confessions real and imagined, had even launched an investigation into Mycroft's affairs and miraculously had found nothing incriminating. Mycroft had been very careful, at least. Nevertheless, he had barely escaped with his life. He had learned a very valuable life lesson then, a belief burned into his heart that he would carry with him for the rest of his life: nothing made for a deadlier enemy than a former friend. From then on, he would just have to trust no one.

Thomas had always been unstable, prone to rages and sulks one moment and contrite sweetness the next. During those days, such mental imbalance could very well have been thought of as a form of demonic possession. It had not been a hard task for Mycroft to turn the tables against him. But once again, sentiment had entered to stop Mycroft's hand from delivering the final blow. That and the fact that the Moriartys still exerted formidable clout in Elizabethan England. Instead of having him put to death, he had had his friend banished to live the rest of his life alone, sealed in a suite of rooms in his sprawling estate in Lincolnshire, where total madness and death would finally claim him in a few years.

But Thomas Moriarty's madness had not come soon enough. Five hundred years later, something of his friend's malevolent will still had the power to reach out with a taloned claw to touch Mycroft and his only remaining family by means of the written word, so full of fatal potential in the hands of the present Earl of Westwood.

Mycroft frowned.

The written word—an idea encased in a string of alphabets and syllables. Such incredible power lay behind it. Seemingly fragile as the paper that bound it, but timeless and immortal so long as it found a home in a human being's head. It was difficult to fight and vanquish an idea, so difficult to kill it off once its seeds were planted in the fertile soil of one's mind. And so long as it was passed down from one generation to another, it would never die. The ultimate example of eternal life that is denied even to vampires.

Sherlock had not moved from his supine position on the couch. Mycroft slowly got up and quietly walked over to a bureau attached to Sherlock's bookshelves. He pulled out the journal that Sherlock had taken from John.

He had seen Sherlock cradle the thing as though it were an infant in his hands. He could see that it would be difficult to convince him to destroy it when the time came. Mycroft eyed it as though it were an asp before gingerly lifting the cover open. A few pages into the book and Mycroft shut it hurriedly, before the words could really sink in to make an indelible impression on him.

*Love.*

Everywhere in the passages of that book.

It was all there in John's words. The man did not need to make a formal declaration to make his feelings for Sherlock any clearer. Mycroft was acquainted with the emotion enough to know that it could hurt as no betrayal could, especially when it died.

Mycroft closed his eyes at the remembered pain of past lives deep inside him.

He had loved Thomas Moriarty once.

And Anthea. So very different from Thomas.
Sherlock's John is so much like you, my dearest. I fear the moment he will lose him, as surely as I lost you...

From the couch came a groan and a sudden thrashing of limbs, effectively breaking into Mycroft's thoughts. He dropped the journal back into the drawer and turned just in time to see Sherlock gasping as he rose to sit up, his hands on his mouth and his eyes wide open.

"Easy," said Mycroft as he made his way over to the couch. "Take deep breaths. John."

Mycroft watched as his brother's form gradually subsided into a miserable, trembling huddle on the couch, a hand still plastered over his mouth as he took in deep breaths. Transference was never easy, and the level of its invasiveness must be horrendous to human beings.

Mycroft took a glass of water from the table and handed it to the man in front of him. "Drink," he instructed. "It will help."

Mycroft sat down beside the figure on the couch and watched him drink the entire glass of water down thirstily. "Are you alright, John?" he finally asked. "You have not been ill-treated?"

Sherlock's head shook. "I was going to call you last night," said Sherlock's voice, sounding oddly unlike him with the tone and inflection of another man. "But he came along."

"I know. I'm sorry I couldn't reach you in time."

Sherlock turned to him, a crease on his brows marking the man inside him at the moment. "What is Sherlock going to do?"

"My dear John, we are at war right now," said Mycroft. "Sherlock is borrowing your body for the time being to...negotiate the rules of engagement with the enemy."

"If things go bad, you must promise me that you will do everything to get Sherlock out of Moriarty's clutches. Leave me behind if you must. He must not get Sherlock."

Mycroft smiled and shook his head. "So selfless and courageous, even now," he murmured. "Are you really incapable of being afraid for yourself for just one moment, John?"

Sherlock's eyebrows rose as his mouth thinned in outrage. "You think I'm not scared?" The words came out as a hiss. "I'm in the hands of bloody ritual murderers and I am fucking terrified! But Moriarty is obsessed with Sherlock. He went through all that trouble just to check me out and I never saw him coming until it was too late. I mean, I saw his picture in your file and yet I never made the connection at all when he came to see me, and it's not just because he dyed his hair. The bloke is a chameleon. A monster. He's insanely brilliant, and he'll stop at nothing to get to Sherlock. He's going to destroy him. We can't let him!"

"Yes, we can't," said Mycroft. "Just as Sherlock and I can't let him destroy you. Now tell me where you are being kept."

"In a warehouse. Huge, probably empty or abandoned, to judge from the echoing quality that sounds generated. It's still dark, Moriarty said they can't risk turning on the lights. Temporary, makeshift cage. I'm figuring I won't be held there for long."
"No, I don't think you will," agreed Mycroft. "How many are they?"

"I can't say for sure. Definitely two, at least. I was taken down with some sort of sedative dart."

Mycroft nodded. "Moran."

"Who?"

"His accomplice. Tell me, John, did Moriarty mention anything else?"

"Apart from insults about how common I am, not much." A pause. Then, suddenly remembering, he said furiously: "He fucking rigged my apartment with spyware. He has videos of me and Sherlock in his mobile phone."

Mycroft turned to stare at his brother's face sharply. "Did he—?"

It was the first time he ever saw Sherlock blush. "No, not that video! At least I hope not. Jesus! But definitely our conversations in the living room before…" Here, Sherlock shifted uncomfortably before he mumbled, "…you know."

Mycroft took a breath, let it out slowly. The cleanup was going to be far more complicated than he thought. It was useless to feel anger now, so he may as well not try. But he was going to take intense pleasure in disbanding Jim Moriarty's little cult. The man himself he will leave to Sherlock to do as he pleased.

John-in-Sherlock stared at him with an expression that Mycroft had never seen before on his brother's face. "Tell me what's going on."

"It may not be safe," said Mycroft, shaking his head. "We're not out of the woods yet. The less you know about the plan, the better."

He felt a pale hand close in to grip his collar once more. "My life is on the line here. I deserve to know at least a little."

Mycroft sighed. "The plan is being carried out even as we speak. It is mainly Sherlock's. I merely provided him with an opening to carry it out."

"Moriarty said he may have made a mistake with his initial approach to Sherlock. What does that mean?"

"Did he say that?" asked Mycroft, pleased. "Then it means our plan may actually have a chance of succeeding."

"You mean your trap?"

"Yes. You see, John, this little spider likes to do some research before he hatches his plans. An admirable trait. That is the reason why he's been so quiet all this time. I'm sure he's been on to Sherlock the moment he started therapy with you at Baker Street, just as I have been aware of Sherlock's movements from the start. The reason why he had delayed making his appearance was because he had been looking for this book and checking its authenticity. He can check it all he wants, what he will not be able to find out is that the book is, shall we say, booby-trapped."

"Booby-trapped how?"

"Do you know what a **grimoire** is, John?"
"No."

"It is a witch's personal book to store his or her spells and incantations. A hodgepodge of devil worship manual, recipe book and personal journal all combined into one. Jim Moriarty just got his hands on one such book—a book that finally has something concrete jotted down in its pages on how to turn oneself into a vampire."

"But you got there before him."

Mycroft smiled. "Very good, John. Hundreds of years before him, to be exact. When I tracked down that grimoire, just a few years after its original owner was burned at the stake, it made me so angry to see how he had bestialized himself for something as worthless as witchcraft. Perfectly hideous man. He had recipes for black magic that required parts taken from murdered babes—the stuff of Shakespearian nightmares. I tore out certain pages—the most offensive ones, but then I realized that the journal still had some blank pages left over. I admit, it started out as a prank. I was young once, after all. Never did I realize it would bear fruit someday."

John wasn't sure what Mycroft was getting it. "So what did you do?"

"I vandalized it," Mycroft replied with a cold smile. "In short, the author of all those details in that book on how to turn into a vampire...is me."

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It was very hard to surprise Jim Moriarty. In this case it only took a moment for him to recover as he gazed into the cell at the being who had taken over John Watson.

"Oh," he breathed a long breath of delight. "Oohh..."

Grinning, he took hold of the bars of the cage before him. "It's you," he said. "I wasn't expecting to see you so soon. That's a neat little trick. You should show me how you did it sometime."

The vampire said nothing, merely quirked a corner of John's mouth up as he silently regarded Moriarty.

"You know you really caused me a spot of bother when you ran off like that months ago. And to call the coppers in! Was that you as well?" said Jim, conversationally. "Before the autumnal equinox, I had already called in all the bigwigs in my coven. At my word, they came pouring in from all over the world—America, Asia, even as far away as Africa. Only to find you missing in action."

"Sorry to have spoiled your party," the vampire drawled lazily. "I've never been one for crowds."

"I own you!" yelled Moriarty through the bars suddenly. "You will do as I please. Don't you dare humiliate me like that ever again!"

"Or else what?" The tone was bored.

"Or else I'll burn you," said Moriarty, his dark eyes wide and round with fury. "I'll burn the heart out of you. And then I'm going to eat it."

"I've been reliably informed that I don't have one," said the vampire coldly.
"We both know that's not true." Moriarty stared meaningfully not at the vampire, but at the man before him.

Sherlock-in-John shook his head as he laughed gently. "This is the kind of attitude that is going to get you nowhere, and you know it."

"Oh?"

"Such arrogance for a mere human being desperately wanting to be turned. Such a need to be in control and to dominate, when your rightful place is down on your knees in front of me as you call me master."

Moriarty said nothing, merely widened his smile as he stared at the vampire behind the bars in reluctant fascination.

"You nearly squandered your chance for eternal life the last time when you proposed to cut me up and eat my heart out," said the vampire. "That is not the way to become one of us."

"What is the right way, then?"

"I think you already know what the right way is."

"Perhaps. But I want you to tell me."

The vampire scoffed. "To prove to you that I'm not bluffing?"

"To prove to me that it's really possible!"

"The most effective way of hiding a secret," said the vampire slowly, "is to hide the secret in plain sight. It is right out there in all the legends concerning us."

"You mean vampire stories? All those fairy tales?"

"All fairy tales stem from a miniscule grain of truth, once upon a time." The vampire's gaze never wavered as he stared at Jim Moriarty. "The details of these so-called fairy tales in describing our ways and habits have to come from somewhere. For example, our quaint tradition of seeking our victims' consent before we take their blood. It is absolutely vital in our case that we obtain permission, never mind how it is achieved. Our victims' sanction binds them to us, you see. I will tell you now that the consent goes both ways. Before you force me into turning you, allow me to tell you that without my consent it will be quite useless to even try."

"So, you're saying...?" Jim asked, eyebrows arching.

"Isn't it obvious?" said the vampire. "You will have to court me for my consent to turn you."

Silence for several minutes as they stared at each other through the bars of the cage.

"So you see your conundrum," continued the vampire at last. "After your initial, disastrous overtures to me, we really have to wonder how you're going to win me back. If at all."

"I don't believe you," said Jim softly. "I don't believe a word you're saying."
"Don't you?" said the vampire in a low voice. "I was human once, just like you. El Brujo, they called me. With good reason. I managed to find myself a lover who made me into what I am now. I practically seduced him into it. Those foolish Inquisitors tried to burn me at the stake. Too late by then, as I've already taken enough of my lover's blood to make the process of turning an irreversible one. Oh, yes. The turning process is a gradual one. Treat it with undue haste, or take in more vampire blood than is necessary at any single time, and you shall not survive the experience. You will need to take our blood at regular intervals before you turn completely into one of us."

"You managed to survive burning at the stake?" Moriarty could not hide the incredulous eagerness in his voice.

"I dodged it altogether," said the vampire with a smile. "And I disappeared."

"And were you in the process of turning John Watson as well? He's your lover, isn't he?" The subtle change in Moriarty's tone was all Sherlock needed to know that he was stepping onto treacherous and unpredictable territory, like a minefield.

Cautiously now...

"There aren't many of us. We practice…birth control, of a kind. There are men whom we choose to include into our secret society— our Brotherhood, if you will," replied the vampire. "And then there are men whom we choose to retain as our lifelong servants. You know the concept about how vampires have human caretakers to see to their every worldly need. It's all true. How else can we manage our affairs especially at this day and age? We have a privileged army of bankers, lawyers and doctors to manage unimaginable wealth accumulated over centuries, and to take care of us. All totally loyal, and all bound to the utmost secrecy.

"We are looking for tigers among lambs— men who possess that perfect combination of ruthlessness and iron will that marks a prince among peasants. Needless to say, John Watson does not have what it takes to be turned, but as my servant he serves my needs beautifully. Right now you are being tested as to whether or not you are worthy to join an elite circle of immortals. I suggest you do not fail your test outright by harming my servant in any way."

"This is too good to be true," murmured Jim, shaking his head. "All of it. It fits too perfectly. I don't —"

"What further proof do you need other than the fact that I possess John Watson, body and soul?"

Jim Moriarty watched, transfixed, as the vampire laid a hand over Dr. Watson's heart.

"This man is mine." John's tone was as dark as sin as the creature that inhabited him stared at Moriarty from under John's blond brows. "And you will have to make me yours if you wish to become one of us, to possess powers beyond your imaginings."

Looking at his face, it was clear to Sherlock that Jim Moriarty was now vacillating between wild hope and dark, suspicious doubt.

Time to press his suit home.

"Consider this my first summons," said the vampire in an imperious tone. "Midnight tonight. The house in Oxford. I think you already know which one it is. Return my servant to me, and come and play."

And with that the vampire was gone, leaving John Watson to collapse in a heap inside the makeshift cell.
Author's Notes: Elizabeth I (1533-1603) was queen regnant of England and Ireland from 1558 until her death. She was the last of the Tudor monarchs.
Long after Sherlock had transferred out of him, and long after the dizziness and nausea brought on by transference had passed, John continued to lie on the floor, feigning unconsciousness. Cold and hard it may be, but John welcomed the reassuring contact of the rough cement on his body. He desperately needed something to hold on to. He needed to curl up into a protective, fetal position, just as his mind was urgently rounding up on itself, fighting back the panic and fear.

Through slitted eyes, he could see Jim Moriarty hovering by the bars of the cell as he excitedly got his phone out. John closed his eyes and willed his tense muscles to relax, appearing entirely drained and dead to the world. After a moment, he heard Moriarty walk away from his cage, already busy with plans as he called someone from his mobile phone.

"It's me. I need your people to get ready. I want your team settling in the perimeters of the Oxford house no later than ten tonight. Continue to keep an eye on that house. Guard it well..."

Silence after a while.

"John." Inside his head.

*Sherlock.*

"Hold on, John. Just a few hours more. Everything will end one way or the other tonight."

*Christ, Sherlock, why don't you just run for it...*

"Not when he's got you. And I will not be forced to flee like a fox before hounds. We can't just let this man go. He knows too much."

*He's calling somebody, about securing a house in Oxford.*

"I know."

*That's your house, isn't it?*

"My former dwelling place, which I periodically visit just to give the impression that I'm still living in it. Mycroft got me a new place to stay after coming away from London. It's conveniently situated just a few blocks away."

*Oh.*

"You're getting the picture now, aren't you? Clever isn't it?"

*Yes. Sherlock...*

"Yes?"

*If anything should ever happen to me, promise me you won't grieve too long.*

"Don't say that, John."

*It's normal to grieve. Just not too long. Don't grieve like Mycroft. It's not...healthy.*

"Stop it."
There are ways to deal with grief. You may not be familiar with it, but it…

"Stop it right now! I'm not listening to this."

I just want you to know I've got no regrets. No regrets.

"John…"

I love you.

"John, I said stop it. I am going to see you tonight, alive. Right now though I have to wake up, see to some preparations."

Okay. Later then.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Sherlock came to on the sofa to find his body draped over it in a sitting position instead of lying down. Mycroft was seated beside him, staring at him intently.

"How did it go?" Mycroft asked, but Sherlock was not listening to him.

Sherlock's voice was trembling with rage as he said, "He's frightened, Mycroft. He's afraid. My John, afraid!"

"Anyone with a properly functioning nervous system would be," said Mycroft in a mild tone. "And he's a psychiatrist. He knows a dangerous human deviant when he sees one."

Sherlock got up from the sofa a bit unsteadily and, instead of pacing, merely stood with his hands on his hips. He clamped his lips hard together and breathed deeply, shaking his head all the while.

Mycroft waited patiently for him to calm down, then said, "Have you told Moriarty then?"

"Yes, midnight tonight."

"Good. My men will be ready."

Sherlock turned to Mycroft. "I trust that you will not fail us this time," he said coldly.

"You have my word. Once is more than enough."

"The battlefield is set then. That empty house—"

"No," said Mycroft. "Anybody with half our sense will know it's not the house."

"Don't say it," warned Sherlock in a harsh voice as he glared at his brother. "I've already downplayed John's importance to me so that he won't be harmed. I've tried my best to strike a balance—he's not entirely relevant, but not expendable either. Anything more or less than that will set that madman off against John. What more can I do? Just don't say it—"

But Mycroft was talking at the same time, and their words crossed each other out: "It's John. The battlefield is going to be John. We know it, he knows it."

Sherlock looked away, lips curling inward into his mouth as he swore loudly.
Mycroft sighed and said, "Your refusal to acknowledge it will not make it go away. Frankly, I am astonished at you. I take it that is one of John's traits that you've managed to imbibe after you have Bonded with him? Obstinate denial in the face of certain reality?"

Before Sherlock could say anything, Mycroft's phone sounded an incoming text. Mycroft lifted a brow as he read the short report from one of his people. "Somebody's come to check the house," he said.

"How many?"

"One, so far. Just checking out the place and walking on."

"And your men?"

"Three already in position."

"I will need to feed before the day is out," said Sherlock as he walked away to his bedroom to dress. "He won't be using that variable against me, at least."

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

John found that it was hard to remain on the floor, pretending to be unconscious, when every nerve fiber within him was screaming to be let up, to know what was going on around him.

It was hard, just lying there, immobile, when a figure squatted on his haunches just outside the bars, staring at him for a time before saying, "You can stop hugging the floor. I know you're awake."

John opened his eyes slowly to find himself staring at the man dressed in a white shirt and dark military fatigue pants. The man stared back, his gaze dark and shuttered.

John took one look at him and descriptions of all sorts started filling his head. He had treated military personnel for a good part of his career, and he knew a damaged soldier when he saw one. This one went way beyond damaged though. John had only to take a look at him to know that he had not just killed people, he had taken considerable pleasure in doing so.

The silence was unnerving. The man finally broke it by saying, "So you're the vampire's servant, is that it? His human caretaker? That's a lot of horseshit. Do you know what you really are?"

John stared at him and obstinately stayed silent.

"You are a traitor, is what you are," said the man softly. "A fucking traitor to your own race. You'd choose that sort of vermin over your own kind and let him carry on preying on people to satisfy his filthy need for blood. I'd say tying you up and tethering you out there like a goat to lure the tiger in is too good for you."

Silence once again. The man seemed to be waiting for some sort of response from John. Baiting him.

So John gave him one. "Fuck you," he said in a low but clear voice.

John felt a small surge of satisfaction as he saw the man's lips tighten in anger. Before the man could say anything, a soft chortling came from behind him and Moriarty materialized from the
dark shadows of the warehouse to say, "Well, he's got balls. You've got to give him that at least, Seb. Don't you have some things to take care of, preparations to see to for tonight?"

Jim Moriarty watched as the military man turned abruptly and stalked away, then brought his gaze back into the cell as John slowly sat up.

"That's the Colonel for you," said Jim, lowering his voice in a confidential whisper. "He's a pretty handy guy, takes care of all the heavy and unpleasant stuff for me. Worth every penny I pay him, too. But so limited in his vision and hopelessly common in his perceptions. He just can't seem to grasp the magnitude of the situation, you see. Tigers! Tigers are boring. We're not just after a tiger here."

He sat himself down on the folding chair nearby and said, "Do you know what our vampire really is?"

John stared at him and said nothing.

"He's a unicorn," said Jim, eyes shining. "Something rare and magical, like a creature from a fairy tale. I love fairy tales, don't you? They're so fantastic and otherworldly. He did say all fairy tales stem from a little grain of truth, and I am inclined to believe him. And you, Doctor Watson, are the perfect bait for a unicorn. You sneer! You don't believe me? Legends have it that a unicorn is strong and vicious enough to impale ten elephants on its horn at any single time, and yet it will stop to lay its head down on the lap of a virgin. Well, of course, you're not literally a virgin but you did manage to stop him in his tracks just the same. Stopped him in his tracks to lie down with you and briefly forget the peasants with the torches in the background. How did you do it, John Watson?"

John swallowed, still said nothing. Jim Moriarty continued to stare at him with those dark, obsidian eyes before saying, "At any rate, you will do it again. Halt the unicorn in his tracks. Tonight. Have some lunch, John. It's going to be a long day for us."

So it was already noon, or early afternoon. It was hard to tell, as his watch had been taken away from him and the warehouse was shrouded in perpetual darkness. Absolute silence for the time being.

John sat with his back to the wall, arms wrapped around his knees, breathing slowly and letting the minutes creep by.

In situations like this, there was a particular form of mental exercise that he had repeatedly taught his soldier patients: find a safe, warm place within your mind and shut yourself inside it. Now that he was at the other, receiving end of that counsel, he found that it was actually crap advice, and definitely easier said than done. Still, he tried.

He thought about his patients. He thought about his family. About Harry. Most of all though, he thought about Sherlock. Of the first time he had ever laid eyes on him. The way Sherlock had entered his office amid shafts of golden afternoon sunlight. Where had those legends gotten the notion that sunlight could kill vampires and turn them into a pile of ash? If anything, the light had only made him appear more solid and served to accentuate the darkness of Sherlock's curls, the paleness of his skin, his eyes.

Those pale eyes the color of a still, pure lake. Eyes that could pierce like a spear or caress like a
soft, loving hand.

John remembered the last time they had made love, in the dream they had woven together just that morning. The feel of his lover beneath him as he stroked into him. Warm and quivering and alive beneath his fingers, the steel-in-velvet feel of him in his hand. The hot moistness of his open mouth against his as John leaned down to kiss him; the slow, intimate tangle of their tongues.

John remembered now that even though they had grown steadily unfocused and heavy-lidded with pleasure and arousal, Sherlock had not closed his eyes then, as if he had not wanted to miss a second of their lovemaking. Not even when the moment had come when control shattered to give way to a new order of things and feelings. He had seen Sherlock's eyes widen in surprise as he strained against him, heard the rush of his breath from his lips in a single-worded sigh of astonishment: "Ahh..."

A surprisingly, thoroughly human response.

And he remembered how he had never felt so alive, so much in love with another being as he did then.

Sitting there in the cold, dark cage, firmly within the hands of the enemy, John thought back on those moments when he had loved and had been loved in return, and could not help but feel warmed.

Evening at last, or actual night. He wasn't really sure. He could only mark the passage of time by the way his stomach was growling again. Hungry again.

Noise as voices approached. Moriarty and his henchman, this time carrying a curious-looking gun. John felt himself stiffening, pressing against the wall behind him in sudden alarm.

"Well, Johnny-boy," announced Jim in a jaunty air. "It's time we get moving. Show's about to start. But first..."

He paused in mid-sentence theatrically and, with a flourish, held out a hand to his man. "Seb here has got a sedative dart in that blowgun. Yup, that was how he took you down outside Baker Street last night. Now, see here, I've got something special lined up for you, and if you'd just be kind enough to sit still, Seb will not even need to blow a dart at you. Personally, I'd rather you don't get another helping of that right now, as you might...you know, overdose."

Jim laughed at John's look of frowning incomprehension. "Okay, time to slow the thought train down a little for our doctor to catch up," he said. "You probably may not have even realized this, but your master managed to possess you for a short time this morning. Now, he's asked me to drag you along for the final show tonight, so you understand why we will need to incapacitate you just in case our unicorn has got ideas about slipping into your body and making a dash for it. Or worse. Whatever. And knowing me, well...I can never do anything simply."

Jim turned to address somebody behind him before bringing his attention back to John. "Now, don't get all agitated and make things more difficult by running around the cage, Johnny-boy. You're special, according to our unicorn, so we're preparing you for a little, special surprise. Say hello to a mutual acquaintance of ours."

John felt his jaw drop open in blank astonishment when he saw who it was emerging behind Jim.
"Small world, isn't it?" said Moriarty with a wink as he made to unlock John's cage. "It's either I strap you to a bomb, or I get our anesthesiologist friend here to administer a drug to immobilize you. I trust you will appreciate my choice between the two alternatives. Now just sit still like a good boy and you won't get that dart, as promised."

John stared at the woman in disbelief as she made her way over to him inside the cage, a syringe in one hand. "I'm sorry, John," she kept saying in a frightened and tearful voice. "I'm so sorry. I don't have any choice. Just...just sit still and you won't feel a thing."
Ten minutes to midnight.

Sherlock walked along the deserted sidewalk in the quiet residential pocket of Oxford, past hushed, darkened houses on either side of the street. The cold night was made even colder by a chill wind moving in the dark trees overhead, raking across the dry, brown leaves like something alive.

Sherlock could almost feel it raking its icy, skeletal fingers across his heart.

Something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

He could feel it deep down inside as he made his way in measured, unhurried steps towards the cottage that he used to live in. The setting for the final confrontation. The final problem that was Jim Moriarty.

Being so close, he ought to be able to talk to John by now. And yet there was nothing. For the past hour or so, John had not responded to Sherlock as he called his name deep inside his head.

*John…*

*John…?*

*John…!*

And there was simply nothing. A blank, black void in his mind where only his voice echoed back at him, as from the mouth of an empty cave.

Sherlock paused before the small wooden gate that guarded the entrance to the cottage and listened to the whisper of the wind through the trees again—trees with thick, dark branches high above him, the autumn leaves rustling with a restless lamentation that seemed to speak of a multitude of shadows moving through them.

He pushed the gate open and willed himself to stroll in with the same calm, unhurried gait. Through the narrow front windows of the house, he could see the faint light from a single lamp inside.

The man was clearly as bold as brass, to announce his presence by turning on a light. By his action, it was clear that he meant to show Sherlock something as soon as he entered the door. Something that Sherlock knew he would dread seeing.

Sherlock tried one more time, despairingly: *John, where are you?*

Still nothing.

He was before the door now. There could never be a right time to feel like this and now was perhaps the worst time of all, but all the same, Sherlock suffered a terrifying, momentary sense of imbalance at not knowing what awaited him inside the empty house.

He closed his eyes and made a final entreaty: *John. Just…please, just don't be dead.*

He turned the knob.
The lamplight was turned down to its minimum, and the first thing to register to Sherlock as he stepped across the threshold of his house was the way the sparse furniture had been pushed to the sides of the living room, clearing the space directly before him.

And in that clearing lay John, stretched out, motionless. His arms were lying limp and useless by his sides and his head was tilted to one side, facing Sherlock. His eyes were open. And yet he wasn't moving.

Until then, Sherlock did not know that fright could be a hideous force that left concentric rings of intense fear spreading outward from the epicenter that was his heart, like the tremors of an earthquake. He felt the shock and pain slamming from his chest out to the tips of his fingers, shooting down to the soles of his feet. A tingling numbness very quickly followed so that for a moment, he did not trust himself to be able to stand upright.

He knew this was a possibility. More than a possibility— it was practically a certainty. He and Mycroft never doubted that Moriarty would use John to bait him. He thought he had come prepared for anything Moriarty might throw at him, but it seemed he was not, after all.

John.

My John.

Dead.

Instantly, Sherlock went into lockdown. Even as his mind struggled to accept what his eyes were telling him, his brutal, centuries-old, finely-honed hunter's instinct rose and took over, forcing him to stillness, dampening the shock and fury clambering up to overwhelm him and firmly resisting the urge to spring and cover those few feet separating him from John.

The hunter was being hunted. John was the battlefield and the bait to lure the tiger in.

And John was probably already dead.

He stood where he was, hands clenched tightly into fists deep in the pockets of his coat, and clamped down hard on the distressing brew of emotions that threatened to give him away. From somewhere in the shadows that led to the kitchen came a soft giggle.

"How do you like my little tableau?" asked Jim Moriarty as he emerged into the light. "I call it, 'The Sacrificial Lamb Upon the Altar of the Master'."

Sherlock angled his head a little toward him, watching him out of the corner of his eye. His voice sounded all right to him, when it finally came out: "Which part of my instructions regarding my servant were you not clear about?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Moriarty, eyes innocently wide as he rolled his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. "You told me not to harm him, and I didn't. Not in the usual sense, anyway."

Finally having Moriarty within his range of sight, Sherlock moved slowly forward, careful to keep his expression neutral as he kneeled in front of John and reached out an incredibly steady hand to feel the pulse in his neck.

Moriarty was right. John was alive. His skin was cool and clammy, but Sherlock could detect a faint, steady pulse. His respiration was shallow but even. A quick glance at the exposed parts of his body suggested he had not been tortured. He brought his gaze back to the vacant blue eyes staring
straight up at him.

*John…can you hear me?*

Still nothing.

"What did you do to him?" His voice was still level, cold.

"Oh, you'll love this," said Moriarty with relish. "Have you ever heard of the dissociative effects of ketamine? It's a widely used anesthetic, but properly administered it can induce a trance-like state where the person is wide awake deep down inside himself, imprisoned in a body that is in deep sleep. They say it feels very much like sleep paralysis. Or like the draught of sleeping death the wicked stepmother had coated on the apple for Snow White.

"At any rate, that ought to make you think twice about possessing him. He's closed off as an escape route for you, but I want him attending this little meeting of ours as part of his come-uppance for being the upstart that he is." Moriarty sniggered. "I do love my little torments. You must admit this little touch is highly original. You didn't see it coming, did you?"

"You used ketamine on top of the unspecified sedative you've given him last night?" said Sherlock. "He could have died."

Something seemed to snap inside Moriarty then. "That's what people do!" he shouted.

"You would have failed my test," continued Sherlock, unperturbed.

"Your test, your test!" cried Moriarty mockingly. "What if I were to tell you I don't believe a word you said to me at the warehouse?"

Sherlock said nothing, merely stared at Moriarty as he continued to feel John's soft, steady pulse.

"What if I were to tell you I've got an alternative to make you say yes to everything I desire of you, regardless of passing your stupid test?" continued Moriarty, jeering.

Sherlock removed his hand from John's neck, slowly straightened himself and stood up. A glowing red spot appeared before his chest. And another one.

Jim Moriarty smiled as Sherlock turned his gaze to the narrow windows a few feet away. "Sorry. It may seem overdramatic," he said, shaking his head almost apologetically, "but I do like to have all my bases covered."

"Snipers," said Sherlock, in a bored, infinitely weary tone. "Your sycophantic followers, I trust?"

"Professionals," corrected Moriarty. "I'm not letting any of my doubting followers near you until I've got you where I want you."

"Killing me now using snipers will get you nowhere."

"No, of course not. Don't be obvious," said Moriarty, exasperated. "They're not there outside to kill you. Not if you behave anyway. They're there to make sure that you comply with my wishes. And my first wish—"

He reached a hand into his coat. "—Is for you to take these," Moriarty finished.

Sherlock glanced at the bottle of pills that Moriarty held in his hand.
"Nothing fancy," said Moriarty. "Just plain old thorazine. The stuff they give to the mental patients to keep them nonviolent and fuzzybrained. Tonight, you start the first of many merry doses. Once your brain gets sufficiently pulpy, you will follow my every whim. You will not run away from me again. You will not humiliate me in front of my followers ever again. Your escape a few months back really caused quite a stir in the inner circles of my coven. I had to tamp down hard just to retain a measure of control. Had a little bit of a massacre among the higher officers, actually. Oh, now most of them are too scared of me to really cause further trouble, but I can see the doubt and speculation in their eyes. Everything that I lost following your escape—my followers' respect and acceptance, their belief in me, my influence on them—you will bring all of that back for me. I shall take your blood in the regular intervals you have described in your grimoire, and you will allow me to drink from you every single time until you have turned me into one of you. I shall gain everything back through you. Everything, and more."

Moriarty had obviously thought things through, but he was hardly making any sense. He said he did not believe in Sherlock's words, yet his own words betrayed him.

And more, more, more…!

Always, more.

The man was insatiable greed personified. The kind of monster that could eat up worlds and still remain hungry and bored and unsatisfied. A black hole. He would never stop wanting more. Very well. Sherlock would give him more.

Sherlock stared at Moriarty for a moment longer before he forced himself to smile. "Novel," he finally said.

"Aren't I?" agreed Moriarty, returning Sherlock's smile with one of his own. "Are my methods Macchiavellian enough for your princely standards?"

Sherlock took in his words and hope slowly flared inside his chest. Moriarty was actually lying, then, when he said he did not believe him.

"Perhaps," said Sherlock. "But first get rid of your boys in the kitchen. I do not want any uninvited guests for this private conversation. Both of them. Don't try to trick me. You know who I am. It doesn't work."

Moriarty stared at him and grinned. A tiny, barely imperceptible nod from him, and Sherlock could hear a flutter of movement in the darkness of the kitchen, heard the back door click shut.

"That was very good," said Moriarty. "Night vision, or supersensitive hearing?"

Nothing but plain common sense to tell Sherlock that Moriarty would not be inside his house unattended, and he wasn't one to restrict his armed escort to just a single person, but Sherlock was not going to tell him that.

Sherlock chose his next words carefully. "While I am nearly resolved that you are the right choice, you must still pass certain levels of the test I have prepared for you," he said. "While you have demonstrated your considerable intelligence and ingenuity over a range of…imaginative situations, I wonder about your self-control. Try hard to satisfy me. Success ensures you a life like mine."

"Good," sneered Moriarty. "Put a little bit more rub into it and perhaps I will start to believe you."

Vacillating again. Moriarty professed to scorn what he was hearing, yet Sherlock felt that he longed to believe him. Just as he longed to believe those passages in the grimoire. Could Sherlock
make him believe at least enough of what he had to say to let his guard down?

"Your suspicion is commendable," said Sherlock icily. "It speaks of caution. And ruthlessness is rampant in your desire to take, not merely to be given. These are traits necessary in a successful predator, a hunter, such as myself. But you're not yet ready. You're not yet fully formed for a life like ours. You must drop your pose of masterly authority and become servile. Learn from what I have to say and take from me."

Sherlock stared deep into those dark eyes, shining and alive with monstrous passions, and said, "Come to me."

"Why? So that you can get your hands around my neck?" asked Jim Moriarty. But he could not seem to tear his gaze away from Sherlock's. "I know how infuriated you were the entire time you were in captivity. You must want revenge after the humiliation that I put you through, and for starving you."

Sherlock smiled. How well he remembered the desperate fear and rage that had been his constant companions the entire time he had been trapped in Moriarty's cage. Sherlock had never hated anyone or anything more profoundly than the man standing before him. A perilous indulgence, this hatred. Especially now. He could not afford to give in to its urging as he dealt with such a cunning and dangerous adversary.

"Such a meager understanding of our ways for a man professing to worship the devil," he murmured. "You forget where we vampires come from. Like the master you claim to serve, we see good in what others can only see as evil and unclean. Your capacity for cruelty and the sense of your own superiority over those around you must run deep and true, if you wish to become one of us. Yes, I do see it. It is there inside you, like a core of ice. You're bold enough to run against my orders but you exercise enough good judgment to stop just when you need to. But this wish of yours to be my master shall not happen. I do, however, wish you to be my kin."

Moriarty raised his brows. "Is that an invitation to join the club then?"

"You know it is," said Sherlock. "If you can prove yourself to be worthy."

Close. So close to convincing him now...

And just as suddenly, Sherlock felt Moriarty swerve away again. Not out of a sense of actual danger, more out of habit, like a rat.

"Nah. I don't believe you," said Moriarty softly, shaking his head. "This is too easy."

The tiny, red points reappeared to range slowly over Sherlock's chest. Clearly they were operating under some sort of signal. But were they Moriarty's men still, or had Mycroft's plan already kicked in?

Sherlock dragged his attention away from the dancing red points of light with some effort. He had other, more immediate things to worry about within the confines of this room. Almost casually, he let his gaze swipe across John's immobile form a few feet away before bringing it back to lock on Moriarty.

And in that casual swing of his gaze, he saw John's fingers move in the smallest of twitches at his side.

The relief flooding Sherlock was sweet and overwhelming.
And all at once everything fell into place.

He had not thought to ask himself what John would do in a situation like this.

Even if John could not answer him right now, something of John's intuition locked deep inside his mind spoke for him and offered an analysis of the enemy: This person standing before you is not a man at all, Sherlock. He is a child. Brilliant and precocious, yet twisted and emotionally deformed and unstable—an unlovely, unloved man-child with dark dreams and strange, compulsive hungers. What sort of childhood stories had filled his miserable, vicious heart as he grappled with the affliction of growing up?

Tales of the frightened, lost child transforming into something more, something infinitely better than what he is at present—the pauper who is in reality a prince and heir to a magical kingdom. Or perhaps the caterpillar who dreams that he is a butterfly; the ugly duckling transformed into a beautiful swan. In the case of Moriarty, there is something more. Always, there must be something more, and with a different twist to familiar, well-loved tales: Red Riding Hood not just besting the Big, Bad Wolf, but becoming the supreme leader of the company of wolves dwelling deep in the forest. The knight slaying the dragon not for the sake of rescuing the damsel in distress, but to become the dragon himself.

Every fairy tale needs a good, old-fashioned villain. Moriarty will be more than happy to play the villain, if it means he can take over the entire story and make it all his own.

But more than that, you are his dream finally realized, his most secret hopes fulfilled. This entire performance is his way of showing off and advertising what he is capable of. This is his way of courtship. His treatment of John is partially out of histrionics, but it is enough to make certain things clear: he is jealous of John because you are the closest thing he can ever love. He covets, envies, despises yet loves you at the same time—the kind of love attributed to true monsters: fanged and clawed, with the destruction and consumption of the object of that love its final aim, its way of consummation.

His and John's intuition combined could not be wrong.

What would John say to a being such as this? What had John said to him not so long ago during that fateful night when everything had hung in the balance and, against all odds, John had ultimately tipped everything in his favor and won over a vampire?

His extraordinary, beloved John.

All of this went through Sherlock's mind in the few seconds it took him to lock his gaze back onto Moriarty's face.

"Of course. You are afraid," said Sherlock slowly, the cold authority in his voice gradually softening. "It is natural for you to be afraid of things that you're not certain of, that you have no control over. The sudden reversals of fortune that nobody is immune to while they are shackled to this world. Your mortality. Me. But you need not be afraid of me. I see everything now."

Moriarty smiled. "And why not?"

"Because I am you. And you are me," said Sherlock, careful to keep his tone soft, approving. "Prepared to do anything. Prepared to burn. So long as you get what you want. If you want to shake hands with me in hell, I doubt if you will disappoint me."
"I have decided," announced Sherlock as he held up an arm and slowly pushed away the sleeve of his coat, peeled away the cuff of his shirt sleeve to reveal a pale, elegant wrist. "You've passed the first rung of the ladder. The first of many tests still to come. You will be a bare initiate for decades, the process of transformation gradual but sure until finally you will be able to cast off that mortal carapace and don the mantle of eternal life."

He gazed at the man-child before him and spoke both to the man and to the child in the man as he said, "You'll never have to hurt again, never to feel fear and uncertainty again. Never to be judged for what you are, virtually a god among men. Why retain your unworthy, earthly followers when you will be accepted into an elite circle of powerful, like-minded peers? You shall have me as your guide until your transition is complete. And you will never have to die."

"I don't believe you," said Moriarty, but he never tore his gaze away from Sherlock, his words taking on the tone of an automatic, mechanical chant. "I don't believe you."

"This is what you want, what you've been longing all your life to have," said Sherlock as he raised his wrist to his mouth. "It shall be yours, if you are bold enough to acknowledge me."

He placed his lips on his wrist and darted the needle underneath his tongue to pierce his skin. Instantly, he tasted his blood in his mouth, tart and rich. Hunger flared inside him, and he raised his eyes to meet Moriarty's, to let him see the ecstasy of the fulfillment of that hunger etched in his gaze.

"Come and drink," he said, offering his bleeding wrist to the man before him.

Moriarty stared transfixed at the red stream on Sherlock's pale skin, stared at the way it slowly flowed to drip at the end of Sherlock's long fingers. A tinkle of glass as the thorazine bottle slipped from Moriarty's hand to land on the floor.

"For the blood is the Life," whispered Sherlock. "Come and feed."

And without another word, Moriarty made his way toward Sherlock and took the offered wrist. He lowered his head onto the wound and started to drink, lapping at Sherlock's skin.

Sherlock put his other hand on the back of Moriarty's head, and let it guide, reassure, caress with a feather touch. Beneath him and partially obscured, he saw Moriarty's hand reach into his coat.

Too late to reach for the gun hidden in his breast pocket. With a sudden roar of triumph, Sherlock seized his prey and, with a hand gripping his face, hurled him down onto the floor a few feet away from John.

His hand clamped down hard over the screaming hole that was Moriarty's mouth and, with his victim's flailing arms and legs pinned securely beneath his body, Sherlock leaned down to stare at the wide, dark eyes. "What's the matter?" he hissed. "Are you wondering where your snipers have gone? You've got worse things to worry about than that right now.

"As you've probably guessed at this point, you just failed my test. You're too human. Cleverer than most, perhaps, but still pitifully human in your weaknesses, the main one being your desire to believe in stories that are just that- stories. You wonder how John did it? How he managed to survive me? It's because he was prepared to give me everything of himself without asking for anything in return. I don't expect you to understand. And John is not a sacrificial lamb. He's my heart. You've geared everything so that in the end, it's all about you. That is why everything is going to be taken from you, including your life. As of now. You. Are. Dead."
Sherlock's hold on Moriarty tightened incrementally as each emphatic word left his lips, his hand over Moriarty's screaming mouth twisting the already broken jaw further, angling Moriarty's head sharply away from his neck until, with a sudden, dull snap, the muffled screaming stopped.

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**Author's Notes:** The use of the drug *ketamine* in fiction is not as original as Jim Moriarty would have us believe. It has been used by [John Connolly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Connolly) in his novel, *Every Dead Thing*. It has some uses in Psychiatry as a therapeutic agent, and as a recreational drug, it has been reported to induce dissociative and trance-like states.

"*For the Blood is the Life*" is actually the title of a vampire story by [F. Marion Crawford](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._Marion_Crawford).
Chapter 35

In the end, John had Jeanette— or whatever her real name was— to thank that the amount of ketamine she had administered was not enough to incapacitate him for long. She had also very bravely argued against putting him in a ketamine drip to prolong the effects, as Moriarty had first intended, citing that his body wouldn't be able to handle it. While the effects of the drug lasted, though, John felt like he was living a nightmare.

A nightmare where he was locked fully awake and conscious inside his sleeping body. It was very much like the time Sherlock had first visited him in his dreams, but this time around there was definitely nothing sexy or arousing in the situation.

He was not able to feel his body at all, let alone move an inch of it. He felt like a disembodied spirit, just floating, hovering over the edge of things without a physical body to anchor him down to the world. His eyes were open the entire time, and he could see what was going on within his range of vision. His mind was also fully awake, able to think, to panic, to shout deep inside him. He had been shouting for a full hour, to no avail.

The worst part of it all was that he could hear Sherlock calling him inside his head and he couldn't send a word out to warn him what had happened.

*John...John?...John!*

*John, where are you?*

Over and over, John could hear him, and yet Sherlock could not seem to hear his replies. He could feel Sherlock's anxiety rising each time he called and there seemed to be no response from him.

He had not realized that his link with Sherlock could be affected by the administration of drugs, and that alone was enough to tell John that the Bond he shared with Sherlock had something in it that was not just psychic. Something organic or chemical rooted in some hidden locus of the brain that could be shut off with the proper medication.

But there was no time to ponder that concept as he was carried bodily into the little house in Oxford and dumped unceremoniously on the floor. He could see them pushing the furniture away, clearing the space around him.

"Check the entire house," he heard the man called Sebastian Moran giving orders. "Then, I want the two shooters positioned outside in the trees. That would give them the vantage point necessary to see into the windows. I will be in the kitchen along with the third."

Hurried sounds, voices, more last-minute orders.

Then Moriarty came bounding in.

"Everything all set?" his voice was pitched high, almost manic with excitement. "Oh wait! Our most important showpiece! We haven't arranged Johnny-boy yet!"

Faintly, he felt fingers gripping his jaw, setting his face down to a certain angle, and all of a sudden, Jim Moriarty's face flooded his view. "Nice view, huh, Doc?" he asked, smiling. "I need to set you up just so our unicorn will be able to see you as soon as he enters that door."

He felt his head and body being arranged so that he lay there, facing the door. Looking dead.
"He won't be able to miss you like this. We're aiming for maximum effect here," said Moriarty as he made his last adjustments on John and stood up. "Everything all right at your end, Seb?"

John heard a grunt from somewhere a few feet away from him.

"And now, we wait," said Moriarty, clapping his hands together once in delight.

They must have waited for half an hour, though it felt like an eternity to John, before the door knob turned.

John felt Sherlock even before that. Felt his approach outside the house and heard his one last, despairing plea.

*John. Just... please, just don't be dead.*

Oh, Sherlock…

John did not know how Sherlock was going to take it, seeing him there on the floor, but the last thing he expected was the kind of shock that he felt Sherlock feeling as he took in the tableau that Moriarty had arranged for him. And the pain.

There was so much pain in Sherlock just then that John felt it slice at his own heart. Was this how Sherlock felt human feelings— magnified a hundred, a thousand-fold compared to how John would feel them? If this was how John had felt at the news of Henry Knight's death, he would have committed suicide a long time ago.

Was this the reason why Sherlock had not wanted to feel anything at all? Why he had been desperate to preserve the solitary ways of the perfect predator that he had known all his life, why he had wanted to maintain his distance from John until their shared passion had made the entire point moot?

If tigers and lambs were made to feel pain differently, how much more a unicorn?

And by inducing the unicorn to lay its head down on his lap, had John made Sherlock vulnerable? By achieving an empathy with Sherlock and rousing a side of him that had never been awakened before, had John unwittingly opened an avenue for Moriarty to succeed in his plans? Had he provided Moriarty the means to slay the unicorn?

No, thought John fiercely. *I am not the tempter whose touch defiles the unblemished, magical being. If I have unleashed a modicum of humanity in Sherlock, then it must have been there within him in the first place. Conceived weaknesses can be turned into strengths depending on how one sees them, and I am not Sherlock's weakness. Never have been, never will be. Just as he's never mine. That is Moriarty's biggest mistake. The Achilles heel of his plans.*

It was a wonder that Sherlock showed none of the turmoil he was feeling inside. From John's lopsided view of the living room as seen from the floor upward, Sherlock continued to stand still and straight, the pose of his head haughty, voice and face aloof and cold, as Moriarty made his move.

"Which part of my instructions regarding my servant were you not clear about?" Sherlock's ability to maintain his act under such distressing circumstances was truly amazing, given John's unique insight into his true feelings deep inside.
Moriarty was talking, yet Sherlock did not seem to have heard him at all, so intent was he to approach John, to lay a hand on him. Yet the manner of his approach was slow, unhurried. Very well done. John watched as Sherlock advanced toward him, watched as he knelt down and felt his pulse.

*John, can you hear me?*

Sherlock, don't play into his hands and let me get in your way…

Sherlock still couldn't hear him, although John was slowly gaining his senses back. He could feel the touch of Sherlock's fingers on his neck as he took his pulse.

The ketamine was wearing off much faster than expected. Evidently Jeanette had managed to give him only enough to fool Moriarty for an hour or so.

John continued to lie still as he slowly felt sensation coming back to his limbs, careful not to intrude on Sherlock's concentration as he faced off with the enemy.

The speed of Sherlock's thoughts was astounding, the manner of his own entrapment operation a flawlessly executed thing. Through it all, John could feel his desperation, his overwhelming anxiety, his fear. He could also feel Sherlock's fury, kept severely in check. And his single-mindedness in matching Moriarty's wits, the way he would check and swerve and deftly switch tactics as he adjusted to the thrust and parry of Moriarty's agile mind.

John listened in awe as Sherlock gradually seduced Moriarty with his words, spoken with the perfect blend of icy authority and smooth certainty to render his fictions not just plausible concepts, but virtually unassailable truths. John felt his fingers twitch involuntarily as the ketamine gradually made its way out of his system, to be replaced by the first of several motor reflexes that signaled the resumption of normal operations in his muscles.

And felt the sweetest relief course through him, cleansing away the anxiety and fear. Sherlock's feelings. He must have seen the movement of his fingers. John could not help but smile deep inside. Such a sweet, silly git, his Sherlock, to be so worried about him.

John was immensely moved when his mind went through the final analysis just as it simultaneously went through Sherlock's head, quick as a flash—the work of less than a second—yet clear as crystal, that had Sherlock using his—John's—point of view to deconstruct the monster as a child. It was just as he would analyze it, only it was much quicker and more lucid when Sherlock thought it.

"For the blood is the Life," he heard Sherlock whisper, his outstretched wrist dripping red, his eyes alight with ecstasy and hunger, and John knew Moriarty had lost.

John watched as the man-child advanced, the fight gone from him, to drink from Sherlock's wrist. He watched as Sherlock reached up a soothing hand to caress the back of Moriarty's head. Watched as the expression on his lover's beautiful face suddenly fracture to finally show his true feelings as he seized the enemy by the face and hurled him down to the ground. Sherlock's cry was a terrible sound to behold—triumph and rage, relief and gloating victory all mixed in one; a growl combined with a bark of derisive laughter.

John had never seen him more demonic looking than at that one point in time, though his words sounded like heaven in John's ears: "You wonder how John did it? How he managed to survive me? It's because he was prepared to give me everything of himself without asking for anything in return. I don't expect you to understand. And John is not a sacrificial lamb. He's my heart…"
He's my heart.

John had never heard himself referred to in words as sweet as those before.

He could not really see what was happening to Jim Moriarty from his position, which was a blessing. However, he could feel the impact of Moriarty's fragile head against the floor as Sherlock slammed it down repeatedly for emphasis as he spoke. Sherlock's voice was filled with cold fury as he finally said, "As of now. You. Are. Dead."

And with a final twist of Sherlock's powerful hands, Moriarty was.

Dead.

The sudden silence after all that muffled screaming was truly unnerving. Almost instantly though, Sherlock was beside John, lifting him with hands suddenly gone gentle—as tender as they had been murderous one moment before.

"John," cried Sherlock, voice breaking. "John, are you alright?"

John still couldn't move his mouth, though he was able to blink his eyes. Sherlock saw it and gave an unsteady smile before he folded John into his arms.

"Oh God, John. I thought you were gone. I thought you were dead," murmured Sherlock as he pressed his lips to John's skin, on his temple, his eyelids, his mouth.

But John wasn't paying attention. He was too busy looking past Sherlock, at the darkened doorway that led to the kitchen, where a single point of red flickered its way onto Sherlock's back…

Sherlock…!

What happened next occurred so fast that John could not really remember how he managed it. The only thing that mattered was that he was suddenly inside Sherlock's body, pressing him down flat on the ground with his own body pinned underneath as the shots meant for Sherlock missed and took out bits of the wall across them where the bullets landed.

Almost at the same time, there was a crash and loud yells as men stormed inside the house from all sides, through the doors and windows. A smattering of gunfire, confusion and mayhem all around. All the while, John-in-Sherlock kept still as he shielded himself and his lover.

Then the chaos ended as suddenly as it began, and Mycroft was there beside them.

"Sherlock," he said, urgently, as he bent down to kneel beside them. "It's all right now. He slipped past us but we finally got Moran. Sherlock…oh, bloody hell…"

John saw Mycroft flinch away as though burned, saw him whisk out a handkerchief to cover his nose and mouth, his expression one of appalled horror. John looked down and beheld the strange sight of himself bleeding, the blood gushing out of his body's nose in bright red streams. He felt a surge of savage hunger rise in Sherlock's body at the sight and smell of that sweet, delicious blood.

John had never realized just how savory blood was to Sherlock. He did now. Before he knew what he was doing, John felt the irresistible pull of Sherlock's body toward his own. He needed that blood, he needed it inside his mouth, down into his belly. He—

"Sherlock!" Tight, painful hands on his shoulders, hurling him roughly up and away. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!!"
Mycroft turned him around sharply and looked into his brother's eyes before he finally said, "Wait a minute. Who is this?"

John managed to gasp out a breath. "Not Sherlock," he answered in his lover's voice. "Definitely not Sherlock."

The ambulance and paramedics came and took him away not long afterward. The doors slammed shut on the ambulance and John, now rightfully back in his own body and strapped to a stretcher, could feel the paramedic hovering over him, administering the first of many drugs to stabilize him.

"Sir, just relax, your blood pressure is above 180/90 right now," said the man looming over him, adjusting the dose of his IV drip.

John felt his remaining strength leave him and he sagged back onto the stretcher. His head felt so heavy that he thought it just might burst.

Sherlock. Wait…where's Sherlock?

It was his last thought before he lost consciousness.

John woke up several hours later to find himself lying on a hospital bed with his nostrils stuffed with nasal packing and Sherlock seated on the edge of the bed beside him. He had his back to John, and had not bothered to take off his coat. He sat and stared at the vital signs monitor before him, thoroughly absorbed in the readings as the machine kept minute track of John's blood pressure, the rate and rhythms of his heart.

Just as John was thoroughly absorbed watching him in silence.

"I know you're awake, John," Sherlock finally said, not bothering to turn around.

John smiled. "Yeah, well. Given our mind link, it wouldn't take a genius to figure that out," he said. Given the nasal packing clogging his nostrils, he sounded odd, like he was coming down with a cold. For some absurd reason, he felt like laughing.

Gladness and relief suffused John as he thought back on what had just happened.

What a rollercoaster ride! It was incredible. Sherlock won. Sherlock actually won over Moriarty and they had gotten away with their lives.

Sherlock's gaze was indescribably tender when he turned to look at John.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

As if you don't know…

"Nothing I wouldn't be able to handle," John replied more diplomatically.

Sherlock smiled at both John's thoughts and his spoken words. "That's my John," he said quietly. "My brave, beloved John."

Slowly he reached up a hand to caress John's cheek, the touch of his fingers mere ghosts of sensation as they trailed down the side of John's face. "What you did back there," said Sherlock.
"That bit of transference. That was…that was very good."

John smiled.

"You don't seem particularly distressed at what just happened," observed Sherlock.

"You won, Sherlock." John's voice was exultant. "You won over Moriarty."

"You saw me kill a man."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't a very nice man," replied John readily, unable to bring himself to feel a single ounce of regret over Moriarty's demise. "I think you just did mankind a service by getting rid of him."

Sherlock gave a soft laugh. "No, he wasn't a nice man," he agreed.

Something was wrong. Sherlock was laughing, and yet John was feeling a very different current running deep inside him. A deep sadness. An extinguished quality about his emotions.

What could it all mean?

"So, what happens now?" John wanted to know.

"Now you must rest and recover from this ordeal. You've been through so much in the past month, the last twenty-four hours alone—"

"That's not what I meant and you know it. What's going to happen to us now?"

John gazed at Sherlock, felt something very much like alarm brush at him as he heard his lover say, "Right now I must do what I have to do. What I ought to have done in the first place, had it not been for Jim Moriarty's interference."

John started to shake his head. "What— what does that mean?" he said, his voice faltering, dropping to a whisper.

The look Sherlock gave him said it all. That, and his feelings.

"No," said John as he felt his heart sink down, down inside his chest. Shocked dismay and disbelief mingled in his thoughts and his voice as he realized what Sherlock's intentions were. "Oh no. God, no..."
Chapter 36

After the ambulance had taken John away, Sherlock sat on the steps outside the cottage's back door, staring off into the sparse garden beyond, now overrun with weeds.

Inside the house, Mycroft's people continued their work. The entire procedure had "top secret government operation" stamped all over it. Curious neighbors and onlookers who had been attracted by the brief but violent break-in had all been turned away. Mycroft's people had given reasons that may or may not convince them, but the reasons would have to suffice. There would be no witnesses to see the captured snipers herded away in black cars, no witnesses to see two body bags being transported out of the house.

Already, they were beginning clean-up operations, setting the scene up for some plausible crime that had been very quickly taken care of, to be filed away by the authorities as a closed case. The sounds inside the house were hushed, muted. Everything seemed far away as Sherlock sat on the stone steps and stared out at nothing.

He had expected to feel relief, exultation. He should have felt glad that he had bested Moriarty and saved John. Instead he felt empty, tired. So very tired.

He would have wanted to close his eyes and sleep. And sleep.

He had indeed saved John, and John had, in turn, saved him. But a new set of problems had arisen right there—problems that Sherlock had wished fervently to be able to solve with John's help.

But it seemed there would be no adequate solution for them, except one.

Behind him, the back door opened and Mycroft stepped out.

"You can come inside now. They've carted off the bodies of Moriarty and Moran," said Mycroft.

Sherlock did not so much as acknowledge his brother's presence.

There was a pause as Mycroft continued to stand behind Sherlock, looking down at his brother's slumped shoulders. Then he said quietly, "Moriarty and his man left the kitchen upon Moriarty's go signal, but he turned back just when we were closing in on them outside the house. There was very little we could do to stop him. He was able to fire off two, three shots from the kitchen before we were able to take him down."

"I would have been dead if John had not transferred into my body," said Sherlock, but his voice was more tired than complaining.

"Yes." It was not an apology, but Mycroft, to his credit, did not bother to attempt an excuse over something that could not be justified.

There was a measure of quiet as the two brothers stared off into the distance, each lost in their own worlds of thoughts and memories.

Then, Sherlock asked, "Did Anthea ever have nosebleeds like that?"

"She did," replied Mycroft, "even though we never did engage in transference. We never had a
sphygmomanometer to measure her blood pressure back then, but John's blood pressure now will give us a picture of what very likely transpired the entire time we were together."

Silence for a time. From somewhere in the quiet neighborhood, they could hear a baby's hungry wail.

"Do you hear that?" Sherlock said softly, nodding his head at the direction of the faint, shrill sound. "I've often wondered why human infants do that."

"What? Cry?"

"I've often wondered why they do so. Practically the first thing they ever do upon being born is to cry. I never realized I'd find the answer tonight: that somehow, these infants seem to know that they are entering a world filled with so much pain."

He turned to Mycroft. "I suppose you'd be pleased to find that your words from a century ago have come true," he said. "I'm finally awakening to what you have experienced with Anthea."

Mycroft closed his eyes at Sherlock's words. "That's an exercise in pain right there," he murmured. "But I suppose you're right. We are creatures adept in inflicting it, but we are woefully, inadequately prepared to suffer it when our turn comes."

When Sherlock did not say anything to that, Mycroft continued, "You know I never meant those words."

"Yes, you did." Sherlock's tone was even. Dull.

"I did, then," conceded Mycroft. "But they were all said in the heat of the moment. The moment has passed. Just as this will pass."

"I don't want to pass John up." The softly spoken words were laced with desperate hurt. "I don't want to lose him, Mycroft."

Mycroft shook his head. "You know what you have to do, then," he said. "There is no other way. If there is one, you would have thought about it. I would have thought about it with Anthea. In fact, it did occur to me, but she would have none of it, not when war was looming and England needed me. You won't have that problem, at least."

"There must be another way, Mycroft," snapped Sherlock. "A way for John and myself to survive each other and be together."

"You know there is," said Mycroft softly.

Sherlock stared at his brother for a long time.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Mycroft had arranged for John to be taken to a high-security military hospital just outside London. He was sleeping when Sherlock entered his room and sat down on the edge of the bed beside him.

For a while, Sherlock occupied himself with studying his lover's face, intent on memorizing every line, every curve and every hollow of those features that had become so indescribably dear to him in the past few weeks.

Such a short time. They had such a short time to get to know each other and to realize just how
good they were together, and how impossible it really all was in the end. It was most unfair. Unfair and horrid! Was this why the ancient Greeks invented tragedy? To explore why they were so fascinated by the way Man could not be turned from the paths already preordained him, no matter how heroic his struggles to veer away from what Fate had decreed should be his lot? There were so many things about human beings that Sherlock had never understood, and all these sudden, recent revelations into his prey's psyche were as much a source of fresh pain as wonder.

And certainly there was nothing as wonderful as the man lying fast asleep before him.

So Sherlock studied John, studied the way his golden hair was beginning to streak with silvery grey, the premature lines on his forehead and around his eyes and mouth evidence not just of a lifetime of care, but also of strength and the fierce will to overcome.

Sherlock had often wondered about that as well— that determination to fight and overcome. During those times before John when his prey knew too much about him and he had to kill, he had wondered why certain people would give up without a struggle and simply let him take them down, and why others would choose to fight. And continue fighting until their very last breath. He had often wondered why they would even bother doing it when it was so futile.

Then this man had to come along to show him that fighting back was anything but useless, that things need not fall into the usual, inevitable pattern, that Sherlock's appetite need not mean this man's destruction.

But this would not be enough for them to solve the final problem, because it seemed that nature had intended Sherlock's kind to be the ultimate apex predator. The perfect monster. Everything about vampires was designed by evolution as a means to kill their prey, no matter how the vampires themselves would feel about it. Resonance, Bonding, transference— all these processes so natural to vampires came at a great cost to human beings. No matter how determined they both were to overcome the obstacles set before them, Sherlock could no longer ignore the way John's body was betraying him, showing the strain it was under whenever they were together even as John continued to deny and ignore the signs.

And the signs were all there in the electronic monitor for Sherlock to see. The final proof that he needed to make up his mind about his situation with John.

That was how John found him when he woke up: preoccupied with studying his vital signs.

Sherlock felt John's quiet scrutiny behind him, and carefully locked away all unnecessary thoughts and feelings in his mind that might upset John further and interfere with the task at hand.

"I know you're awake, John," he said, his eyes not leaving the monitor's screen.

"Yeah well, given our mind link, it wouldn't take a genius to figure that out," replied John, the smile in his voice clearly evident.

John's playful banter carried with it such undertones of relief and joy that Sherlock felt a stab of intense pain upon hearing it.

What was wrong with this scene? Wasn't this supposed to be the part of the fairy tale where they got to live happily ever after? Here they were, having just vanquished the enemy and emerging bloodied but intact from the entire episode, only to find that they couldn't escape the limits of their own natures.

Resolutely, Sherlock pushed aside the pain before John could sense it and turned to look at him.
"How are you feeling?" he asked.

More teasing from John. His wonderful John. This was what he wanted, what he had been looking forward to: the time when they could lay aside all their differences and troubles and just be together.

He knew now that it wouldn't be possible for them to do so, not unless certain sacrifices were made.

All the while, John could sense his sadness, the intense disappointment of finding all their potential for a future together in hapless disarray. John was beginning to wonder at the turbulent mix of feelings he was sensing, and to worry.

"So what happens now?" John asked.

For all it was worth, Sherlock tried to dodge John's question one last time. "Now you must rest and recover from this ordeal," he said. "You've been through so much in the past month, the last twenty-four hours alone—"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," interrupted John. "What's going to happen to us now?"

"Right now I must do what I have to do. What I ought to have done in the first place, had it not been for Jim Moriarty's interference."

Sherlock willed himself not to look away as he felt the first stirrings of alarm and panic within John.

"What— what does that mean?" asked John, shaking his head, his voice a mere whisper. Then he finally understood. "No. Oh no. God, no…"

At this point, Sherlock could no longer trust himself to speak without his voice breaking. "John," he said in his mind as he held out a hand to restrain John from getting up. "Oh, John. I have to do it. Can't you see why? Can't you see what's going on?"

Clearly, John refused to see. An anguished cry: Why?

"It's all here in your vital signs, John. When you transferred into me…when you transferred into me, you bled—"

_It was just a fucking nosebleed! It happens. Don't inject too much meaning into it!_

"You practically went into hypertensive crisis, John! Your blood pressure went right over the roof. I thought for a moment you might have blown a vessel or something."

_So we won't do transference ever again, argued John quickly. I don't see why this should be a problem—_

Sherlock shook his head. "It's not just that. I've been studying your BP for quite some time before you woke up. With all those IV antihypertensive meds inside you, your resting BP was 135/85. The moment you woke up to find me here it went up to 143/89. Now it's around 150/93—"

"That's because you're being such an enormous prat and pissing me off royally!" said John aloud.

"Yes, I am," agreed Sherlock, resignedly. "I am the cause of your hypertension, John. Our Bond is the culprit."
"It was never meant for human beings. You just can't deal with the strain of me inside your head. No matter how much we would want it, no matter how much we would want to be together, it's just not meant to be."

**No!**

John was clutching at Sherlock's hand now, clutching it in a tight grip as though Sherlock might choose to get up and leave at any moment.

*Tell me why you Bonded with me in the first place*, demanded John, his tone fierce.

"Because I needed to protect you from Mycroft, from what was coming. Moriarty—"

John stared at Sherlock with a crestfallen expression. *Only that?*

"You know why." A low mutter.

John shook his head sadly. *I'm not sure I do.*

The answer was torn from Sherlock: "Because I want you, John! I've never wanted anything or anyone the way I do you. I love you."

That unfamiliar sensation of moisture gathering in his eyes, sliding down his face to land softly on John's cheek below him. Sherlock watched as John's eyes widened at his words. It should have been a happy moment of revelation, but Sherlock had never felt so wretched in his entire life as he did at that one moment.

"I love you, John," he repeated defiantly. "I love you so much. That's the reason why I have to do this. If I love you any less then perhaps I might give in, let us go on and risk whatever chance Fate has in store for us. But I can't. I can't when I know it will be to your detriment. And I don't think I can survive it if something were to happen to you because of me, because of our Bond. Just like what happened to Mycroft and Anthea—"

**No. No! Listen to me.** John's tone was desperate. *We don't know what really happened to her. Mycroft didn't know the full story, so you shouldn't be jumping to conclusions—*

"I didn't base my conclusions on what happened to Anthea. I based it on your vital signs right here. We can't ignore such concrete data, John. It's all there. The final proof."

**No!**

"And even if we were to go on, what sort of life would it be for you, strapped to a vampire for a lover?"

And what the hell is wrong with that?

"Everything, John, as you will realize if only you would decide to be objective about the situation for a change."

Sherlock stroked John's trembling cheek gently. "You'd be stuck with me and my blood hunger. We might be able to pull it off for a couple of months perhaps, with you valiantly fending off the strangest speculations from your friends and colleagues and family about your new lover who, by human standards, is possibly a psychopath; most definitely a high functioning sociopath. Without a
doubt, they will be shocked at the sudden turnaround that your sexual orientation has taken. But these would be the least of our problems. For how long can we hold out before the moth burns its wings as it comes too close to the flame? All it will take is a single, unguarded moment. You've experienced my hunger firsthand, and I came to that house after having fed. Imagine how it would be for me to be there on an empty stomach. How it would be for you to deal with me during those times in our relationship."

Yeah, but that time in the house, that was me. That was me inside you then, Sherlock, not you. You can—

"Nobody can retain control over that kind of hunger all the time. Not even me."

You can. I know you can. Throughout your entire courtship, you've been able to hold it off. That time when you weren't able to feed—

Sherlock shook his head. "I can't manage that level of control all the time," he said simply. "Not when you've become my ultimate addiction. Besides that, there is the more urgent matter of the backlash to be expected from Moriarty's...disappearance. He may be dead but the repercussions of my actions are very much alive. Mycroft will need time to contain and defuse the threat of his cult — it may take months, maybe even years— and while we are together you shall never be safe. I can't be seen with you, John. I can't do this to you— expose you to further danger."

Anger now, rolling off John in waves. And bitter frustration.

**Back in that house, you told Moriarty that I am your heart. Well, guess what. You don't do these things to your heart— tearing it out from your chest and casting it aside. You just can't do that!**

"I've lived this long without a heart. And now that I have one, I must see to it that I keep it safe, even if it must be removed from me. Isn't that what you would do for me if you were in my place?" Sherlock's tone was implacable.

John's lips thinned, but he found he could not refute Sherlock's argument. Not when he said it like that. Finally: *How can someone of flesh and blood live without a heart? Maybe you can but I can't! I don't think I want to go on without...without—*

"Hush, John! Don't say it!" Sherlock's tone was sharp, wounded. "Do not say such nonsense. You can and you will live on. You're practically indestructible. The only one who can destroy you, John, is yourself. Always remember that. You are so reckless with yourself when it comes to the people you care about. You'd gladly invite eternal damnation upon your head so long as you can find someone to be damned with, and I can't allow you to destroy yourself like that. Not even for me."

John was crying now. All points of his argument exhausted, he resorted to a final plea: *What am I going to do without you?*

"I'm giving you your life back, don't you see." Sherlock shook his head a bit helplessly. "Do what other people do. Find someone worthy to marry, have children—"

John's look and tone were incredulous: *Seriously, do you realize how you're sounding just now?*

Sherlock sighed. "I just want you to be happy, John."

Then don't leave me, Sherlock. Please.

"I'm not going to let go, John. I'm in here." Sherlock touched the tip of his finger to John's head.
"And here." He placed the palm of his hand flat on John's chest, on top of his racing heart.

_THAT's not what I meant, you idiot!_

Sherlock sighed again, not bothering to misunderstand. He made to pull away, only to find John's hand tightening over his. Not letting go.

_Kiss me._

"John—"

_I said kiss me, you great, stupid git._

It was a command that allowed no opposition.

Wordlessly, Sherlock leaned down to touch John's lips with his own. He felt John deepen the kiss immediately, stabbing his tongue into Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock gave a soft moan as John effortlessly took over the kiss, caressing his tongue roughly with his own.

From the monitor came a steady beeping sound of warning. John's blood pressure had just exceeded 160/90.

_Tell me now that you'd want to leave me, John challenged. Leave this behind._

"John…"

_Don't. John's thoughts broke apart as a fresh wave of pain welled up inside him. Just don't, Sherlock…_

"I won't let you go. I love you, John."

_I love you, too…I love you so damned much…_

John never saw Sherlock raise his hand to pinch at his neck.

Sherlock closed his eyes as he felt a brief spasm go through John. He continued to kiss John long after he fell unconscious. Kissed the short strands of hair on his forehead. Gently licked away the salty tears gathering on his closed eyelids. Lightly kissed his parted mouth, his chin. Felt the light stubble of beard on his unshaven cheeks. Inhaled his scent from his neck. Felt the strong, steady pulse on the junction of his neck and shoulder.

Sherlock stayed that way for a long time, his face pressed to his lover's neck as he let his senses be filled with John. All of John, to live on in his heart and to be kept safe there.

_And so the fairy tale ends, thought Sherlock, finally moving to rest his forehead against John's, with the fabled monster vanishing from the light of your waking existence to the seclusion and darkness of your nighttime dreams. I am a creature more suited to the fantastical realms that sleep takes you to, never in your daily life when you move around and are part of the real world._

_The life that we've wanted together is a fantasy— the concept as fragile as a dream. It will not stand the light of morning. Though I would like to stay, day has got tired of me. And so I will go and wait for you in all the places where your sleeping mind will take you in its nocturnal wanderings. If that is the only way to make you safe from me, then it is a sacrifice I will very gladly make._

_Never let me go._
My love.

With those words, he finally withdrew from John's sleeping form, his hands trailing down John's body, maintaining contact for as long as they could. Until they finally couldn't.

Sherlock did not risk another backward glance as he made for the door. He wiped away the tears before he opened the door to face Mycroft, to face whatever else lay in store for him as he began to make plans for his own disappearance.

He found Mycroft patiently sitting just outside the room, a few feet away from the armed guards stationed outside John's door.

He felt Mycroft's gaze on him as he slowly approached his brother. Felt his sympathy and understanding, genuine and devoid of any condescension, for once.

Mycroft rose as Sherlock stopped in front of him.

"I'm ready," said Sherlock.

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Author's Notes: A part of Sherlock's thoughts is lifted from Emily Dickinson's poem, "Good Morning, Midnight":

    Good morning, Midnight!
    I'm coming home,
    Day got tired of me –
    How could I of him?

    Sunshine was a sweet place,
    I liked to stay –
    But Morn didn't want me – now –
    So good night, Day!
John did not know how long he slept. An eternity, it seemed. All he knew when he woke up was a sense of profound relief—intense, cleansing. The feeling of a fever finally breaking, lifting from a body made tired by illness but already on its way to mending.

And also complete and utter desolation.

Was this what it felt like to have one's heart taken away from oneself?

He was dead-tired, still. Yet, he had never been more clear-minded. Through the waves of fatigue coursing through him, he couldn't help but notice the bright sunlight drifting in from his hospital window. That, and Mycroft sitting beside his bed.

After the initial start, he turned to Mycroft eagerly, urgently, and the vital signs monitor nearby immediately picked up the sudden acceleration of his heartbeat. His blood pressure remained stable at 120/82.

"You've been out for well over twelve hours, John," said Mycroft with a slight smile as he glanced at his watch.

Fuck that.

"Sherlock," whispered John. Then, more loudly, "Sherlock—"

"—Is safe," replied Mycroft. "As are you. That's the most important thing right now."

No. No…

"He's gone, John," said Mycroft softly. "He has to be, for you to be safe."

John sagged back abruptly on the bed, his mind reeling. So last night had not been a nightmare, after all.

"Where is he?"

"It would be best if you do not know, at least for now," Mycroft said. Reverting to an impersonal tone, he continued, "You will be needing your phone back. Evidently you're not someone who can disappear as easily as Sherlock. There have been some missed calls, messages from your family and friends, and it's only been a day since you went away. It was a good thing you disappeared on a Friday night. Imagine the chaos if you were suddenly gone during a weekday."

Mycroft was never good at making impromptu jokes, and after a short, painful silence with a pointedly uncooperative John, he sighed and pressed on, "You can tell them anything you want. Your phone battery suddenly died, or an emergency has occurred that left you too busy to check your phone. It may not be a bad thing to tell them something closer to the truth—that you've checked yourself into hospital for fatigue. We do hope you can stay for a few hours longer here—we're still going through your apartment for bugs."

John looked at him sharply.

Mycroft shook his head. "Just one, so far," he said. "We found it in your living room, tucked away in your bookshelf facing the sofa. That's probably where he got his videos. I don't think you will
need to worry; there has been no indication that Moriarty sent anyone a copy of those videos of you and Sherlock. There were only two very brief ones in his phone, totally decent, and the audio was not very…revealing."

John stared at him, his breathing suddenly fast.

Mycroft took out John's phone and handed it back to him. "I will take over from here, John," he said. "Cleaning up is what I do best. It will take at least a few months, but so far, the picture emerging is one of Moriarty desperately trying to save face and ruthlessly silencing members of his own coven who had taken to questioning his authority over the past few months. Sherlock's escape sent everything upside down and further weakened his already-precarious hold over his followers. He had thought getting Sherlock back would somehow set everything right, and more importantly, start the transformation he had been dreaming of his entire life.

"In the coming months, I expect to get to the bottom of things involving his coven. It will be disbanded, its members defused of any threat they might pose. You need not fear getting dragged into the investigation, John. As far as we are concerned, you are not even remotely connected to what happened in the cottage at Oxford. You were not there. There will be no formal investigation by the local police force as it has been labeled an incident of the highest national security. The snipers we captured are not a threat. They know nothing apart from the kill they were expected to make, and nothing whatsoever about the quarry. The two who know are now deceased."

Mycroft stared at John. "You do not know just how fortunate you are, John," he said softly. "You're the very first special person that Sherlock has ever spared, and you're very likely to remain the only one for a long, long time. We hope you will be able to live the rest of your life to the fullest with this special knowledge at the back of your mind. Needless to say, we trust that you will never mention the name Sherlock Holmes to anyone ever again."

John swallowed the lump that was suddenly in his throat, and managed a dry croak: "And Sherlock? What's going to happen to Sherlock?"

"Sherlock Holmes is dead, John," said Mycroft. "He was killed in that obscure incident that nobody knows about and which will be branded as a botched house burglary. A body will be released for burial, to lay to rest his fate once and for all. It's for your own protection and to thwart members of Moriarty's coven who would have ideas of carrying on searching for him. As for Moriarty himself, he has disappeared without a trace. Noises from certain sectors will be made over the disappearance of the 22nd Earl of Westwood, but I shall make sure it will not involve you or your connection to Sherlock Holmes, your one-time patient. If talk from your colleagues will invariably link you with the sudden disappearance of Dr. Holmes, you may cite Sherlock's confidences as privileged communication between a doctor and his patient and remain silent."

John licked his dry lips. "This can't be as easy as you're making it sound," he said.

"Can't it?" asked Mycroft mildly. "I've swept incidents with far heftier consequences than this under the rug before. With a few centuries of experience along this line of work, trust me, John, I can get anything done."

John closed his eyes, exhaled a soft breath. This isn't happening.

"You get to live the rest of your life in peace, John. What more can you possibly want?" said Mycroft, his tone finally taking on an edge of impatience as he sensed John's dissatisfaction. "This is real life, not a soap opera in the telly where we can present you with endings wrapped in a bow. If you really love him, you will learn to let him go just as he has let you go. It's not easy for you, but think just how hard it is for him as well. Think of all the things that could happen if neither of
you were willing to let go. It has happened to me. Believe me, I do not wish the same thing to happen to you or to my brother."

John opened his eyes and avoided Mycroft's gaze, staring fixedly at the window instead.

Mycroft continued after a moment's silence: "In the meantime I shall do everything in my power to protect you. I've sworn an oath to my brother that I shall keep you safe. You will not hear from me unless it is absolutely necessary, and I hope in due time you will stop looking over your shoulder to check if I'm watching. But I will continue to keep watch until I decide that you no longer need my surveillance."

Mycroft was already moving away. "Victoria, my assistant, will come by later to pick you up. She will leave you at your apartment. Tomorrow, you can get back to your usual routine. Have a nice life, John," he said as he let himself out of the door.

For a while, there was silence except for the steady beep of the vital signs monitor, where John's blood pressure remained at a steady 120/80.

Proof positive that Sherlock was indeed gone.

John closed his eyes tightly, turned his face towards the pillow as his shoulders shook silently.

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It would be another six weeks before Mycroft would think to summon John.

By that time, John had recovered sufficiently to move on. A difficult task, made all the more difficult by the unanswered questions that teemed inside him. But he had slowly found himself moving on.

He had asked for some time off when he returned to Baker Street that very first Monday. Sarah and the other doctors had understood and had readily given him leave, effortlessly taking over his clinic schedule and his patients. Where he had taken himself off to next was irrelevant to John, as he had spent most of his time sleeping. Nowadays, sleeping was no longer a problem for him, as if his capacity for nightmares had been exhausted by the events of the past month.

He had survived Sherlock Holmes and everything that had been attached to him. No other nightmare could possibly compare to that.

Only, John could never bring himself to think of Sherlock as a nightmare. Far from it. He missed him, and could find no solace in his thoughts, so strangely alone now in his mind.

Sherlock was gone, and John could not find him in his dreams. Wherever he was, it seemed as though he was not interested in resonating with John. It seemed that he was done with him.

And yet life went on. Oddly enough, John had not sunk into a depression as he had feared he would. He recognized now that there was a place inside him that seemed determined to function and carry on, no matter the wounds inflicted on it. Something made of a substance hard and unbreakable. Something that John was surprised to find inside himself, something that had been present within him all along.

It had taken Sherlock to make him realize it.

He wished he had been able to ask Mycroft more specific questions about Sherlock. Mycroft had been deliberately obscure and had held back information that John desperately needed, if only to
assuage the ghastly emptiness that he felt deep inside.

He would have his answers, a few days before Christmas.

Mythof had arranged for them to meet at a private club called The Diogenes. It was snowing lightly when the sleek, black car deposited John outside the club's pristine, white colonnaded building. Inside, a cheerful, roaring fire blazed in the hearth of a reading room full of distinguished old men and absolute hush.

He was taken to a private room by a silent escort with booties on his feet. Mycroft sat in the armchair facing the fireplace. He stood up and extended his hand to John for a brief handshake.

"So glad you can make it, John," said Mycroft as he waved him toward the chair opposite his. "People can get pretty busy at this time of year."

John bit back the first thought that came to mind— of how he could possibly stay away when Mycroft knew he was aching for a piece of information only he could give him— and silently sat down on the chair offered him. He shook his head at Mycroft's offer of refreshments.

With the initial pleasantries behind them, Mycroft briskly settled down to business by handing him a portfolio.

"The progress of things, so far," said Mycroft. "We've been successful at tracking down the leaders of the coven. Apparently, Moriarty had kept them in the dark regarding Sherlock. They knew nothing of Moriarty's entrapment plan. They knew nothing about you. They didn't know where Moriarty had gone, but they were looking. A restructuring of their internal hierarchy was already underway when we put a stop to their operations.

"As for that anesthesiologist."

"You don't have to pursue her," said John quickly. "I'm not interested in seeing her dragged into this. It was clear that she was forced to do what she did. She did her best to make sure I was not harmed."

"Hmm," murmured Mycroft. "All right. If it is your wish, then I will drop my investigation concerning her. Anyway, that's the first part of our operations. For the second part, we've wiped out all the data that Moriarty had managed to collect regarding Sherlock. We've scoured over and secured all his communications. Most importantly, I was able to get this."

Mycroft held aloft an antique volume bound in leather. "The journal by the first Earl of Westwood that started it all," he said, perusing the book with distaste. "The ravings of a lunatic that made sense only to a fellow lunatic."

"Which also happened to be the truth," finished John before he could stop himself.

"Yes," said Mycroft rather sadly. "This was all partly my fault, John. I will not hesitate to admit it. Consider this my remedy."

He threw the book into the crackling fire, and for a time they watched as it flared and burned in the grate.

"This, on the other hand, I shall keep for future reference," said Mycroft, taking out a smaller antique book from the inner pocket of his coat. "It has served its purpose, and may very likely be
useful in catching future vampire aspirants."

"The grimoire," said John, taking the book from Mycroft and rifling through the pages. "Wait, this is where you placed your doodles—"

"All that nonsense about how to turn oneself into a vampire, yes," said Mycroft complacently. "I was lucky to have been able to acquire it shortly after its original owner was burned at the stake. The ink I used was identical to his. I've always had a talent for forging another's handwriting, and happily, I was familiar with the dialect of the region, so…"

"So you wrote all that fiction down and returned the book to its proper place," finished John.

"And five hundred years later, it managed to ensnare a certain dangerous devil worshipper," said Mycroft. "It came pretty late, but what counts is the fact that my efforts bore fruit after all these years."

John gave him a tight smile as he returned the book to Mycroft.

"There is one last book," said Mycroft, his voice thoughtful.

"Oh?"

"I would have done away with it, except that its owner is still very much alive. And Sherlock would have wanted him to make the final decision over the fate of the volume, not me."

John watched, astonished, as Mycroft handed over his own journal.

"I can assure you that your notes were well-thumbed by Sherlock," said Mycroft softly. "It afforded him a great deal of…comfort, to have known your thoughts."

"He's always known my thoughts," said John.

Mycroft tilted his head in silent acknowledgement. "What are you going to do with it?"

Without another word, John tossed his journal into the fire to join Thomas Moriarty's book. "Now that Sherlock's read it, this book has no more purpose," said John. "I've decided that I don't wish to pass Sherlock on to posterity. I'm selfish this way."

Mycroft nodded. "Then I am sure you will approve of the method he has taken to remove himself from us," he said.

John glowered at Mycroft. "Where is he?" he asked.

Mycroft frowned. "What do you mean, John?"

"Don't," warned John, suddenly furious. "Don't pull this stunt on me and pretend you know nothing about his whereabouts. You're right when you think I will go after him, my health and sanity be damned. So it's useless to withhold the information from me. I need to know where he is."

Mycroft was staring at John as though he had gone mad. "You mean to say you don't...oh, for God's sake."

John watched in increasing bewilderment as Mycroft shook his head, bemused. "You mean to say that all this time you didn't know?" Mycroft asked, pitifully.

"You never said anything. Sherlock never said anything. The bastard never even bothered saying
goodbye—"

"Why would he say goodbye to you, John," cut in Mycroft, "when he is only sleeping?"

John realized that he was gaping, and he shut his mouth hurriedly. "How…how does that work?"

he asked cautiously.

"Sherlock never told you about the way we sleep for certain intervals of time?"

"He did mention something like that," conceded John. "About your need to hibernate periodically."

Mycroft smiled. "Hibernation would be one way to describe it," he said. "We do it during periods

of extreme physical and emotional stress. We simply cut off all ties to the present and disappear.

Quite literally, we go to the ground— find a place where we will not be disturbed, a place with

moisture or running water, and shed off our consciousness. It used to be a relatively simple affair:

find a cave, or an underground tunnel inaccessible to humans and foraging animals, or the harsher

elements, make a comfortable pallet of straw and our discarded clothes, and lie down and wait for

sleep to overcome us. Water is an essential element that we cannot do without. In our sleep state, it

is the only thing that will sustain our bodies.

"At this present day and age though, there are always complications. One simply cannot burrow
depth enough into the ground and expect to be left undisturbed. You need not ask where I have kept
Sherlock as I have no intention of telling anyone, not even you. It can be someplace uphill or down
dale, somewhere in the moors or in the crags of a cliff, more likely in a hidden suite of rooms in a
secluded country estate somewhere, equipped with the latest machinery to see to my brother's
reduced metabolic needs.

"You need not scowl at me like that. As I have said, Sherlock is only sleeping. It's not as if he has
severed your Bond. As I have mentioned previously, it cannot be broken easily, although its
deleterious effects can be dampened if Sherlock is in deep sleep. Think of it as a kind of screen to
shield you from Sherlock's radiant glare. This is the solution I would have wanted for myself and
my wife, if only circumstances would have allowed me back in 1914.

"Resonance will not be affected," said Mycroft. "You will be able to see each other in your dreams
as you have done beforehand. If you are to contemplate that we spend a third of each day sleeping,
think of the possibilities that you have in store with Sherlock. I almost envy you, John."

John swallowed and released a trembling breath. "I haven't seen or felt him in my dreams yet," he
said. "From the way my mind felt, I really thought he had gone."


"He doesn't need my forgiveness," said John. He stared at Mycroft in puzzlement. "There is one
thing I don't understand. When you came into the picture, you could have just stopped everything,
stopped me. Save Sherlock from all this trouble. Sherlock said you've done it before. Why did you
allow me to continue?"

"I believe I told you once that I do not do anything without an ulterior motive," said Mycroft.

"And your ulterior motive here being—?"

"Through you, I saw an excellent opportunity for Sherlock," said Mycroft. "A chance for him to
learn some valuable lessons through a very good man. I thought it was time that he grew up."

John flushed at Mycroft's words, delivered matter-of-factly— generous, coming from him, even if
lacking in warmth.

"Wouldn't my human influence be dangerous to him in the long run?" murmured John, voicing his worry at last. "Wouldn't it compromise his perfect state, make him unbalanced enough to affect his hunting and the way he sees people?"

"My dear John, my brother and I are two members of a race on its way to extinction," said Mycroft. "That does not mean we are incapable of adapting just to live out the rest of our lives among our prey, even if it would ultimately mean that we will end up getting adopted by your kind."

"You won't mind…evolving to become one of us?"

"I don't see how we have any choice in the matter, once the rules of evolution are set," said Mycroft. "Of course, Sherlock may not agree to my view, but as I have said, he has a lot of growing up to do. But you do understand why Sherlock had to distance himself from you, John? This pattern of evolution, this process of becoming human, takes time. And a month of such intense change with you is simply too much. No organism can withstand that kind of accelerated metamorphosis.

"At any rate, you have a lifetime to see to my brother's…education. Of all the people he's ever come across, I'm glad he chose you."

Mycroft stood up and extended his hand once again to John, a sign that their interview was ending. "I am keeping you from your holiday duties," he said. "Good luck, John, and I will be in touch with further developments."

They shook hands. John was about to leave, but then he turned back to Mycroft one last time. "You know, you can get some therapy to help you get over your wife's death," he said. "You don't need to hang on to it for so long and let it scar you like that."

Mycroft's brows shot up in amazement. "Are you offering your services then, Dr. Watson?" he asked.

Startled, John quickly backtracked. "No," he said.

Mycroft smiled, nodding. "Very wise of you," he said. "As it is, I am rather fond of this particular scar, so I see very little point in altering or removing it. Happy Christmas, John."

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It was, all in all, a very strange ending, thought John inside the hushed, comfortable confines of the car that would take him back to Central London, back to his life. And yet it was the only ending that fit, the only one possible for his and Sherlock's impossible situation.

All was not lost, after all.

With that knowledge came the final release he had longed for, as if John had been holding his breath for the past two months. He shuddered out a breath, took in a new one even as he felt the last of the heavy load roll off his shoulders.

John settled back into his seat, and closed his eyes.

Of course, life would go on. There would always be problems to solve and overcome, responsibilities mundane and special that John would have to see to for the rest of his life. There would be things he would not be able to help with (Harry's divorce would be finalized in the coming year). And many others where he hoped he could help and make a difference.
Through it all, John would carry within him a special secret that nobody else had access to. A certain person he would be glad to keep safely in his heart. If there was a dark underbelly to John's desires, it would be the fact that he was a deeply possessive and jealous man. Never one to flaunt his assets, he would rather not let anyone else come across Sherlock. Short of being able to turn him invisible, this was a very satisfactory solution indeed. John had to admit that it was a very selfish thing to do, but a man was entitled to a bit of selfishness in one aspect of life or another. In this realm, his desires were absolute: Sherlock was his, and his alone.

_Breathe. Just breathe._

Just like what Sherlock must be doing now, somewhere out there. Safe in his quiet bower, safely in a state of deep sleep, full of sweet dreams, and good health, and quiet breathing.

_I shall continue to live on then, love. As you would want me to do. To live and work and care for the people in my charge. And at the end of the day, I shall look forward to the time when I will meet you on that ethereal plane where time ceases to have all meaning and stops, only to begin again._

_Our time._

_Our time and our place and our many dreams together._

_Dream of me, Sherlock, dreaming of you._

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**Author's Notes:** The last line is borrowed from one of The Unicorn Tapestry's most poignant lines: "Think of me sometimes, Weyland, thinking of you."

A passage from John's thoughts is lifted from the poem, _A Thing of Beauty (Endymion)_ by **John Keats**:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Thank you so much for your kind patience. An epilogue (and a special chapter) will follow, and we are done! Reviews are welcome, as always. Do tell me what you think!
Epilogue

In the early morning hours of Christmas Day, John finally got his wish.

In his dreams, he found himself in the corridor of doors again. This time he did not get lost. There was a slip of paper pinned to the door immediately to his right, on which two words were written: Enter Me.

Heart suddenly pounding, John grasped the door handle and opened it.

The door led John to a cemetery with manicured lawns, set in a hushed atmosphere of fine mist in that still, blue, almost eternal hour just before dawn. John shook out a breath and looked around, but there was nobody in sight. This was hardly the venue for the kind of reunion he had been fantasizing about, but he supposed everything would be made clear to him soon enough.

For a while, he walked through the tidy rows of tombstones great and small that lined the path before him until he came upon a newer-looking one, set slightly apart from the others. The tombstone was a simple affair, a solid slab with no frills attached. It was made entirely of smooth black marble, making the gold letters etched on its surface stand out all the more. There was only a name: SHERLOCK HOLMES. No birth or death dates. No other inscription.

John stared at the name and felt a mixture of feelings course through him. There was sorrow there, and genuine mourning. Quite a bit of bitterness as well. But John's predominant feeling was one of profound relief that he knew better than to believe that the being he had known as Sherlock Holmes lay beneath this particular stone. How would he feel if he thought Sherlock had really died? Knowing Sherlock, he could very well have arranged such a scenario if he had wanted. It would have been unbearable, yet John would have no choice but to bear it.

"Sherlock Holmes is indeed dead, John," a familiar deep voice said behind him.

At last.

A contraction of the heart that was almost painful, then John was turning. Turning slowly around to see his lover stroll up to him with that familiar, easy grace of carriage.

Sherlock stopped a few feet away from John, hands linked behind him, not quite smiling and looking a bit uncertain— so unlike him.

John stared at him for a moment, body tense and rigid, hands locked into fists by his side. His breathing had turned shallow, erratic. He was clamping down so hard that his jaw was beginning to ache. He thought he knew what he was going to do to the bastard when he saw him again, but he surprised himself when he finally made his move. Mutely, he stepped up to Sherlock and threw his arms around him, his grip hard. A startled moment passed, then he felt Sherlock's arms wind around him in a tight embrace.

Sherlock smiled into John's hair, feeling him bury his head at the crook of his neck and shoulder. He felt John's body shaking against him for a few minutes as he continued to hold him tightly in his arms. Except for his harsh breathing, John was utterly silent— a wondrous and heartbreaking thing. After he was sure that John had recovered sufficiently to talk, Sherlock whispered, "Am I forgiven then?"

"You daft git." John's voice was still thick with emotion, but Sherlock could hear a smile tucked somewhere inside it as well. "There is nothing to forgive."
"I did what I had to do. I did it for you, John."

"I know."

John's eyes were dry when he lifted them to gaze fondly at Sherlock. "You're an idiot, do you know that?" he said. "To hide this long from me, thinking I'll be mad at you."

"Weren't you? Even just for a bit?" Sherlock sounded doubtful.

"Yes, I suppose I was," said John. "To be sure, I was looking forward to decking you, though I'd much rather do this right now."

He tilted his face towards Sherlock and caught his mouth with his.

In the cool, blue stillness of near-dawn, among the buried dead— such a luxurious, defiant gesture in celebration of life. And love.

They stayed that way for a while until, with a small, parting kiss, John drew away just a little to look at Sherlock. He licked his lips carefully before he said, "It doesn't hurt anymore. My head, I mean."

Sherlock smiled. "Good," he said. "Going to sleep has been worth it, then."

"Going to sleep does that?"

"This is a very different kind of sleep, John. It slows everything down in my body, taking away the physical hunger, even the intensity of my thought processes. Your thoughts are once more your own, now." Sherlock stared at John with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "How does it feel not to sense my thoughts, John? It must be so relaxing."

John's lips twitched in a momentary smile before he grew sober again. "Going to sleep is never an easy option, is it?" he said. "Especially in the past, when you don't know when you're going to wake up, if at all."

"I have no regrets."

John refused to be derailed. "You gave everything up. You shed off a lifetime's work, everything you've accumulated and achieved— to disappear and sleep. To wake up years and years later to an entirely new world to start all over again. That can't be easy. And I know how much you wanted to hold on to this life. Consider the circumstances that led to our first meeting. You could have just disappeared after that initial trouble with Moriarty, yet you chose to hold on to your life and career by taking a huge risk and agreeing to Mike Stamford's recommendation that you see a psychiatrist. Me."

Sherlock gazed at John. "Your point, my love?"

"You could have waited before you made the decision to sleep," said John. "We could have talked about it. You could have chosen to stay awake until we come across some sort of solution to our problem—"

"That was exactly what I was afraid of," said Sherlock. "To wait until you recover enough to seduce me with your words, your assurances that there is a way that we can be together while we're awake. To wait until I cannot extricate myself from you, which has always been the case with us. To wait until it's too late, until you're gone from me forever."
Sherlock lifted a hand to touch John's cheek lightly. "There is no reasoning with you, John. A minute more with you in the hospital and I would have lost the argument. Besides, my identity has been compromised beyond repair. But more importantly, back in the hospital, I finally realized what I really am to you. I can't be with you because I'm no good for you," he said. "And you can't die, John. You just can't."

John swallowed painfully around the lump in his throat. "Someday I will," he said in a low voice. "It's only a matter of time. You will outlive me by centuries as nature has preordained it. Would I be worth it in the long run?"

"Someday you will die, yes," agreed Sherlock. "Just as I would. But it's not going to happen today. It's not happening anytime soon. I might have spared myself a degree of pain if I were to avoid you altogether just because I fear that day would come. But then, if I did so, I would never have discovered the treasure that is uniquely you, John. I would never have experienced the pleasure of finally having a true friend and an ally. I would never know what it feels like to be alive, so different from merely existing. You are worth it, worth all the pain and sacrifice. Because you have become, quite simply, my happiness."

John bit his lip and looked away, quite overcome. Then, softly: "I love you."

"I know, John. I love you, too."

John shook his head. "Even if you were to remain as you are," he clarified. "I'd love you just as you are. It is an intrinsic arrogance among men to judge everything by human moral standards. Morality would have to be different for someone like you. Mycroft is wrong when he says you'll have to become human, sooner or later. You don't have to, not when it means it will weaken you, somehow."

A corner of Sherlock's mouth went up in a wry smile. "We'll just have to see to what degree I will have to transform myself then, shall we?"

John smiled his agreement.

Sherlock looked away and nodded at the tombstone in front of them. "Here lies Sherlock Holmes," he intoned. "I buried him myself. His short life of 36 years, the little details that made up his existence, his likes and dislikes, his successes and failures. Everything about him is now stored inside a room in my mind palace with the door closed."

"Is it locked?" John wanted to know.

"It was a life well-lived, with some unexpected rewards at the end," said Sherlock. "There are valuable lessons to be learned from his dealings with the people he came in contact with, especially during the last month when he met somebody truly special. Important lessons, and memories too precious to be locked and stored away. Good memories."

He held out his hand. "Come, John," he said. "Let's be away from this morose place. There are other rooms and other lives to explore, other things to be done to make wise use of our time."

"Hmm," said John as he took Sherlock's hand, feeling his fingers twine around his. "Let's hope one of the rooms is a bedroom."

"That can very easily be arranged," replied Sherlock, his voice a low rasp.

He gathered John to him. The kiss this time was eager, hungry; yet, the touch of their mouths was frustratingly off-kilter as they shifted around each other— lips barely touching, breaking apart,
changing angles, touching again, until with a soft growl, Sherlock caught John's head with both hands and slanted his mouth to seal it properly over John's.

A small eternity before they resurfaced, panting slightly, winded.

"And what shall I call you now that you're no longer Sherlock Holmes?" asked John.

The vampire smiled. "You may call me Beloved," he said.

~~~~~FIN~~~~~

Author's Notes: And now we reach the end of the story! What a ride it has been! Thank you so much for sharing the journey with me. Possession is just about the fastest I have written a story (my previous story, also roughly the same number of chapters as Possession, took six years to complete!), and I owe it to all your kind and generous messages for spurring me on. My special thanks to Yutrans, for such a splendid Chinese translation, done with so much care. It is truly an honor, dear!

There is a special chapter coming up just to top things off. This is a good place to stop, as it is really the story's end, but if you are not averse to a bit of naughtiness (my way of making up for all that angst in the last two or three chapters), then we will see each other again in a few days (next Monday--the story has to be posted on a Monday ^_^).

Again, I just want to pay tribute to The Unicorn Tapestry, the novella that started it all for Possession. Please do read The Vampire Tapestry in its entirety. I promise that it's a treasure of a book, definitely worth your time.

Future projects: I plan to do more stories soon, beginning with a prequel to Possession that explores Sherlock's time with Irene Adler in Manchester. Duo Swords from ff.net has also suggested an in-depth exploration into Mycroft's relationship with Anthea— an appealing idea.

There is a new Johnlock AU story that I am outlining, although I am not sure when I can really start fleshing it out. Is anyone up for a little medieval romance? ^_^

Until next time!
They were already kissing by the time they stumbled through the door of the bedroom that Sherlock had chosen in his mind palace.

The kisses were rough, eager. Most definitely hungry. The sort that could only be induced by incredulous joy and immense relief at things suddenly and unexpectedly going right in life at the
very last minute.

John's hands were trembling as he roughly pulled off Sherlock's coat from his shoulders and tore his scarf from his neck.

"Are you sure, John?" Sherlock asked in between kisses.

"Yes. Hell, yes," replied John. "I want you to take me. Take me hard."

He captured Sherlock's face in his hands and broke their kiss long enough to whisper fiercely, "I thought I was never going to see you again, you bastard. I thought you've left me. I want your long, hard, lovely cock so deep inside me now that you'll never be able to leave."

"I thought I've already made it clear that I'm never going to let you go, John," said Sherlock.

"Not enough," said John against Sherlock's mouth. "No words could possibly be enough. You'll need to show me."

"Gladly." The word was a deep growl.

John felt Sherlock's long fingers twisting into his hair, abruptly angling his head up the better to meet the slant of Sherlock's kisses— forceful and deep and thorough, almost cruel in their intensity. The sweetest caresses John had ever had.

Dimly, he felt Sherlock stirring him backwards, guiding him through the few steps needed for them to get to the bed. John felt the sumptuous slide of cool silk beneath him as he was lowered onto the wide bed, followed by the weight of his lover on top as Sherlock moved to straddle him, their kiss never breaking.

John moaned softly into Sherlock's mouth as he felt his lover's tongue slide against his in a slow, urgent tease. Then he felt Sherlock finally break the kiss to move his mouth lower, touching his cheek, his jaw with open-mouthed kisses. Ah, the velvet feel of those lips, the warm wetness of his tongue as Sherlock followed the line of John's neck... down, down, finally stopping at that junction where his frantic pulse leaped.

"There was always a risk when we're together, when I was awake," he heard Sherlock murmur against his throat. "Your proximity, the way it affected me in ways I never allowed myself to show you. All throughout my courship, the hunger was always there, my constant companion, deep down inside. All those times I was alone in your office with you, you'd never guessed at the extent I had to hold myself back, wanting your blood. Wanting all of you.

"You were in grave danger every single second you were with me, John. Did you not realize that? I would look at you looking back at me, thinking you could never guess of the things I longed to do to you. I could have snapped and taken you and I would have reveled in the taking until sanity returned, too late."

"Except you didn't," replied John, kissing Sherlock's hair, stroking his back possessively. "You never lost control, when it came to me. It's the exceptions that matter."

"Oh, John," groaned Sherlock. "I'd like to lose control now."

John felt desire coil inside him, hot and tight, at hearing those words.

"By all means," said John, fiercely.
He felt the sharp sensation of Sherlock's teeth grazing along the line of his neck, followed by his
tongue. Just that and nothing more. For now. Still, it was enough to elicit a small moan from John.

"Hmm…delicious John," whispered Sherlock, nuzzling his neck. "You have no idea how long I've
lusted after your blood. Though as much as I would want it, I want something else more urgently
right now. You've brought this on— taught me to crave for sex. You will give it to me, John. Give
yourself to me."

"Yes," said John. "Oh God, yes."

John felt Sherlock's hands skimming over his clothing, the light caress gradually taking on the feel
of claws, digging through his shirt. The sudden sound of popping buttons and ripping fabric was a
small shock. John felt Sherlock sharply dragging away the remnants of his shirt, replacing the feel
of cloth with his clever, wet tongue.

Yes, thought John mindlessly, winding his hand into Sherlock's curls and arching his body against
that hungry, open mouth. More.

A shudder of delight as Sherlock licked across his chest with broad, flat strokes of his tongue,
lavishing his nipples with saliva before moving down farther to tease with tongue and teeth,
nipping none too gently at his abdomen, down the trail of sparse, coarse hairs just starting at the
rim of his trousers.

John felt Sherlock undo the zip of his trousers, felt fingers brushing at what lay beneath. Felt those
fingers suddenly cease their teasing.

Then he heard Sherlock's voice, rich and dark with amusement, "Well, well. What do we have
here."

John could feel himself flushing. God, how did he look to Sherlock just now, spread beneath him
with his trousers pulled down to his knees? Did he appear too eager? Was he—

Sherlock's next words took him by surprise. "I didn't realize that you'd have this side to you, John. I
wouldn't have guessed in a million years what you've been hiding beneath those respectable coat-
and-tie ensembles that you always wore to the office."

John was sure he had no idea what Sherlock was talking about. He raised his head to look at
Sherlock, and did a double take as his eyes alighted on the sight revealed by his open trousers.

Red pants.

For some reason, he was wearing red pants underneath his trousers. A shade of red as bright as
arterial blood.

He stared at it for a second more in complete incomprehension before meeting Sherlock's amused
gaze.

"Explain," prompted Sherlock.

John started to shake his head, at a total loss on how to go about with an explanation. "You're
serious?" he said. "I mean, this is a dream. I could be wearing diapers inside my trousers for all we
care."

"Yes, you could be," said Sherlock thoughtfully, reaching out with a finger to trace John's straining
member through the damp red cotton of the pants. "Except your mind chose red pants. Why,
John made a noise somewhere between a groan and whimper at the light, teasing touch. "Is it really important right now?" he said through gritted teeth.

Oh God, he needed Sherlock to do that again, but the bastard had withdrawn his hand. And it seemed he was not likely to continue with his advances until John had satisfied this stupid need of his for a good talk in the midst of their heated foreplay.

"Indulge me, John," was all Sherlock said.

John exhaled an exasperated breath, tried to pick up the shattered remnants of his brain and force himself to put together a single, coherent thought.

"Look, maybe this wasn't me at all," he said. "Maybe you're the one who put the red in those pants. Have you thought of it that way?"

"Good," murmured Sherlock, nodding. "Interesting theory. What else?"

"There's nothing else there," snapped John. "You wanted the pants to be red, not me. Red must be your favorite color, isn't it? The most predominant color of your psyche, colored by the most important substance to sustain your existence. Your food. This is you speaking of your need to take me, devour me in a sexual context. Am I wrong?"

"Not quite, but why must it be in the pants, John?" said Sherlock, with the patience of a schoolmaster lecturing to a favorite pupil. "I could have made you wear a red jacket, a red shirt and I would still find you attractive. Why red pants, in particular?"

"I'm sure you'd be willing to tell me that yourself," said John in a low, needy voice.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" obliged Sherlock, already dipping his head down. "I chose to put you in red pants because it's something I'd have to take off you to fuck you properly."

"Oh God," groaned John, unable to believe just how cheesy yet sexy that sounded, coming from Sherlock. He'd never felt so hard in his life.

He saw Sherlock take the elastic band of the pants in his teeth and felt him pull the fabric down. A slow torture in itself. John's head hit the sheets once again as he felt the cool air on his imprisoned cock, now freed from its constraints.

A startled moan erupted from his throat as he felt a line of fire being traced up from the underside of his shaft and he knew he had to raise his head again to see. He lifted his head just in time to see Sherlock, his tongue speared into a fine point as it licked its way up his shaft, pausing to swirl around the head before taking it into his hot, avid mouth.

John fisted a hand, shoved his knuckles against his mouth and bit down hard to staunch his voice, the other hand sliding to grip at Sherlock's curls as he felt Sherlock suck him in, something of his hunger showing at last as he devoured that jut of sexual flesh with such craving, such single-minded intent. John strained upward frantically, thrusting his hips, trying to make Sherlock accept more than what he was taking in, but strong hands very quickly appeared to hold him down, hold him immobile against the bed. Almost immediately, he felt Sherlock's mouth release its hold on him.

"You're not the one in charge here, John," he heard his lover say severely. "Not this time. You are to take anything I'm willing to give you, not impose any of your demands."
Oh God, so he was being punished now. God only knew what else Sherlock had in store for him.

John sobbed out a breath and lay back flat on the bed, panting, looking defiantly and distinctly unapologetic.

A smile in Sherlock's voice as he said, "Such pride. I shall take great pleasure in reducing you to begging soon enough. You know I can, and I will."

John hissed in a breath as he felt Sherlock's thumb and forefinger circle the base of his shaft, felt his tongue return to his glans. But instead of taking it into his mouth, Sherlock was licking at it with small, quick, delicate strokes, like a cat licking cream.

John realized that he was making noises—unfamiliar, agonized little noises at the back of his throat. Wholly embarrassing, and yet he was powerless to stop them from coming out. Just as he was powerless to stop his hips from bucking upward into that cruel, lovely mouth.

Those hands pinning him down once again, and the cold withdrawal of that talented tongue.

"John." Sherlock's voice was laced with warning.

John looked away, his expression dazed. Panting, he started shaking his head. Whether it was from a continued sense of defiance or helplessness, John was no longer sure.

"Stubborn, aren't we?" he heard Sherlock murmur. "Let's see how far we'll have to go before I break you down completely. On your knees, John."

It took a moment for John to obey the command. With a half-stifled grunt, he shifted his suddenly languid legs about him and twisted himself into position, his head pillowed by his forearm.

His flesh leaped as he felt Sherlock's hands on the globes of his arse, massaging the flesh in a firm, ungentle grip. Felt himself being slowly spread open. A harsh intake of breath as he felt Sherlock's tongue licking a hot, wet stripe over that sensitive cleft, so newly exposed.

Oh...

A jolt went through him at the sensation of that tongue returning to circle on that tight, closed ring of muscle.

Oh, that felt so good. John had no idea how that could feel so good, but it did. That felt—oh, bloody hell...!

John cried out as he felt Sherlock's tongue pierce into him. Again. And again.

Oh. Oh! Oh God...!

Dimly, he felt Sherlock's hands on his thighs, keeping him open, keeping him down as he squirmed and thrashed against that teasing tongue. He couldn't help it, couldn't help but move, even if he knew that Sherlock would retaliate by withdrawing himself completely from him. Which he very soon did.

John bit back an oath, forced himself to take deep calming breaths as his body adjusted to the sudden absence of that hot mouth, those unkind hands.

A minute passed. Two minutes. Sherlock was waiting it out, wearing him out.

Three fucking minutes!
Then John did the unthinkable.

"Please," he whispered.

He heard Sherlock shifting to loom over him. "Louder, John," he said. "I don't think I caught that."

Bastard!

"Please!"

"Please what?" Sherlock asked, his voice rich with amusement and dark triumph. "You'll have to be more specific, John."

Oh, fucking hell!


"Hmm," murmured Sherlock. "Inasmuch as I would like to oblige, I don't think you're ready."

John turned his face away from his forearm into the pillow below him, and shouted a garbled obscenity into it.

"I don't think you're ready," repeated Sherlock, the fingers of one hand returning to knead John's arse. "You will need further…preparations."

John jumped a little as he felt Sherlock's fingers bite into his arse, just as he simultaneously felt something push itself deep inside him.

John felt his breath leave his body in a rush at the voluptuous intrusion, felt himself closing in on that one finger greedily. He clenched his body eagerly against it, ground against it as Sherlock worked it in and out of his body in smooth, sensuous movements.

John had had rectal exams before, and he had partially dreaded the feel of this act as something that might remind him of the discomfort he had to endure periodically in the hands of his urologist. He need not have feared. This was not simply an impersonal finger quickly feeling around for his prostate. This was a slow, careful exploration, made by a digit— no, two digits now— that sought and found and refused to remain straight, curling and twisting deep inside him and— oh, God!— sending John almost to the brink as they scraped over his prostate.

Sherlock felt the tension suddenly escalate inside John and withdrew his fingers slowly, languidly.

"Turn over, my love," he mumbled, but John was too busy moaning into his pillow, almost too far gone to hear or comprehend Sherlock, so that in the end, Sherlock had to be the one to turn him over.

The sight of John completely subdued and open beneath him was almost too much for Sherlock. John was so hard that a single touch could set him off. Sherlock reined himself in and forced his voice to be level, almost gentle, as he said, "It's time, John."

"Fuck, yes," said John, panting. "Come on, then, love."

Sherlock had prepared John very well indeed. He was slick and open, accepting Sherlock smoothly as he made his first push into John's body.

Sherlock had to grit his teeth at the incredible sensation of John, tight and wet, clinging around him, against his flesh. A perfect fit. He knew it. He just knew it. This man was just perfect for him.
in every way. Breathlessly, he watched the complex play of emotions across John's face as he slowly withdrew a few inches, only to plunge in deeper into his lover. Withdrawing slowly again, then thrusting deeper. Deeper still, until he was inside John to the hilt.

John was trembling as he felt Sherlock's warmth against him. Inside him, Sherlock was huge. Ah, huge.

"John, open your eyes."

He did not realize that his eyes had flitted shut. With some effort, John peeled them open, his lips forming around one single word: "Move."

With a growl, deep and guttural, Sherlock obliged. All gentleness was now gone, all restraint forgotten as he surged into John, his hips snapping against John's as he moved against him and inside him. His thrusts were deep, his pace a combination of urgency and voluptuous deferment. Greedily, he milked the sensation of excruciating pleasure out of each moment, never once taking his eyes off his lover.

"Oh, fuck!" he heard John shout, felt his lover's arms and legs go around him to bring him in and hold him close. Felt John strain against him, taut as a bow, matching him stroke for stroke with a hunger all his own.

His beautiful, beloved John.

John. Oh, John. Could we have believed this to be possible between us, when we first met? Your mind grappling with my mind, your golden leg now wrapping over my silvery one. Unlike closing with unlike across whatever likeness may be found between us. Enough likeness for us to be joined by a rich complicity that has all the elements of what you human beings call love. Not a dangerous disadvantage after all, but the very key to our survival. And the greatest mystery of all—something I would love to unlock with you, in due time. But right now...right now, John oh John what you do to me...!

Close. So close now. He wouldn't be able to hold on. He heard John cry out as his hand closed around John's quivering length and squeezed.

"Come, John." The words were growled against John's skin, moist with sweat. "Come on."

He watched as John's lips curled back in a snarl of frustration, watched as John mutely shook his head, an expression of pained confusion on his face. Not yet. For some reason, he was not yet ready. He was strung up too tightly from all the excitement, unable to uncoil. Unable to let go.

And Sherlock couldn't. Couldn't hold on for a second longer.

He moved his head to nuzzle at John's neck. And bit down savagely on that junction where he would normally feed, drawing blood, as he started to unravel in John's tight embrace.

"Oh my God!" screamed John, fisting his hand hard into Sherlock's hair as the sudden, unexpected pain ripped through him and pushed him over the edge.

And then they were falling, shouting their release even as they fell, even as they continued to move together past the boiling rage of their orgasm, through the spreading pool of spasms of intense relief, all the while never letting go of each other.
It took a while for them to recover, but this time it could not-- would not-- be rushed.

Contentment, at last.

Sherlock lay with his head pillowed on John's chest and felt his lover's heart beat in a still-frantic pace; he felt the rhythmic pull of air in and out of John's lungs, still fast and slightly irregular.

Felt John's chest suddenly heaving.

He looked up to see John quietly laughing.

"God. Oh, God. Sherlock," John said, looking down at him with such tenderness.

Unbridled joy coursed through Sherlock as he watched his John.

"That was…" John trailed off as he searched for the proper word.

"Perfect," supplied Sherlock after a moment. "It was perfect, John."

"Yes."

"A perfect end to everything that we've gone through so far," said Sherlock.

John thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

Sherlock frowned, puzzled. "No?"

"A perfect beginning for whatever else lies in store for us," corrected John, smiling.

Sherlock smiled back. "True," he said before settling back down in John's arms.
And it was all quite true. In a way, they had only just begun.

They could both feel it, feel the pull and the lure of great adventures to be shared together in their dreams that would last a lifetime.

They could hardly wait to get started.

~~~~~The End~~~~~

More Author's Notes: Kirkus reviews posted their appraisal of The Vampire Tapestry by saying that Ms Charnas "uses the inhuman condition to explore the specialness of humankind", and I feel that this is also true of Possession, wherein we contrast Sherlock's vampire coldness with John's warm humanity. I've mentioned this to several readers before, that Sherlock seemed to flow so naturally from my pen, but I had to struggle with writing John. John is a very special character precisely because of his very ordinariness— a trait so easily abused and neglected, and I would never want that to happen to him while I am writing him. John can ground somebody as special and otherworldly as Sherlock (whether or not he is a vampire), and that is a fantastic trait, very rarely found in real life. I hope I have done him justice in this fic, just as I have Sherlock. The entire story is a love song dedicated to these two infinitely special literary characters that Mr Moffat and Mr Gatiss have recreated in BBC Sherlock.

The writing of Possession was influenced by two vampire stories— "The Unicorn Tapestry" and "The Lady of the House of Love" by Angela Carter. But while Ms Charnas summed up her vampire Weyland as "I am not the monster who falls in love and is destroyed by his human feelings. I am the monster who stays true", and Ms Carter's vampire really did die to achieve her humanity, I thought it fitting to strike a balance halfway between these two stories for Vampire!Sherlock as a reflection of John's gradual, humanizing influence on him, whether in the BBC series or as a vampire. He is the monster who falls in love and is not destroyed or created, but simply transformed.

Thank you so much once again for your continued support for this story. It was a great pleasure to be writing for such a lovely audience. No goodbyes; rather, see you all really soon in another story!

~~~~~@~~~~~

Here's a short excerpt on what to expect in the medieval romance AU that I am planning on writing:

"You can heal people," said Lestrade urgently. "Start healing him, then!"

The soldier gazed down at the writhing form in front of him, in the throes of fever and delirium, and he could not help but remember the vivid details of their fight just yesterday. He had bested this man in hand-to-hand combat, yet he was now this man's captive. His hostage.

This man before him who was no less than his enemy.

John raised hooded eyes to glare at Lestrade. "Give me one good reason why I should help you save him?" he asked.

Lestrade swallowed. "If he dies," he said, his voice a hoarse rasp. "If Monseigneur dies, we are all Dead."

Do tell me what you think! Until next time!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!