Reaction

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Summary

Written for a prompt. Spoilers for TGG, ignores Season 2. Before Moriarty shoved John into an explosive vest, he raped him.
John supposed this meant he wasn't getting any tea.

It was a ridiculous thought to have as his knees buckled, but it swam through his brain nevertheless. Barely a street away from the flat, using one of those shortcuts he hadn't realised existed until he started following Sherlock around, he'd felt a sharp, sudden pain at the juncture of his neck and shoulder, as though someone had punched him with a pen. John had seized whatever had hit him and yanked it out, to find a small, hollow dart with a bright red tip, the kind they used to drug up zebras and lions in nature documentaries.

Then everything had started to get very fuzzy. Among the jumbled chaos of 'oh god, this can't be good' and 'who the hell uses tranquiliser guns on people anyway?' there was the very clear impression that he wouldn't be getting any tea, and he probably should have eaten before he left the flat.

Ridiculous, but it was there nevertheless, and was in fact John's only clear thought as consciousness drifted away like smoke on the wind.

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John didn't open his eyes when he regained consciousness, partly because he suspected he wouldn't like what was going to greet him, but mostly because he wanted to figure out what was going on without alerting his captors he was doing so.

The first thing he took note of was that there was cloth in his mouth. He pushed tentatively against it with his tongue, but it did budge. Gag, then. Either he was somewhere screams would be heard and attract attention, or whoever had taken him just wanted him quiet – it could really go either way.

The second thing he noticed was that he was naked. John had read about how people didn't feel clothes against their skin because their brain became used to the sensation and simply blocked it out, and he figured that was true – he'd never really felt his clothes, not unless they were hideously uncomfortable, but he was definitely feeling their absence. So he'd been stripped while he was unconscious, though why he was stripped remained to be seen. There were a host of possible reasons that suggested themselves: sexual assault (the most obvious), to ensure he wasn't carrying any weapons, to dress him in something else...or they could have taken his clothes simply to unsettle him and put him in a very obvious position of vulnerability in relation to his kidnappers.

He was lying on his stomach, on something soft, something that felt a lot like a mattress. A bed? John shifted, trying to determine what he was lying on and at the same time make the movement look like a natural shifting of position while unconscious, when he became aware of something much more disturbing – he was tied up.

His wrists were fastened above his head to what was probably the headboard (John was going to assume he was lying on a bed) with something that felt a lot like handcuffs. And not the fuzzy sex-toy kind you bought in adult shops, but the police kind, the kind that could cut up your wrists if you struggled against them. His legs were spread so wide John just knew his tendons were going to be aching soon, and they were tied with something both strong and smooth – some kind of synthetic cord?

“Stop playing around Johnny-boy, I can tell you're awake,” came a voice from somewhere to his left. It was a man's – as cheerful as if he were greeting a long-missed friend, but there a sinister edge to it
that made the hair stand up along the back of John's neck.

He almost wanted to keep his eyes shut, to be defiant, but knew that was only misplaced pride speaking. The game was up, and further prevarication would be pointless and only put him at a disadvantage.

That said, John certainly didn't expect to be greeted with the face of Molly's new (and supposedly gay) boyfriend.

“Jim?” he croaked. Or at least, he tried to – with the gag in his mouth it came out as more of a single-syllable mumble.

“We weren't properly introduced before,” the man grinned. It was the kind of grin John had seen on the faces of some of the nastier mental patients he'd had to deal with, the kind that had completely disconnected from reality. “I'm Jim Moriarty. I'd shake your hand, but you're a bit tied up at the moment, aren't you?”

He didn't laugh at his own joke, but his voice was rich with amusement, the kind of gloating smugness John had heard in Sherlock's voice when he was particularly pleased at his own cleverness.

For at least five solid seconds, John did nothing but stare at the man. When he thought of Moriarty, he'd thought of an old professor-type crossed with a Mafia boss, the kind of criminal who'd seen it all and had used that experience and knowledge to challenge Sherlock. He'd imagined someone with greying hair and guns and bodyguards ever-present at his side, not a man who was probably younger than John, dressed in smart tailoring and with a forgettable, almost generic face.

Moriarty wouldn't have looked out of place working in a high-end bank, or real-estate office, or PR job. But John supposed that was the point; there was no skill a criminal needed more than the ability to move about undetected and unremarked upon. And somehow, Moriarty's blandness only made him seem all the more threatening.

It hit John suddenly how very vulnerable he was, naked and bound to the bed in front of the man with a businessman's suit and a lunatic's smile, and the doctor couldn't help but tense. He was reminded that there was still one last 'pip' to go, still one last stepping stone in the mad game Sherlock was playing with this man, but he had a feeling Moriarty was changing the rules.

None of the other people dragged into the bombing spree had described being stripped of clothing and tied to a bed. Either they'd all left that part out, or Moriarty was trying something new.

John suspected it was the latter, and he could literally feel his stomach start to churn uncomfortably at the thought. Moriarty had obviously chosen to abduct him and not a random citizen for a reason, though John still wasn't clear on what exactly that reason was. He was equally sure he'd been stripped and tied to a bed for a reason, and he had a feeling he wouldn't like it.

He took the panicky little voice in the back of his head that was screaming he was about to be raped and told it to shut up. Torture was much more likely – if the whole point of this sick song and dance had been to get to Sherlock, it made sense that Moriarty would want more information on him.

Except that thought just didn't sit right. If Moriarty had known enough about Sherlock to send him shoes from the very first murder case he became interested in, surely there wasn't much he didn't know about the man? At least, nothing that interrogating John would get him, unless he wanted to know how Sherlock liked his tea.
"I can just see your little mind whirring," Moriarty mused, sounding genuinely interested. His voice was bizarre, each sentence moving through a different accent and inflection pattern as though he had yet to find one that suited him. "Moves a bit slowly, doesn't it, Johnny? Not as slowly as some, I'll grant, but still..."

He shook his head, like a teacher disappointed in a child's bumbling efforts. "I really have no idea why he keeps you around."

John assumed that 'he' referred to Sherlock and, unable to yell or curse at the man as he wanted so desperately to do, settled for glaring. It was the glare he hadn't used since his army days, the glare that said 'you are less than a cockroach beneath my boots, now get out of my way or I will end you'.

Moriarty rocked back on his heels and laughed, clapping his hands like a child delighted that his puppy had learned a new trick, obviously not intimidated in the slightest. He then shifted out of view, and John did his best not to outright panic. His head was twisted to the left, and the position he was bound in ensured he couldn't get enough leverage to raise his body and turn his face to the right without smothering himself in the mattress.

"You do display a kind of determined courage that some might admire," came the soft, congenial voice from somewhere over John's shoulders. "And I must admit you're very loyal."

A hand came down on John's exposed back, fingers stroking across his shoulder – his wounded shoulder, and John didn't think that was a coincidence. He arched his back and tried to jerk away, but wasn't truly surprised when Moriarty's grip only tightened, fingers sinking into scarred tissue and sending jolts of pain dancing across his nerves.

"Yes, I can think of a few uses for you," Moriarty went on, and this time his voice was seething with a thousand implications.

Something cold and hard formed in John's chest, but at the same time, he felt the strange calmness he always felt when he was under stress or in danger. It wasn't that he became detached from his surroundings, or that it seemed to be happening to someone else, more like everything became very clear and sharp, and he could see what had to be done as clearly as if he were working a simple mathematics problem.

The hand disappeared, and Moriarty intruded on John's field of vision again, his eyes sharp and staring fixedly, not at John's body, but at his face.

'He wants a reaction,' John realised. 'Don't give him one.'

He tried to deliberately make his face blank, his expression completely indifferent, the way Sherlock sometimes looked when John interrupted his thinking to remind him of such trivialities like food and sleep.

He must have succeeded at least partly, because Moriarty looked vaguely put-out. Then his gaze sharpened and dragged over John's body, and his tongue slid out to wet his lips as though he was physically salivating. But the movement was a little too exaggerated to seem natural. John knew he probably wouldn't have realised it if he hadn't already been sinking into combat mentality, when he was hyper-aware of people's movements and gestures, but Moriarty's leering expression just struck him as...wrong, somehow.

Bizarrely, he thought of Sherlock's earlier performance, when he'd pretended to be over-emotional and grieving to extract information. This had the same ring of falseness to it, though in Sherlock's case it had only seemed staged because John knew him so well.
In an instant, he understood why – this was the behaviour of a mimic. Moriarty had probably never openly displayed desire for someone in his entire life, but because he wanted to unsettle John, he was trying to imitate the movements and expressions he'd seen on other people's faces. He'd probably made that 'hey, sexy' comment purely to unnerve Sherlock – he probably thought sex itself was pointless and time-wasting, but was happy enough to use it to manipulate people.

Knowing that Moriarty's leer was false gave the scenario a pantomime-like quality that made John want to laugh in spite of what he was facing. His face must have given away some of the scorn he was feeling, because Moriarty's expression suddenly turned very ugly. Any other man would have simply slapped him, but Moriarty reached out and quite deliberately curled his hand into John's wounded shoulder before squeezing viciously.

Agony seared through John's body, so intense it was like being shot all over again. Damaged nerves sparked and starbursts danced in front of his eyes as he screamed into the gag. This wasn't the light, reprimanding grip Moriarty had used before – this was cruel and vicious, fingers scraping at wounded muscle and bone as though he was trying to rip John's shoulder out of the socket.

John was released as suddenly as he'd been grabbed and lay still, panting desperately as the pain slowly subsided to a dull throbbing, like a knife was being jabbed there with each heartbeat.

Moriarty's expression was much more genial now. “That's better.”

He patted John's cheek twice, so hard they were more like slaps than anything else, but the remnants of his anger still glittered in the corners of his eyes.

'Can't bear honest contempt,' John thought, committing it to memory because in this situation, everything he knew about his captor was an advantage.

Of course, how he could possibly apply that advantage was another question entirely.

“You see, Johnny.” Moriarty continued, his voice light. “I've got some time to kill before my little rendezvous with Sherlock-”

John's eyes widened, and he made a muffled noise of horror. Moriarty broke off, smiling at him.

“You didn't know? He posted an invitation on his website – we'll be meeting up at midnight.”

John thought back to Sherlock's offer to buy milk himself – unheard of, as he treated supermarkets as though they had some kind of personal vendetta against him – and abruptly realised what had failed to so much as cross his mind earlier. Sherlock had let him go knowing that he was going to meet with the insane bomber later; he'd let him walk out that door knowing that later he would be going into a dangerous, possibly lethal, situation.

When John got out of this, he was going to strangle Sherlock. He was going to strangle him for being the most brilliant man John had ever met and at the same time, the most stupid. He was going to strangle Sherlock for being a monumental idiot and no court in the world would convict him.

But that hinged on getting free from Moriarty first, and John had a feeling that wasn't going to happen any time soon. Moriarty had managed to spin a web that had kept Sherlock intrigued for days; holding John prisoner for however long he wanted to was child's play compared to that. John considered the possibility that he'd be killed as soon as Moriarty was finished toying with him, but dismissed the idea out of hand – the whole point of this was to play with Sherlock, to somehow prove that Moriarty was superior, and outright killing John wouldn't prove anything.

“I'm sure even you can guess that we have hours yet.” Moriarty didn't bother leering this time,
apparently having decided he'd had enough of the play-acting. “What can we do to pass the time, do you think?”

Moriarty's hand carded through John's hair in a bizarre parody of affection, before it suddenly fist ed and yanked brutally, reflexive tears springing to his eyes as his neck was forced backwards at an achingly sharp angle. He felt fingers trace the line of his lips almost curiously, feeling the way they stretched around the gag.

John swore and struggled, ignoring the pain that still writhed through his shoulder, tossing his head even as he felt some of his hair rip free from his scalp. Moriarty laughed and released him, letting his forehead smack inelegantly into the mattress, apparently finding some kind of perverse pleasure in John's struggle to turn his face to the side so he could breathe properly.

Moriarty's patient wait for John to regain his breath seemed somehow the most horrifying thing that had happened so far – it implied he wanted John fully conscious and fully aware of what was going to take place.

“You're really a lovely little pet, aren't you?” he said, deliberately staying in John's line of sight as he unbuckled his belt. “So very amusing.”

He didn't bother undressing all the way; just unbuckled his belt, opened his pants and pulled himself out.

Moriarty was fully erect, which somewhat surprised John. His leers and lustful comments had been an act, so he'd been half-expecting that the man wouldn't be able to get it up. But there was no doubt he was excited; aside from the most obvious evidence, his pupils were dilated and his breaths were rapid and shallow, as though in gleeful anticipation.

John knew it wasn't the prospect of raping him that had Moriarty so excited, but what raping him represented. It was proof of his power, of his control over someone else...and another blow in his war against Sherlock.

His arousal also brought home to John exactly what was going to happen with an impact so solid it was like being slapped.

Beforehand, he'd been able to stay detached, to evaluate the whole situation with an almost clinical eye. Moriarty's clear disinterest in him had made the rape seem an abstract threat – something that was frightening, but unlikely to happen, like being hit by lightning.

It wasn't abstract any longer, and John could feel his heartrate climbing, panic clawing at his throat and making it difficult to breathe. The worst thing about it was that he knew what was coming; the medically-trained part of his brain was inundating him with snapshots of injuries he'd seen and treated, recovery periods and susceptibility to infection. The presence of the prostate made consensual anal sex a mind-blowing experience, but if the participant wasn't relaxed and properly prepared, it could be incredibly damaging and brutally painful.

John knew exactly what was going to happen to him, and he had a good idea of how much it was going to hurt.

'Don't give him a reaction,' he coached himself. 'Don't give him a reaction, don't give him a reaction...' 

But he couldn't help himself from pulling against the handcuffs, the metal edges biting into his wrists like small, vicious animals. Little tingles of pain were beginning to run up and down his legs,
muscles and ligaments protesting the strain of being forced so widely apart. John tensed his body and bucked, his spine arching like a bow, ropes scraping at his ankles as he fought his bonds.

It got him nowhere, of course. Moriarty didn't even bother stopping him, just watched with a kind of unholy glee in his eyes. He knew as well as John did that the doctor was pinned like a butterfly on a card, immobile and helpless.

It was the helplessness that really frightened John. He'd been in danger before, but usually with a gun in his hands and men at his back, and even when he was running after Sherlock without them he wasn't helpless, he could still yell an alarm or fight back or run away – the point was, he could do something.

But now...now all he could do was lie there and take it.

He couldn't help his breath coming in harsh, stuttered gasps when he heard the slick, wet sound of lubricant on flesh.

'Don't give him a reaction, don't give him a reaction...'

The fact that John was anticipating the rough intrusion of the wet finger into his body didn't make it any less unpleasant, any less of a violation. He told himself to relax, told himself to surrender and hopefully avoid the worst of the physical damage, but it was hopeless. He couldn't relax, not now – every muscle in his body was clenched tight in useless, futile resistance.

“You'll have to loosen up a little, Johnny,” Moriarty cooed, the sudden, vicious intrusion of a second finger making John bite down on his gag to prevent himself from crying out. “You're so tense I might rip you clean in two, and that would rather spoil my plans.”

John wanted to swear at him, wanted to tell Moriarty exactly what he thought of his plans, but he didn't dare. His teeth were grinding over the gag, and he was sure that if he relaxed his jaw for even an instant he'd begin to scream and he wouldn't be able to stop.

'Don't give him a reaction, don't give him a reaction...'

The fingers withdrew, and the mattress shifted as Moriarty climbed on the bed between his spread legs.

'Don't give him a reaction, don't give him a reaction...'

Hands spread his buttocks, and something much larger than two fingers nudged between them as Moriarty lined himself up.

'Don't give him a reaction, don't give him a reaction...'

John had tried to prepare for it, but there was nothing, nothing, that could have prepared him for this. Moriarty drove into him like a cudgel, bulling his way through the resisting muscles and tissue without any hesitation, and it felt like a red-hot poker had been shoved into John's guts.

In spite of his vow not to give Moriarty what he wanted, he couldn't stop himself from screaming.
In the end, Moriarty raped him four times before John was released and ordered to re-dress himself at gunpoint.

He didn't bother making a grab for the gun – there was no way he'd be able to take it, not in his condition. His whole body felt pulverised, like he'd been run through a meat grinder and then stuck back together. Moriarty seemed to have found as much delight in causing him pain as an eight-year-old did in playing Pokemon, so John was going to count it a victory if he managed to stand and dress without passing out completely.

As he dragged his arms and legs under him, his limbs weak and trembling after being bound for so long, John silently tried to take stock of his injuries. His wrists were bleeding, torn open by the unforgiving edge of the handcuffs, but the wounds weren't deep, and were clotting already. His shoulder was a mass of twinging, throbbing nerves – Moriarty had brutalised the tender scar tissue whenever he felt John wasn't screaming loud enough – and both arms ached from the uncomfortable position they'd been restrained in.

Truth be told, his whole body ached. He'd fought to the very last, even when he was so exhausted and in so much pain he barely had the energy to tug against the handcuffs...he'd still fought. But muscles and tendons weren't built for that kind of long-term strain, and even now John could feel the tight, burning pull of tissues pushed beyond their limits. Coupled with Moriarty's need to make him hurt, to hear him cry out – a need the man had answered with expertly delivered blows in unexpectedly tender areas and some cruel pinches to various nerve clusters – John was rather surprised that his body still worked at all.

He forced himself into a sitting position, his back prickling uncomfortably as the welts striping across his skin began to tighten and sting with his movements. Moriarty had seemed to derive a certain thrill from bruising him, from marking him, and at one point had gone as far as flogging him with what John thought was his belt. He knew some of the blows had broken the skin, and thought at least two of them were wide enough to need stitches. The bites might need stitches as well. They'd certainly need to be cleaned; the human mouth was rife with bacteria, so much so that infection was practically guaranteed, especially considering that every single bite had drawn blood. Moriarty had never just mouthed at his skin, that would have defeated the whole purpose, after all. It hadn't been about lust or convenience, it had been about power, about demonstrating the extent of his control – it had been about marking John, branding him almost, like a graffiti tag: 'Moriarty was here' – so his teeth had always, always sunk deep into the flesh like a vampire trying to feed.

So, stitches were certainly needed, and sterilisation as well. It felt almost comforting to be able to recite treatments; to look at his body and think of the injuries as a medical exercise, not as something real, not as something that happened to him. It was made a lot easier by the half-numb state he was drifting through, the pain undoubtedly there, present and agonising, but...distant. Removed. As though his brain wasn't quite attached to his body anymore.

John had experienced this state before; it had settled in after he was shot, while he was being hurried back for treatment. In cases of severe, debilitating pain – being shot, having a limb severed or the like – the body produced masses of endorphins in an effort to shut pain receptors down and keep the body functioning. The result was an almost trance-like state, the kind of painless calm that enabled people with broken legs to stand up and limp to a phone to call their own ambulance.
It was that state John had sunk into at some point during the ordeal, though he supposed it could also be the beginning stages of shock.

Lowering his legs to the floor, keeping a wary eye on Moriarty and the man standing next to him with the gun, John tried to stand...

And was suddenly reminded of the one injury he had been doing his best to ignore.

The movement of his legs, his attempt to take his weight on them, the shifting of muscles in his pelvis, it all sent agony shooting straight up his spine like an electric current. He couldn't keep from gasping in pain, clutching spasmodically at the wall as he fought to stay on his feet and not go crashing to the floor.

John knew he'd sustained internal damage – the blood on the sheets (and on Moriarty, before the man had wiped himself off with a tissue) confirmed that much – but he didn't want to think about it. There was no way to rationalise that injury, no way to lock it up in a neat little box and shove it away in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind. He couldn't clinically assess this – this used, violated ache like a long, dull knife inside of him, that changed in an instant into glass-sharp splinters of pain when he tried to move.

“Hurry up, Johnny,” Moriarty taunted, his voice dripping with self-satisfaction. “We have an appointment to keep, and I do feel punctuality is important.”

John's mouth tightened, his jaw clenching painfully as he fought the urge to flinch away from that cruel, viciously smug voice. Instead he squared his shoulders and tilted his chin defiantly, glaring Moriarty down in an effort to say as clearly as possible 'you don't scare me'.

It was a lie, of course – Moriarty frankly terrified John – but he wasn't about to cringe or cower before him. In spite of the nauseous dread and remembered pain curdling in his gut, John held the stare until Moriarty chuckled and shook his head, gesturing to the pile of clothes folded on top of a chest of drawers.

Fortunately it was a very cramped room; John only had to move to the end of the bed before he was in reach of his clothing. He pulled on his shirt and jacket first, wincing as the cloth scraped and rubbed against the welts that decorated his back. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he then attempted to pull on his jeans without aggravating the incessant, throbbing agony that radiated from his arse.

It didn't work, of course. Several times he had to freeze in place, fists clenching until the knuckles bleached as he fought the pain back down.

Moriarty sighed with impatience, like a child desperate to go to the toy store whose father was lagging behind. “Come on Johnny, no need to moan; it might have been a while but it's not like you haven't done it before.”

It was true John was no stranger to sex with another man, but it had been years since his last foray into anal sex (and he really didn't want to know how Moriarty had found that out), ensuring that Moriarty's penetration had been as agonising as if he'd been a virgin.

And the idea that being raped for hours on end was in any way comparable to his previous experiences had John glaring at Moriarty again. He wanted to tell the psychotic bastard exactly what he thought of him, but his throat was so hoarse from screaming he didn't think he was capable of getting out a single word.
So John settled for continuing to dress at exactly the same rate as before, making no effort to either speed or slow himself, as though he'd never heard the command in the first place. He knew playing deaf was a small and frankly childish defiance, but he felt like he had to do something, had to prove that Moriarty hadn't broken him completely.

By the time John was putting on his shoes, his underwear was already damp – blood, most likely, but probably semen as well. Moriarty hadn't bothered to wear a condom, which John had taken as a boast, a way of saying he knew John's medical records well enough to know he was at no risk of catching something from the doctor, and that they weren't going to find his DNA in any system.

The door opened and another of Moriarty's people – this one a woman – entered, carrying a vest laden with explosives and an olive-coloured parka.

John stared at her wearily, trying to recognise some kind of distinguishing feature, something that might be of use when he got out of here...but there was nothing. Both she and the man with the gun were dressed entirely in black, to the extent that they were even wearing the traditional, bank-robber balaclavas over their face.

Sherlock could probably have deduced their life story from the way they'd tied their shoes, but all John could see was an expanse of black cloth from head to toe, broken only around the eyes and mouth.

“Well, go on,” Moriarty encouraged. “Bombs, first, parka afterwards – I don't want you getting cold, after all.”

John had no doubt the only reason he'd seen Moriarty's face was because the man wanted it that way. He couldn't even gain any clues from the bedroom – it was small, true, but that was about the only distinguishing feature it possessed. The furniture consisted of the faceless, generic items found in the mass-produced rooms of large hotels, the sheets were white (though now streaked and smeared with John's blood), the only window had been thoroughly daubed in black paint so he couldn't catch even a glimpse of the outside world...even the paint scheme was a generic beige!

In short, there was nothing, absolutely nothing John could learn from this; not the identity of some of Moriarty's henchmen, not the location of wherever he was being held, nothing! Well, nothing except that Moriarty apparently dabbled in rape.

In that sudden, crushing moment of realisation, John understood the term 'heartsick'. Because he was sick – sick down to his soul, nauseous in a way that had nothing to do with the body and everything to do with the mind. He'd been hoping he'd learn something, discover some kind of weakness in Moriarty that could help Sherlock...then there'd at least be a reason for all this, something to justify what he'd suffered.

But there was nothing, only the blood that dampened his thighs and the searing, merciless burn of his torn body, ripped apart for a maniac's pleasure.

The woman shoved the bomb-vest on him as though she were helping him into a coat, and for a moment John's dazed, fragmented mind was reminded of when he and Sherlock were investigating the smuggling case, when he'd barely gotten into the flat before Sherlock was shoving his coat back on his shoulders, long fingers flipping the lapels against his chest.

For a moment, John wanted to throw up. It just seemed so inherently wrong – these people didn't get to remind him of Sherlock, they just didn't.

He looked down at the bomb, at the packages of Semtex tangled amid the wires and blinking lights,
realising that something felt...wrong. He took a deep breath, hoping it looked like he was resigned, but really to test the weight of the vest against his body.

As he'd thought – it was too light. It wasn't by much, but John had handled Semtex before, and knew that whatever was strapped to him was just a little too light to be Semtex. There was something funny about the wiring as well – nothing he could pin down (John had been a doctor, not a sapper, after all), just a subtle instinct telling him that it wasn't right.

Either the supposed bombs were nothing of the kind, or Moriarty wanted to give the impression that there was much more Semtex on the vest than there actually was.

Sherlock might have been able to make something of that, but John's mind was too preoccupied – too busy quelling any sort of reaction and pretending not to be scared – to think on it for long.

John brought a hand up to touch the hard plastic at the back of his neck, the ear piece nestled out of immediate sight, and wondered why. Why had Moriarty bothered to kidnap him when surely another random bystander from the streets would have served his purpose just as well?

“Why?” John's throat was so raw and his mouth so dried by the gag it emerged as a whispered sigh.

He didn't actually realise he'd spoken the question aloud until Moriarty raised his eyebrows, then gestured at the woman. She departed as silently as she'd arrived, coming back only moments later with a plastic cup half-filled with water.

It was only when she held it out to him that John realised Moriarty intended him to drink it. For a moment, he was suspicious – was he about to be drugged? But it would have been pointless to refuse; John desperately needed to moisten his aching throat, and there was no need for Moriarty to be so subtle about it – if the criminal wanted John drugged, John was sure he'd simply have his henchmen hold him down and inject him with something.

With some effort, John managed to contain his shudder of revulsion at that thought of being held down. He took slow, measured sips of the water, concentrating on the relief of the cool liquid wetting his mouth and throat in an effort to distract himself from that ugly thought.

There was a satisfied gleam in Moriarty's eye as he watched John drink, one that puzzled the doctor at first, until he realised that giving him the water was just more proof of Moriarty's control. Moriarty dictated when John was in pain and when he was not, when he suffered and when he was given respite.

“What was that you were saying?” Moriarty enquired, his voice a study in gentility as John drained the cup.

John knew he was being given an opportunity to retract the question, but didn't bother. He wanted to know why Moriarty had kidnapped him, not any of the dozen easier targets that must have been wandering London. He wanted to know what was so important about this last ‘pip’ that the criminal had deliberately taken someone with a personal connection to Sherlock.

He just wanted to know why this had been done to him – if Moriarty even had a reason in the first place.

“Why me?” he asked, swallowing against the pain in his abraded throat.

“Because you're special, Johnny-boy,” Moriarty smirked.

The tone in which the man said his name and the gloating, satisfied smile that accompanied it made
John's stomach knot and bile tingle at the back of his throat. He tightened his jaw and forced it down, determined not to show weakness in front of the monster staring at him.

“Doctor John Watson,” Moriarty went on, his voice reflective. “The man who showed a freak what it was like to have a friend...the man who taught a sociopath to care.”

There was something almost hungry in his voice, and every muscle in John's body turned to stone at the expression on Moriarty's face.

It was desire. Not mimicked lust or false excitement but honest, overt _desire_, his gaze flickering over John as though he wanted to dissect him. To pull him apart layer by layer to see how he worked.

John locked his knees to prevent himself taking a step back, his chest suddenly as tight as if it had been trapped in a vice. Somehow, that greedy, covetous gleam in Moriarty's eyes was far more terrifying than any threat.

Then Moriarty blinked and it was gone, his sneering, slightly contemptuous mask back in place.

John was actually rather relieved, but did his best not to show it.

Moriarty gestured magnanimously to the door. “After you, Johnny.”

Walking was absolute torture, but John was determined not to so much as whimper, and instead clenched his jaw so tightly he thought his teeth might crack. Still, in spite of the pain, he almost laughed when he made his way out of the bedroom.

He was in a mobile home – the kind some people drove around Europe or America in. No wonder the bedroom had been so cramped. It just made the whole kidnapping seem somehow absurd; John had expected to find himself incarcerated in some kind of secret underground base worthy of a Bond movie. Instead, he'd been tied up in a caravan.

John was exerting every particle of his considerable willpower not to let his mind stray into what else had happened in the caravan only minutes ago. He couldn't afford to crumble, not now. He just had to stay strong until he was somewhere far, far away from here...he just had to hang on until it was over.

“Zip up the parka,” Moriarty instructed, with just a tinge of frustration in his voice, like he couldn't believe John was really this slow.

John glanced down at the vest, wondering if it really _was_ a bomb he was wearing and if so, how much pressure it could take before it went off.

Moriarty sighed, sounding pained. “Do give me some credit, Johnny-boy.”

It somehow didn't surprise John that Moriarty knew what he'd been thinking. He did as he was told, his left shoulder twinging as he hid the bomb from view – anyone looking at him would think he was just out for a midnight stroll.

“Perfect,” Moriarty said, and he looked so gleeful John was almost surprised that he wasn't rubbing his hands together like a cartoon villain. “I must admit, Johnny, I can't wait to see dear little Sherlock's face when he gets a look at you.”

He was all-but wriggling on the spot, and John thought he finally understood why Moriarty had taken him.
It was all about Sherlock, as it had been since the whole mess began. It was about getting Sherlock's attention, about getting a reaction...even the rape had been about Sherlock, albeit in a very twisted, very disturbing way.

In that moment, John made a split-second decision. It probably wasn't very smart, and he didn't know if he'd be very successful at it...but he had to try.

Moriarty had raped him simply to get a reaction from Sherlock, but John was going to do his level best to deny him that.

John was going to do his best to ensure Sherlock never found out.
John thought he was doing well, considering. He'd forced himself to move normally, naturally, in front of Sherlock, forced himself to act as though pain weren't rocketing through every inch of him, and he thought he'd pulled it off pretty well.

He'd even grabbed hold of Moriarty when he'd seen his chance, even though the thought of so much as touching the man made him want to retch. Under any other circumstances, John knew he'd never have moved.

But stronger than the need to run away and never, never come within twenty feet of Moriarty again was the need to keep Sherlock safe.

He'd been a little worried when Sherlock was ripping the bomb off, mainly out of worry that some of the weals on his back had bled through the shirt. He'd held onto his coat though, ensuring Sherlock didn't get a glimpse of them, and desperately hoping that the blood soaking his underwear hadn't begun to stain his jeans.

John hadn't even been able to feel them to check if they were damp or not – that would have just drawn Sherlock's attention to it.

He took the first chance he had to reel to the floor, getting the seat of his pants out of Sherlock's line of sight and hoping he'd passed it off as sheer, dizzying relief at no longer having a bomb strapped to him. Given his injuries, it wasn't the most comfortable position he could have chosen, but he didn't dare shift his weight, didn't dare do anything to make Sherlock think something had happened to him beyond being draped in explosives.

Besides, the pain had become a sort of crutch, fortifying him against the the fuzziness that was rapidly encroaching upon his senses. John had the feeling that he'd pass out on the floor if he actually found a comfortable position – the constant agony shooting through his synapses was probably the only thing keeping him conscious.

Sherlock didn't seem to notice anything, likely because the self-proclaimed consulting detective was acting as jumpy as a caffeinated squirrel in room full of cats.

Of all the things that had happened tonight, it was this that left John the most disoriented. Because Sherlock was always calm, as distant and dismissive as foreign royalty, always acting as though he was in complete control of the situation even when he quite clearly wasn't. To see him pacing restlessly, switching the gun from hand to hand like he wasn't sure what to do with it (which was really a rather frightening thought) made John think of when he was eight years old and the cat had managed to flip the goldfish out of its tank. He'd swooped in for a daring rescue and managed to save his fish's life, but as Sherlock twitched and fretted John was forcefully reminded of his fish flopping on the carpet, jerking and shuddering as it scrabbled for footing in a completely alien world.

So John did what he did best when Sherlock seemed bitter or frustrated or angry or restless; he made a quip, and tried to get him to laugh. Sherlock's reaction somewhat surprised him – while he'd known he could make Sherlock smile, he hadn't known he could make Sherlock relax like that. He hadn't thought anything could, but the evidence was undeniable. As Sherlock smiled, the taut line of his shoulders suddenly eased, and the tension drained from his body as though a plug had been pulled.

John made to stand up, determined to carefully manoeuvre himself so Sherlock was never behind him on the way home, then invent a reason to go out so he could discreetly get himself treated at a
hospital or clinic somewhere.

At least, that was the plan. Then a swarm of red laser sights appeared on his chest and on Sherlock's, and John had the sinking feeling that the plan was about to go down the toilet.

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It turned out John had been right – it hadn't been Semtex attached to the vest.

Of course, John would have appreciated discovering this some other way than Sherlock shooting it and setting off...whatever it was.

It seemed like a cloud of white smoke, except it was much thicker than just smoke, almost like an explosion of very small, very fine particles, like a gigantic dust bomb. John could feel it irritating his eyes as he blinked into the impenetrable morass, his legs moving in what he hoped was the direction of the door, his fingers welded to Sherlock's wrist.

John had seen the flicker of Sherlock's trigger finger, and had made his move at almost the exact moment the gun had gone off. The plan had been to grab hold of Sherlock and get him to the exit, hoping that whatever happened when he shot the supposed bomb would be enough of a distraction that they wouldn't get hit by the snipers. Of course, he was assuming it was something other than Semtex attached to the vest, but if that actually had been a bomb, nothing he did would have made a difference.

At least this way, there'd been a chance they might survive.

The white...something...had billowed out with frightening speed, like a miniature avalanche. He'd only just managed to grab Sherlock's wrist before they were enveloped, and was reeling through the mess with a half-remembered picture of where the nearest exit was. He was desperately holding his breath, determined not to get any of the powdery substance into his lungs – he wouldn't have put it past Moriarty for the gunk to be some sort of nasty chemical weapon.

His outstretched arm hit the door, and the impact was so unexpected it threw John backwards. He swallowed a scream as his back slammed against Sherlock's chest – he could practically feel his lashes re-opening – and reeled dangerously for a moment, his balance deserting him as his pain reached a crescendo.

Long fingers closed around John's arm, steadying him for the split-second it took to get his feet under him once more.

John didn't waste time or breath on thanks – he bolted for the door, dragging Sherlock behind him. He knew the open air would give the substance a chance to dissipate, a chance for the snipers to re-aim, and he didn't plan to be in the building when they did.

He didn't realise he'd run them three streets away from the pool until Sherlock stopped, the sudden arrest of motion yanking brutally on John's hand (still in its death-grip on Sherlock's wrist) and spinning him around.

For a moment, he and Sherlock did nothing but stare at each other. Then, as the haze of adrenaline started to clear, John's body reminded him that he'd been raped barely twenty minutes ago, and that running around was not a good idea. In fact, it had been a bloody awful idea and what the hell did he think he was doing?

John was determined not to faint on the spot, no matter how badly he wished he could. If he fainted Sherlock would examine him to determine why he'd fainted, Sherlock would find the blood, and
then he'd know what happened and Moriarty would have won and John was not going to do that!

He did stagger rather dramatically backwards, though – releasing Sherlock’s arm in the process – and was grateful when his back hit a reassuringly solid brick wall. It hurt, but not nearly as much as the twisted mass of agony between his legs and along the base of his spine. John let the wall hold him up, all his strength going into not screaming as he screwed his eyes shut and took deep, steady breaths while he waited for the pain to subside to something approaching manageable levels.

“John?”

John opened his eyes. Sherlock looked like some bad Halloween costume of the ghost of Christmas past, covered as he was in the white powder. There was a small frown line forming between his eyebrows and one hand was raised towards John, as though Sherlock wanted to reach out for him but didn't know exactly what to do next. The look in his eyes could only be called concerned, with a healthy dose of alarm in there as well.

“I'm alright,” John told him – technically a lie but he was more alright than he'd been a few minutes ago. “Just the adrenaline crash.”

Sherlock glanced down, his eyes going just a little bit wider, a swift intake of breath revealing just how unsettled he was. “Your wrists are injured.”

John followed Sherlock's gaze. While his gloves and jacket sleeves had covered the wounds previously, it seemed all the jarring his arms had taken had broken open whatever light scabs had managed to form – the dark lines where the powder had absorbed his blood were as clear as neon lights against the deathly white of the rest of his body.

John didn't think he could lie to Sherlock with any kind of success, at least not without prior preparation. The trick would be to tell enough of the truth to explain his injuries, but withhold enough so Sherlock never suspected what else Moriarty had done to him.

“He had me in handcuffs, and I tried to slip them.” He offered Sherlock a pained grin. “Wasn't really a good idea.”

Sherlock sniffed, as though almost embarrassed by his previous concern. “Certainly not. For future reference, if you need to get out of handcuffs and are unable to pick the lock, the best recourse is to actually break several bones in your hand.”

“Duly noted.” John had known that already, but it had been impossible to get the proper leverage to break his hand in the position he'd been tied in.

Wanting to draw conversation away from his injuries, John did what was practically guaranteed to distract Sherlock – gave him a problem.

“What is this, do you think?” he asked, wiping at his sleeve to make a small cloud of powder rise into the air.

“Can't tell without a proper analysis,” Sherlock muttered, sounding peeved. As though being unable to determine the powder's chemical composition by sight alone was some kind of personal failing.

In spite of himself, John felt a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, and he quelled the urge to laugh. Mainly because if he laughed it would turn hysterical very quickly, and that would definitely make Sherlock think that something was wrong.

Sherlock's eyes – distant and slightly unfocused, the way he always looked when his mind was
sprinting ahead and leaving everyone else's in the dust – suddenly narrowed in on John with laser-like intensity. “You knew it wasn't a bomb.”

“I suspected,” John admitted. “The vest wasn't heavy enough for that much Semtex, so either it wasn't a bomb, or there were much less explosives on me than there seemed to be.”

Once again, Sherlock looked a little disgruntled, as though wondering why that hadn't occurred to him. Personally, John was glad it hadn't — if it had, that implied Sherlock spent a lot of time handling Semtex, and that idea wasn't exactly conducive to John's peace of mind.

John asked another question, this time one he honestly wanted an answer to. “Why do you think he did that? The fake-bomb thing?”

“Just another test,” Sherlock replied, already looking into the middle-distance as his mind processed the information. Probably trying to calculate if he'd passed or not and what this meant for the future.

John supposed that made sense. At the pool, he'd been wondering if he'd read Moriarty wrong — if he hadn't been raped to get a reaction from Sherlock, but simply because Moriarty was a sadistic psychopath. He hadn't bragged about it at all, and when it seemed Moriarty was about to order their deaths, John had wondered what the point of it was — why rape him if he never let Sherlock know about it, and if he planned to kill them almost immediately?

But this...this told him he hadn't been wrong about anything. Moriarty had always intended for them to escape, and he hadn't bothered bragging about the rape because he was counting on Sherlock figuring it out.

So John had to make sure he didn't.

'Which is going to be very difficult if Sherlock is going to keep staring at me like that and crowding my personal space,' John mused as he witnessed the return of Sherlock's laser-stare, once again focused on him.

He half-expected the taller man to rattle off one of his usual brilliant deductions, and felt a slight chill creep up his spine at the thought — did Sherlock know? Had he figured it out? — but there was nothing. Just a gaze so intense it was almost solid, flickering up and down John's body like he was the piece of evidence that was going to break a case wide open.

John tried to give Sherlock a reassuring smile, a silent promise that everything was going to be fine. He was a terrible liar, but this wouldn't be a lie provided John could get Sherlock home and unobtrusively obtain medical attention. He needed to get the latter as soon as possible — he was a little worried about the length of time he'd been bleeding.

As long as John's adrenaline high lasted and he didn't bleed through the seat of his jeans, he figured he had a shot.

Then he heard the purr of a very expensive engine. Sherlock tensed once more as a black car swung into view, and John tried to take more weight on his legs instead of leaning against the brick wall — if they had to run for their lives again, he wanted to be ready for it.

But when the car door opened, it was Mycroft that emerged, not Moriarty.

Upon seeing it was his brother, Sherlock relaxed marginally, even as John fought against the sudden urge to run in the other direction. Keeping his rape from Sherlock had hinged on the fact that, for all his intelligence, Sherlock seemed to have trouble reading people. While he could analyse their jewellery and wallets and hands and expressions, actually reading the person and not the details
seemed difficult for him. That had been the crux of John's plan – that even if Sherlock could tell there was something wrong, he would simply put it down to the trauma of being abducted by a criminal and would never think to look deeper.

Mycroft, on the other hand...Mycroft could read people. More than that, he seemed to know how people thought and acted – if anyone was going to suspect Moriarty raped him, it would be Mycroft.

“Got yourself into a bit of a mess this time, didn't you, Sherlock?” Mycroft said by way of greeting, giving their dishevelled, powder-covered forms a meaningful glance.

Apparently unable to come up with a suitably scathing reply that didn't admit his own culpability, Sherlock settled for a withering glare and a simple, “Mycroft.”

John didn't say a word – best not to give Mycroft anything to work with.

“Since I am confident you gave me the original plans,” the elder Holmes sibling went on, in the kind of voice calculated to seem as disinterested as possible. “Am I to assume you used a non-functional facsimile?”

For a moment, John was bewildered, then realised Mycroft was referring to the missile plans, the plans Moriarty had supposedly thrown into the pool.

“Don't you know? Can't you deduce it?” Sherlock remarked, and to anyone else he would have sounded exactly as he had in the flat before the whole mess began. Disinterested and contemptuous, wanting only for his brother to be out of his sight...but John could hear the slight hesitation in his voice, the way the syllables trembled almost imperceptibly – Sherlock had been badly shaken tonight.

John spared a moment to hope that he wasn't nearly as transparent to Sherlock. Then he took another moment to silently pray Mycroft would leave soon.

When he heard the distinctive wail of police sirens on the night air, John fought not to swear aloud. He didn't know how long he could maintain this facade of normality, and he certainly didn't think much of his chances in front of both the Holmes brothers and a collection of London’s finest. Alone, he might have been able to fool Sherlock but now...now someone was bound to notice something.

“Cassiopeia is arriving with the police,” Mycroft announced, and John had a sneaking suspicion it had been purely for his benefit – Sherlock had probably known the police were on their way as soon as his brother stepped out of the car.

His puzzlement over who Cassiopeia was lasted until his slurring brain remembered Mycroft's assistant, and that 'Anthea' wasn't actually her real name. He very much doubted that 'Cassiopeia' was, either, and wondered at the change. Did she go through a rotation – a different name every week or some such?

“And there should be an ambulance on its way as well.”

John's wandering attention arrested on Mycroft again with an almost perceptible jerk.

“An ambulance?” he blurted, hoping he didn't sound as horrified as he felt.

“Come now, Dr. Watson, I'm certain you realise that you, at least, require medical attention,” Mycroft said, with a pointed glance at John's ravaged wrists.

Most of the sirens passed them by – probably on their way to contain...whatever it was that had
exploded all over the pool – but one car turned down their street and screeched to a halt just behind Mycroft's.

John wasn't as surprised as he should have been when Lestrade and Donovan emerged from the car. Mycroft had likely ensured they were called to the scene specifically, probably just to annoy Sherlock or something.

John was still feeling strangely dislocated from everything; as though he were watching it in the cinema instead of living it. And it was difficult to connect himself again, because everything seemed a little off-centre and slightly blurred around the edges.

He was aware of Lestrade ranting at Sherlock, yelling something along the lines of Sherlock not being allowed to invite mad bombers to secret rendezvous just so he could feel clever. Donovan was demanding to know who Mycroft was, to which he replied with something that sounded like 'an interested official' and flashed some kind of ID that made Donovan shut her mouth so quickly her teeth clicked.

Lestrade made some motion towards John, as though he were about to grab his shoulder or something similar, and John couldn't help his reflexive flinch. His body thrummed with pain as he jerked away from the outstretched hand as though it held a snake.

Something shifted in Mycroft's eyes like a stone settling on the bottom of a river, like an idea taking root. John looked away from him, trying to school his face to reveal absolutely nothing.

He hoped he didn't smell as strongly of sex and blood as he felt like he did.

“Surely that can wait?” Sherlock snapped, obviously responding to something Lestrade had said that John had missed in his half-aware daze.

John realised that while Sherlock's face was turned towards Lestrade, his body had shifted towards his own, almost as though the taller man was trying to block Lestrade's view of him. Taking in the way he was practically hovering over him, John couldn't help but think that Sherlock's entire attitude seemed almost...solicitous.

'He's had a scare.' The thought hit John like a flash of lightning in the dead of night – a split second of illumination in previous darkness. 'Probably more of a scare than he'll ever admit.'

Almost involuntarily, John remembered the expression on Sherlock's face when he'd first faced him at the pool, remembered the desperation in his voice when he'd asked if John was alright, the frantic way he'd torn the jacket off, the way he'd paced and stuttered...

Sherlock could claim to be a sociopath and to not give a damn about anyone but himself until the day he died, but John knew he'd never believe it again. Not after tonight, not after seeing Sherlock truly, honestly worried about him. Maybe it was true that Sherlock didn't care about people...but he cared about John.

“The man who taught a sociopath to care...”

John very carefully did not flinch or close his eyes or react in any way to the sudden intrusion of that particularly ugly moment. He remained where he was, struggling to keep his breathing even and steady.

But he couldn't help himself from leaning a little closer to Sherlock as though his presence could banish Moriarty's spectre, his body instinctively seeking safety in the face of the shadowy memories that curled and tugged at the corners of his mind.
John knew it didn't make sense. He'd flinched away from Lestrade, and he hated the very idea of Mycroft or Donovan trying to touch him...so shouldn't he be flinching from Sherlock as well?

Maybe Sherlock just didn't seem like threat because he was so far removed from anything resembling sex. That was, of course, excluding the idle fantasies John had entertained, but he was a relatively healthy bisexual male – he'd figured he was allowed his moments of idle speculation. And yes, he might have been nursing a tiny crush, but he'd been coping with it rather well; he'd been dating Sarah, for one, who was quite pretty and very kind-hearted and he thought they could really get something serious going if they tried...and also because John knew 'unobtainable' when he saw it and to pine away for the rest of his life would have been very unhealthy.

Of course, Sherlock feeling safe could simply be another bizarre twist of John's mind – he never seemed to react to trauma the way he was supposed to. He got shot in Afghanistan and should have developed psychosomatic tenderness where the bullet had actually hit him, but instead he acquired a limp. He had nightmares about the horrors he'd seen and should have never wanted to face anything resembling danger again, but he'd ended up craving it like it was some kind of drug. He'd killed a man and instead of being wracked with guilt, he'd giggled about it.

He was raped in Sherlock's name and by all rights should be cringing away from him...instead he only wanted to get closer. He wanted to rest his head against Sherlock's chest and close his eyes and just let everything disappear for a while...

John only realised his eyelids had slipped shut when he felt a sudden, sharp jab to his shoulder and he had to open his eyes in surprise.

'Cassiopeia' was stepping back from him, tucking something out of sight in her purse. Sherlock had apparently been drawn into some kind of procedural debate with Lestrade, and Mycroft seemed to have taken advantage of his brother's distraction to order his assistant to do...something.

Startled, his mind still foggy and slow, John glanced down at his arm, absently noticing the tiny pinprick of blood on his sleeve, a bright scarlet against the white powder.

He'd been injected.

John's eyes jerked up, staring blankly between Mycroft and 'Cassiopeia' for long moments, his numbed brain trying to determine just what had happened. Why would Mycroft want to inject him? And with what?

“I thought you were in pain, Dr. Watson,” Mycroft said, his voice disturbingly soft. “I believed you'd appreciate a little relief until the ambulance arrives.”

Then John knew. He'd been injected with an analgesic, and likely a very potent one. Perhaps it was beginning to work already, John didn't know – he couldn't feel anything other than pure horror.

Mycroft knew. Mycroft knew he'd been raped, and he knew John was trying to keep it a secret. And with the injection of whatever painkiller was already sweeping through his body, Mycroft had told John that he wouldn't be allowed to keep it a secret.

In that moment, incandescent rage blotted out everything else.

“You utter bastard!” John bellowed.

He was dimly aware that everyone around him had gone completely silent, that every eye was turning towards him, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but the arrogant, high-handed bastard in front of him, and in that moment he wanted nothing more than to smash his fist into
Mycroft's nose until that bland, disinterested face showed something real, something *human*.

But John didn't dare push off the wall he was leaning against. He could feel whatever he'd been injected with beginning to work – the pain tearing through him was getting quieter, as though someone was slowly turning down the volume, and his mind was getting fuzzier. He was certain that if he abandoned the support of the wall he'd simply fall into an unconscious heap on the pavement.

“I expect someone to catch me when I pass out,” John announced to the world at large, before focusing his ire on Mycroft once more. “If I hit my head and get a concussion on top of everything else, I'm going to be even more pissed off at you than I am now.”

Mycroft sighed. “Please be sensible, Dr. Watson. You couldn't have hidden it for any length of time, and subterfuge will only hinder your recovery. And considering the dosage Cassiopeia gave you, I'm quite certain you are not going to pass out.”

“Oh, yes, I am,” John muttered, but with considerably less heat. He knew he was going to drop into unconsciousness very soon, so there was no point debating it, and the novelty of being able to prove Mycroft wrong was rather alluring.

Not to mention, it was hard to summon anger while you were halfway to being completely insensible. The pain was going and it was taking the adrenaline along with it, and his body was deciding that now was a good time to shut down for the foreseeable future.

“John, what is he talking about?” Sherlock's voice cut into his brain like a scalpel, and John realised he'd somehow closed his eyes without actually being aware of it again, and forced them open once more.

Sherlock looked almost as worried as he had when John had peeled back the parka to reveal the pseudo-bomb. It was getting more difficult to control his expression, and Sherlock must have seen something in his face because his eyebrows suddenly snapped together.

“John,” he said, his voice more quiet and coaxing than John had ever heard it. “What's wrong?”

He couldn't say it. He couldn't look into Sherlock's face and say he'd been raped – he just didn't have the strength. All his will and nerve were draining out of him, like the blood he could still feel dripping down between his legs.

John closed his eyes and pressed his head back against the wall, swallowing the urge to scream in despair. He'd tried so hard...

“What gave it away?” he whispered through numb lips, feeling heavy and sick.

Mycroft's voice seemed to be coming from very far away. “From what I've managed to gather, this Moriarty fellow fancies himself at war with Sherlock, and this little game was only to draw his attention to that.”

John could only guess at how Mycroft knew that. Sometimes he thought it was better to just assume both brothers knew *everything* unless explicitly stated otherwise.

“It makes sense to assume that he would make the final round especially personal, hence the use of you as a hostage. But given the degree of frankly disturbing obsession that had been demonstrated throughout, I thought it unlikely he would limit himself to simply making you another mouthpiece, but would underline this first confrontation with a more personal attack.”

Everyone was silent, apparently riveted to Mycroft's words. Even though his eyes were closed, John
could practically feel the tension radiating from Sherlock, and wasn't surprised when he heard the quiet scuff of shoes against concrete and felt the slight shift in air currents as the other man moved closer.

But John still didn't open his eyes. Maybe if he kept them closed and concentrated very hard, the whole thing would turn out to be some dream or hallucination or just not real...

“The way you are holding yourself suggests that you are in pain, but trying to hide it,” Mycroft went on. “You are also determinedly keeping your back against the wall, suggesting that whatever injuries you sustained are severe enough that you do not trust your own legs to support you. But you looked frankly alarmed when I mentioned that an ambulance was on its way, so they are injuries you are also endeavouring to hide.”

John couldn't help twitching again at the mention of the ambulance. In spite of the way the world seemed to be sliding away from him, he thought he could hear the sirens in the distance.

“You were not in Moriarty's custody long enough for him to attempt psychological subversion such as brainwashing, so that may be ruled out. The injuries to your wrists indicate both that you were restrained for some time, and that it was in a position awkward enough to prevent you breaking your hands to escape your bonds. And that you wanted to escape is undoubted – judging by how much they've bled, I'd say you would have been quite willing to cut off both your hands to get away.”

There was a soft, broken breath from Sherlock that might have been John's name. But the consulting detective didn't move and he didn't touch him, and John was ridiculously grateful. If Sherlock touched him now, he'd collapse.

Not that collapsing was very far off. John opened his eyes and couldn't see anything but narrow tunnel-vision of the street lamp above his head – everything else was just the random whorls of vague colour he saw when he closed his eyes.

“The lack of visible bruises and the absence of broken bones make purely physical assault unlikely, and you would have alerted my brother to your need for medical attention had the attack been as straightforward as a beating. Sexual assault suggests itself, which is in keeping with my earlier hypothesis about Moriarty. Raping you would have been a deeply personal attack which – in his eyes, at least – would also pollute and degrade something Sherlock values.”

John had a feeling that he should be humiliated, but he wasn't – he didn't feel anything. There was no humiliation, no discomfort, no upset...even his pain was gone. Everything felt very far off; even his own thoughts seemed to be stuffed with cotton wool.

The only reason he was aware he was falling was because his perspective began to tilt. He was vaguely aware of hitting something, of having a much softer landing than he'd expected – someone must have caught him, he supposed – and then the only thing he could see was part of Mycroft's face, most of Sherlock's, and a small patch of black sky.

He didn't know how he managed to speak, only that some stubborn core of him wanted to get the last word.

“Told you I was going to pass out.”

Then everything was gone.
Lestrade didn't know much about John Watson, but he knew he was a good sort of man. Decent, honest, and the upstanding, moral sort that Lestrade almost never met in his line of work because he never had to. And he was just a little bit insane – Lestrade was quite sure there could be no other explanation.

When John had first started turning up at crime scenes with Sherlock and following him about on the man's mad trawls through the city, Lestrade had just assumed that the sex must be really good. But when he'd intimated something along those lines – mentioned to John in passing that he was happy Sherlock had finally found someone to mellow him out a little – John had looked first surprised, then exasperated.

“We're not like that,” he'd said, with the weariness of someone who'd done this more times than they could count.

“Oh.” Lestrade had felt a faint flicker of embarrassment – he was a policeman, it was his job to read people and he rarely got that sort of thing wrong.

His embarrassment hadn't been helped by the whispered conversation he'd overheard between Sherlock and John not five minutes later.

“Lestrade basically just asked me how our relationship is going – it's official, everyone thinks we're having sex.” It had been John speaking, and he'd sounded irritated.

“Really?” Sherlock had sounded only mildly intrigued, as though this was only marginally more interesting than sitting around making intrusive observations about anyone and everyone in sight. “How pedestrian of them.”

“Sherlock, this has to stop.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever you're doing that makes people think we're a couple.”

“And how do you know I'm the one giving that impression?”

“Because I'm fairly certain it's nothing I'm doing, so it must be something you're doing, so whatever it is, stop it.”

“Fine logical progression, John, you're really coming along quite nicely...”

Their voices had faded out then and Lestrade had never got to hear the end of the conversation. But the revelation that John wasn't, in fact, having sex with Sherlock had led Lestrade to conclude that the doctor couldn't be completely sane. Certainly that was the only explanation for the staggering amounts of time he spent in Sherlock's company.

Lestrade didn't mind Sherlock as much as the rest of the force seemed to, perhaps because his personal philosophy was that Sherlock was akin to some bizarre force of nature; you just stayed out of his way and everything was sorted out that much faster. Trying to hinder him just led to unpleasant and messy situations.

Still, for all that he got along with Sherlock (as much as anyone 'got along' with Sherlock), you
couldn't have paid Lestrade to live with the bloke. John Watson not only lived with Sherlock, but actually helped with cases and, in short, spent far more time in his company than Lestrade was sure any wholly sane man could bear.

But in spite of whatever mental illness he possessed, John was a good man, so when Lestrade learned the doctor had been kidnapped by the bomber he was only too willing to throw himself into a car and turn on the sirens and lights full-blast.

An official-looking woman – who was either using a pseudonym or had very sadistic parents – had slid into the car as well, and the ID she flashed had quelled any objections. Lestrade had no idea why the government was getting so heavily involved in this, and had wondered for a few brief moments if this 'Moriarty' person was some kind of international terrorist.

En route, Cassiopeia had told them what she knew, which had been quite a lot. Almost too much, in fact. She knew that John Watson had left Baker Street several hours ago, and had disappeared, abducted by the man known as Moriarty. Sherlock had issued an open invitation to Moriarty to meet at midnight (and Lestrade had experienced a very visceral urge to punch the man at that pronouncement), but was not expecting to find John held hostage.

Lestrade didn't pretend to understand Sherlock, but he did know there was no way that would have ended well.

When he pulled up on the street Cassiopeia had directed them to, Lestrade wasn't really surprised by the presence of another man in front of Sherlock and John; Cassiopeia had hinted that her employer would be waiting for them, so Lestrade assumed this man was her boss. Besides, he was more worried about the two men he knew than the stranger.

Both Sherlock and John had looked like they'd been covered in flour, and the image was so ridiculous it almost brought Lestrade up short. John had been leaning against a wall, looking badly shaken, as though he weren't quite comfortable in his own skin.

Perhaps he should have suspected then, but Lestrade honestly hadn't thought anything of it. The other hostages had broken down and cried after being strapped into bombs, so it was to be expected that John was a bit rattled by it. Besides, it wasn't the doctor that had drawn Lestrade’s attention – it had been Sherlock.

Sherlock had actually looked...shaken. Lestrade couldn't count the number of times he'd seen Sherlock actually disturbed by something before tonight, because it had never happened. Sherlock didn't get frightened, or worried, or concerned – it was one of the reasons he unsettled people so much.

Of course, Lestrade also realised that Sherlock wouldn't want him to make anything of it, so he'd obligingly shouted at him for deliberately antagonising an insane criminal.

But then John had yelled at the stranger and the man had rattled off that sickening monologue and Lestrade's first thought had been, 'why didn't I notice?'

He was a policeman – it was his job to notice these things. He should have known something was wrong with John as soon as he was on the scene; never mind that not even Sherlock had known, Lestrade should have known!

He should have known Moriarty would never have made this final round so easy, he should have known there was a twist. He should have known that the extremely lengthy time period between John's initial abduction and the confrontation just screamed that something else had happened to
John...

He *should* have known, but he didn't – instead, he'd had to have it spelled out to him by what had to be the most callous man on the planet. Really, Lestrade wouldn't be surprised to learn that he was a relative of Sherlock's or something.

Almost as soon as the stranger finished his pronouncements, John buckled. Lestrade made an aborted movement forward, but Sherlock was closer and much quicker – he caught the doctor under the arms, cradling John against his chest as he eased him gently to the ground, the expression on his face one Lestrade could only describe as stricken.

John blinked slowly, looking bewildered and not quite sure of his surroundings, but managed to slur a defiant, “Told you I was going to pass out.”

Then his whole body went limp in Sherlock's grasp, his head lolling before the taller man moved to support it. Lestrade leapt forward, dropping to one knee beside them, his fingers automatically going to John's neck to check his pulse. It was there, slow and steady, and there were no irregularities in breathing, either – it seemed John's body had simply given out from exhaustion.

Besides, even if there was a problem, Lestrade could hear an ambulance only minutes away.

He withdrew his hand from John's neck, and almost swore when he saw the spots of blood on his fingertips. Sherlock hissed like an angered snake, and carefully – as gently as if John had been made of spun glass – turned John against his chest and peeled back the collar of his shirt in an effort to get a look at the wound.

For a moment, horror froze Lestrade's blood.

It was a bitemark. The indents of canines and incisors were sharply outlined in blood, as deep as though Moriarty had intended to tear a hunk of John's flesh straight from the bone. And that clear, tangible evidence seemed to bring the sudden reality of the situation around Lestrade's ears with an almost audible crash.

It wasn't that he'd never seen a rape victim before – he had, and while the experience had been far from pleasant...it had never been someone he knew. It had always been a stranger, someone he could disconnect from, at least in part. It sounded callous, but he needed that distance to function – those policemen that didn't have it either learned to acquire it or burned out within the first few years. It was what allowed him to do his job.

But this...this was John. John, who seemed to be the first friend Sherlock had ever had, who wrote up the cases in his blog with ridiculous little titles, who'd coaxed Sherlock into a Bond marathon if that same blog was to be believed.

John, who'd been tied down – handcuffed, actually – trapped and helpless while...

Lestrade firmly stopped that line of thought; it wouldn't do anyone any good.

Sherlock could have been a granite statue, he was so still and expressionless. The only sign of his distress was a minute spasm of a muscle in his jaw and a slight twitch of his fingers where they curled against John's shoulder, as though he was suppressing the urge to hit someone.

Then Sherlock’s eyes rose to the man looming over them and Lestrade tensed, his body coiling, ready to throw himself between them. Because the expression on Sherlock's face was one he'd seen on the face of murderers.
But at the same time, he wasn't truly worried. To kill the man, Sherlock would have to let go of John, and Lestrade knew that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

“That could have been done with a bit more tact, don't you think?” Sherlock's voice was a study in rage, and not the kind of swift temper that blew hot as a furnace and cooled just as quickly. This was the stony, frozen hatred that led people to pay hit-men to kill their sibling or parent or spouse.

“And what would you have suggested?” the official asked, his voice still so placid and completely undisturbed by the revelations he'd made that Lestrade felt a little sick. “That I whisper in his ear and offer to lead him some place quiet where no one would hear of his shame? John Watson is not and will never be a man to be condescended to, no matter what horrors he has endured.”

Lestrade wiped the blood on his fingers on his trousers, suddenly unable to stand the feel of it against his skin.

The sirens reached a crescendo as the ambulance swung around the corner, and Lestrade couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief.

--

Donovan had never liked Sherlock, never. Not from the first moment she met him, when she was willing to go out on a limb for Lestrade's weird buddy as long as he helped solved the case, but in the middle of her description he announced 'dull' and stalked off.

Donovan had stared after him, horrified. Dull? He thought a murder was 'dull'? That poor man behind her (stabbed twice in the chest) had been someone's son, someone's friend, maybe a father or brother or lover – everyone had someone to miss them. Maybe the police learned to turn their empathy off, to some extent, but there were definitely limits to how far sane, feeling people could detach themselves from it.

Sherlock had crossed those limits so long ago Donovan often wondered if he'd ever seen them in the first place. Sherlock saw people as problems to be solved, as tools, as sources of amusement...as toys. How many serial killers had started out that way?

But she could admit that he did help out with their cases, and that there were more than a few criminals in jail who would have gone free without him. So she never overtly protested his presence, let him run around crime scenes like some lunatic just escaped from the madhouse...

And she watched him. Donovan always watched him, waiting for the day when he'd finally snap. She knew it would come, and she planned to be there when it happened.

Calling him freak, aside from being absolutely honest – he was a freak, a dangerous one, and someday, he'd be a murderous one – was Donovan's way of telling Sherlock that she wasn't fooled. He might pull the wool over Lestrade's eyes, but she knew what he was, and what he'd one day become.

Donovan had stuck to her guns through every case Sherlock had investigated, every favour he'd done for the department. Every time Lestrade had reminded her how much good Sherlock did, she wanted to scream at him.

'Have you seen him? He only helps us because it amuses him! What happened when he decides it'll be more amusing to work against us? He'll run rings around us because you've spent years showing him police procedure and how not to get caught!'
Sherlock was a freak, so close to becoming a serial killer Donovan wasn't completely sure he hadn't already tipped over...because he saw people as mildly interesting puzzles to be unravelled, not as fellow human beings. Sherlock Holmes would never actually care about another person in his life.

At least, that was what she'd thought. But now...

One of the things that had made Sherlock seem so inhuman was how utterly blasé he was about his own well-being. He'd been attacked by irate suspects, furious family members; she'd even seen him after surviving a round with a serial killer, and not once had he ever seemed anything other than supremely unconcerned.

But now...watching John being placed on a gurney, clambering into the ambulance with him over Lestrade's protests...for the first time, Sherlock looked like a victim.

For the first time, Sherlock looked human.

That, more than Lestrade's discreet gesture, was what convinced Donovan to board the ambulance alongside him. She'd go along with them to the hospital, and on the way she'd call up a nice, discreet technician to collect the evidence – she was confident no one wanted this going around the precinct. She'd make sure she'd be the one to collect John's statement; after all, she already knew what had happened and it was probably best they limited the number of people in the know as much as possible.

It was only after she'd made the call requesting a technician with a rape kit meet them at the hospital that she dared to look at the man on the gurney. He was stable, only unconscious, which meant the paramedics had largely left him alone after their initial check – the treatment he needed could be done at the hospital.

John's face was still and completely blank, which was enough to unsettle Donovan in and of itself. John was an expressive person – his face was always changing, quirking and twisting to show his every emotion as clearly as if it was being stamped in ink on his forehead. It was one of the reasons she'd tried to dissuade him from associating with Sherlock, knowing that it would be bad for someone who felt as deeply as John.

Donovan supposed she'd been proved right – associating with Sherlock had proven to be very, very bad for John Watson. But she didn't feel triumphant, just sick.

She risked a glance at John's wrists, feeling her stomach twist at the clear lines of blood circling them, the way they still oozed as though determined to bleed for as long as possible. The creepy government official had been right – John's hands looked liked they'd come close to being torn off. Morbidly, Donovan wondered what other injuries were hiding under the blanket that had been pulled to John's chest. She'd seen long stripes of blood on the back of his shirt when the paramedics had removed his jacket, and that alone was enough to suggest torture had been thrown in along with the rape.

With some trepidation, Donovan risked a glance to her right, to where Sherlock was sitting and staring fixedly at the unconscious John.

He was still covered in the white powder, and would have been a sight to laugh at if not for the expression on his face. Donovan had seen an expression similar to that only once before, and never in real life – it had been in a movie, during a scene in which a character was being tortured.

Even so, the comparison wasn't exact. That had been an actor, someone playing a role, and while it had certainly seemed realistic at the time, Donovan knew she'd never believe it again, not after this.
Sherlock's face was a thousand times more anguished, a thousand times more visceral, so much so that just looking at him felt like being punched in the gut.

Now, the thought that first came to Sally's mind was not 'that freak', but 'that poor bastard'.

But lurking behind those pale, devastated eyes was the murderous intent she'd always known Sherlock was capable of. The monster that had slumbered inside him was awake now, prowling and hungry.

All Sally's worst fears about Sherlock were confirmed in that instant. But instead of rousing an urge to handcuff him or get him sent to a mental hospital, it actually reassured her. Because Sally's biggest fear, during this whole awful episode, had been that Sherlock would find Moriarty, but wouldn't tell them. That Sherlock would find the man too interesting, too appealing to his sociopathic sensibilities and so wouldn't arrest him, but would let him go.

Now, she knew she was only half-right. She knew that if Sherlock found Moriarty again, he wouldn't arrest him, not after this...but he wouldn't let him go either.

If Sherlock found Moriarty again, he'd kill him.

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Mycroft wasn't accustomed to being wrong. He was even less accustomed to being careless, yet that was the only description for what had happened.

The surveillance on John Watson had been interrupted so professionally that by the time anyone realised something was wrong, it was far too late. Mycroft had been paying closer attention to Sherlock – given the message on the website, he'd known that whatever was about to happen would be highly unpleasant and would likely involve him cleaning up another of his sibling's messes. So he hadn't really given a thought to John Watson after he'd been informed that the doctor had left the apartment. He'd assumed Sherlock was trying to be noble, getting the doctor out of a dangerous situation...so he'd dismissed John Watson from the equation.

Wrong. Foolish and careless and wrong.

Then he'd compounded his mistake with another one – two mistakes in the same evening! It was unheard of.

He'd been sure the analgesic dosage had been enough to numb John Watson's pain without entirely putting him out, and had been honestly surprised when the doctor collapsed. Perhaps he'd had some kind of reaction?

It was only when he reached the hospital and acquired a description of John's injuries that Mycroft understood adrenaline had probably been the only thing keeping the doctor on his feet. Mycroft wasn't used to being impressed, but he was rather astounded John had managed to walk while in such a condition, let alone run around taking care of Sherlock and attempting to act normally.

He'd also ensured that John was being treated by a doctor Mycroft both knew and trusted (as much as he could trust anyone), as he wouldn't put it past Moriarty to have John further interfered with in the hospital.

Mycroft had heard whispers of Moriarty, of course he had, but it had never been on his level. The organisation had been implicated in petty crimes only, not something Mycroft bothered with nowadays, and certainly nothing had been said of the sprawling network Sherlock's investigation had implied.
He wanted to talk to Sherlock, to garner more details about the encounter and hopefully a description of the man who called himself Moriarty...but long experience allowed him to recognise when his brother could be reasoned with and when he couldn't. Sherlock might be fit for conversation once Mycroft's doctor had finished stitching up John's injuries, but until he saw his friend, he was going to be absolutely unbearable.

Apparently Lestrade couldn't see that, given the way the inspector was haranguing Mycroft's brother.

Sherlock had finally wiped the powder off his face and attempted to get it out of his hair (only partially successfully, as his dark hair was still sprinkled with white like the faint dusting of snowflakes), and had been forced to change into a hospital-issue cotton tracksuit – his clothes were already on the way to some evidence locker. He'd folded himself into one of the plastic hospital chairs and his eyes were fixed on the door opposite him, the door behind which John was being treated.

In spite of Lestrade's obvious agitation, Sherlock didn't so much as glance at him – all his attention was riveted on the door that stood between him and John Watson.

“You think I didn't see your face?” Lestrade was asking, his question obviously rhetorical as he barged onwards without pausing. “I know I can't imagine what you're going through right now, but if you can't give me that promise I'll have to drag you back to the station until you can.”

“And what promise is that?” Sherlock asked, his voice so condescending it grated.

It was clearly too much for Lestrade, and his voice suddenly rose well beyond what would usually be tolerated in a hospital.

“I need you to promise that you'll do things the legal way! That you'll try to bring Moriarty in rather than just put a bullet in his brain!”

At those words, Sherlock turned his attention to Lestrade for the first time. His eyes were dark and seething, but Mycroft detected nothing but honesty in his voice when he spoke.

“I promise that, upon finding Moriarty, I won't 'put a bullet in his brain',” he quoted, disdain in every syllable.

Lestrade looked suspicious, but evidently decided to content himself with that because he then went down the corridor to make a phone call. Or maybe he just knew that was the best he could get from Sherlock for the foreseeable future.

Sherlock's gaze – once more fixed to the door – didn't waver when Mycroft approached, but then again, Mycroft hadn't really expected it to.

“Your swift acquiescence rather surprised me,” Mycroft said, trying to keep his voice earnest even as he lied.

He'd never seen the point in what was called 'small talk', aside from reassuring people and making them more susceptible to manipulation, more willing to talk about details that they found inconsequential but could upset the balance of Mycroft's calculations. 'Small talk' was a social nicety Mycroft observed only when it benefited him, and only with people who expected it. Of course, this meant he'd never done so with his brother, someone whose grasp on the concept was even worse than his own, and it was a mark of how desperate the situation had become that he was resorting to it now.

But there was something in Sherlock's intent stare that even Mycroft found unnerving. He knew very
well why Sherlock had made that promise, and wasn't at all surprised by his brother's reply.

“Don't be dull, Mycroft, I only promised I wouldn't shoot him in the head,” Sherlock snapped, a smile entirely devoid of humour curling his mouth. “A bullet to the head is in essence a swift and painless way to die – I would like to think I could be a little more imaginative than that.”

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Sherlock didn't know where his brother was, or where Lestrade or Donovan were, and frankly, he didn't care. John had been given a private room, and Sherlock was sitting in a chair beside the bed. In that moment, that was as much of the world as Sherlock cared about.

John was curled on his side, his body instinctively falling into the foetal position, and he looked distressingly small, though Sherlock didn't quite understand why his mind had attached 'distressingly' to the description. John was a small man – it was a simple fact, so why should tangible proof be so uncomfortable?

Perhaps because John always carried himself with quiet assurance – the kind of confidence that didn't need to be shouted or boasted of – as though he were the largest man in the room, and to see him deprived of that was...unsettling. Even with the pseudo-bomb strapped to him, John had been calm and coherent where the others had openly wept. He'd even grabbed hold of Moriarty when he'd seen a chance, urging Sherlock to run.

To know he'd done so even though the man had raped him produced a strange mixture of repulsion and...something almost like pride.

Almost against his will, Sherlock's eyes flickered over John again, tracing out familiar paths of observation they'd travelled innumerable times beforehand.

Sherlock had watched John Watson the way conservationists watched an endangered species – obsessively and almost compulsively. At first glance, Sherlock could usually see everything he needed to know about a person; their attitudes, their home life, their shortcomings, how they viewed themselves and the world...but not John. John never made any kind of logical sense. He lingered when he should have run away, laughed when others would have been appalled, and showed a kind of relentless loyalty Sherlock hadn't actually thought human beings capable of.

In short, John Watson was completely unprecedented, so it probably should have come as no surprise that Sherlock's response as equally as unexpected.

He'd been attracted to people before, of course, but never as a person. It was always an after-thought from his libido, that they had pleasing lips or a nice arse – it was always an abstract concept, the desire removed from the person themselves because they were inevitably dull and pedestrian.

It was different with John, everything was different with John. The thought of sex with John was appealing because he was John. John, whose hands could grasp a gun as easily and comfortably as a mixing spoon. John, who always made pointed comments about helping him with shopping even when he knew Sherlock never moved. John, who yelled about the experiments in the fridge but never actually removed them.

John, who followed him into danger without the slightest qualm. John, who might not understand him all the time...but accepted him anyway.

For the first time in his life, Sherlock wished he didn't observe quite so much. Because while his observations usually told him what John had eaten and whether he'd faced any particularly difficult
patients at the clinic, now they were telling him a very different story. A story Sherlock wasn't sure he actually wanted to know.

Now, he looked at John and saw how he'd fought, how much he'd resisted, and what Moriarty had done to him. He'd had a brief glimpse of John's shirt in the ambulance, of the long, bloodied lines that had soaked into the cloth, clear signs of being flogged with a whip or a belt. He'd also seen a mousy-haired woman he didn't recognise (recently divorced, one young child – a boy) leave with evidence bags, and he'd seen what the clear plastic contained. He'd seen the underwear; cotton, cheap yet comfortable, the plain white colour almost completely obscured by the bloodstains.

Sherlock knew he couldn't begin to imagine what it had been like for John – he had never experienced anything to compare to it, after all – but he did know one thing: John must have been in agony.

Yet in spite of that, he'd worried about Sherlock's welfare instead of his own, he'd gotten both of them out of that situation, and even – misguided as it was – tried to protect Sherlock from the knowledge of what had happened to him.

It was almost inconceivable. Sherlock didn't know what to make of it, didn't know what to think. He didn't even know how he felt about it, only that it was too much; ugly tangles of emotion that lay in his stomach and at the back of his throat like balls of razor wire. He'd always thought people who described emotional pain with physical symptoms were being needlessly dramatic, but he was surprised to find they were right – this actually, physically hurt.

The door opened, and the distinctive sound of Mycroft's footsteps intruded into Sherlock's world.

Sherlock wasn't about to forgive him for what he'd done to John, but he'd forego punching him in the face for now. Maybe when John woke up and could watch...

"The powder is chemically inert and completely harmless to the human body," Mycroft pronounced.

"Obviously," Sherlock scoffed. A man who murdered by botox injection and infected eczema cream wouldn't attempt to kill them by so obvious a method.

For a moment, neither of them said anything, both staring at the unconscious blonde in the hospital bed.

"Why didn't I see it?" The words were soft, almost grudging. As much as Sherlock loathed to admit it, Mycroft was his superior in deduction...and he had to know. He had to know why he'd missed something so obvious, he had to know so it would never happen again, had to know so that if John was hurt again Sherlock would see it and would know what to do...

Because he didn't know what to do now. He, Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective who always unravelled the mysteries that baffled the idiots known as the police – he didn't know what to do. There was nothing in his head but horror and sickness and unrelenting, unceasing questions.

'Why did Moriarty do it? Why? He already had my attention – there was no point, no need to take it to this level! Why did he do it? Why couldn't he have done it to someone else?'

He knew John would have frowned at that last question, would have been disappointed, but Sherlock didn't care. He'd gladly take John frowning at him and berating him for his lack of humanity over...this. Besides, it was perfectly true – he wished it had been someone else, anyone else, just not John. Not John.

"I could tell he was trying to distract me." The words actually seemed to be physical barbs, the way
they scraped his throat raw on the way out. “I knew he was in pain, I could see it...why didn't I think? Why didn't I see?”

There was so much self-loathing in those final words he could almost feel them burn his lips like acid. He knew there was no logical basis for the guilt that choked him – he hadn't known Moriarty was going to strike at him in this way and he'd actually tried to protect John, to keep him out of it – but he felt it anyway.

The only reason Moriarty had been interested in John was because of his connection to Sherlock. John had only been raped because he called himself Sherlock's friend. Sherlock was so utterly disgusted at the thought that for a moment he wondered abstractly if he was going to throw up.

He'd have to make a run for the bathroom if he was. John wouldn't want to wake up to a room smelling of vomit.

“You were occupied with other things,” Mycroft said, in as gentle a tone as Sherlock had ever heard from his brother. “And it is always possible your mind purposefully steered you away from that path. It is difficult to think about people we care for being hurt, so you didn't want to believe that Dr. Watson had endured something so...unpalatable.”

Sherlock could hardly credit what he'd just heard. “Unpalatable?”

A badly-cooked cake was 'unpalatable'. Raw eggs were 'unpalatable'. Noisy children were 'unpalatable'.

“This is not 'unpalatable'.” Sherlock hardly recognised his own voice – it sounded more like the snarling of a feral dog than human speech. “John has been raped, it's...”

He trailed off, feeling a dim sense of shock as he realised he honestly didn't know how to finish that sentence. There was no word in the English language – indeed, in any language he knew – to describe it.

But now he could at least identify one feeling from the tangled morass – anger. Anger that, at the moment, was directed Mycroft.

“Why didn't you stop it?”

He knew Mycroft would understand exactly what he was talking about. Sherlock wasn't an idiot – he knew he and John were under regular surveillance, so surely Mycroft had been alerted as soon as John was abducted? If Mycroft had known of John's kidnapping, but done nothing...

Sherlock wasn't sure exactly what he'd do, only that it would be painful and lasting.

“The interception was expertly done,” was Mycroft's only reply.

That, more than anything, showed Sherlock Moriarty's true reach. If Mycroft had been completely unaware of John's capture, it implied that at least one of his people was working for Moriarty.

He supposed he should have expected something like that. If he wanted to know an enemy's moves, he would have attempted the same.

But the fury – sitting in his chest like a living creature, one with claws and fangs and a blood-curdling howl – would not be denied. It wanted to blame someone, to punish someone, to tear someone apart...
'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction,' the voice of Sherlock's old physics teacher suddenly droned in his head. He wondered if Moriarty had quite anticipated his reaction.

Sherlock had meant the promise he'd given Lestrade. There would be no bullet to the head for Moriarty, no swift and pain-free end. No, when Sherlock found Moriarty (and he would, he would) he was going to do his best to ensure the man felt every second of the long, slow death that awaited him. Sherlock's experiences with criminals ensured he'd seen many and varied methods for inflicting pain, from the crude and brutal to the downright elegant, and he was going to use them all on Moriarty.

He'd start with something small – cigarette burns, perhaps – and gradually work his way up to the truly devastating – removal of limbs and such. Lye might be involved, and certainly fire and electricity would play a part. The difficulty would come in ensuring that no serious nerve damage was inflicted, making certain that Moriarty would feel *everything*, from the moment Sherlock began until the moment he died.

Every action had an equal and opposite reaction. Moriarty's action had been to rape John.

Sherlock's reaction would be to hunt Moriarty down and torture him to death.
When John woke up, everything was feeling distant and nicely fuzzy, like he was viewing the world through a thin veil of cotton wool. The pain was still there, of course, but that was alright – it felt very remote, and John suspected that if he’d woken up and not been in at least some pain, he would have just gone right back to sleep.

He’d been expecting that – the pain and the fuzziness, because considering what he’d been through he’d have been surprised if either one had been absent. What he hadn’t been expecting was Sherlock.

Sherlock, leaning forward in his seat like a boy anticipating the climax of a movie, too scared to look away. As if he’d been physically willing John to wake. He blinked when their eyes met, as though only just realising that the doctor was conscious.

“John...” Sherlock breathed, then drifted to a halt as though not actually sure what to say.

“Are you actually speechless?” John murmured, his voice raspy and raw, feeling very weary but somehow amused. “Hang on a moment, let me call the newspaper.”

But Sherlock didn’t grin, or laugh, or react to John’s words in any way. Some of the nice fuzziness ebbed away as John remembered exactly why Sherlock was staring. He knew. They all knew – Sherlock and Lestrade and Donovan, they all knew.

“Your brother is a bastard.” John hadn’t been planning on saying that, but he wasn’t about to retract it.

“I’ve told him so on many occasions,” Sherlock replied, his voice carefully level. Then he seemed to brighten somewhat. “Do you want me to punch him? I can always tell Mummy I did it on your behalf.”

In spite of his situation, John wanted to laugh. He realised he’d been wrong in his earlier assessment – what Sherlock and Mycroft had was less like sibling rivalry and more like sibling warfare.

“You want to punch your brother, you do it on your own behalf,” he said, his tone serious. “You’re not blaming me for it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to punch him myself. The army trains you for that kind of stuff, you know – if I did it right, I could probably break his jaw.”

Sherlock actually looked pleased at the prospect. “All right, it's decided; you shall be the one to punch Mycroft.”

John felt his merriment fade as reality suddenly intruded on his happy little bubble. He couldn't punch Mycroft until he was out of the hospital bed – he had a good idea of his recovery time, and that it would probably be measured in days, not hours. “That might have to wait a while.”

Sherlock’s expression flickered, his mouth twisting for an instant before he seemed to force it to smooth out. He looked like he was trying to appear impassive but wasn't quite pulling it off.
“Are you alright?” John asked.

Sherlock, for one split second, looked utterly flabbergasted. It didn't last long, but that heartbeat of time was enough to make John feel a dull flicker of amusement. He'd never thought he'd see the day that Sherlock was actually struck dumb with astonishment, let alone at something John had said – usually it was the other way around – and he took a small, almost perverse delight at reversing their roles.

“Am I...?” Sherlock trailed off, blinking hard and looking suspicious, as though he didn't quite believe what his senses were telling him. “John,” he began again, voice purposefully even. “I realise your powers of observation are nowhere near as acute as mine, but I don't see how you could have missed the fact that you're the one in the hospital bed.”

“Doesn't answer my question,” John pointed out.

He didn't want to think about why he was in a hospital bed. He didn't want to think about why Sherlock was so surprised at him asking after the taller man's welfare. He didn't want to think about the fact that he had a good idea of what had Sherlock so distressed – if he concentrated on how it was affecting Sherlock, he wouldn't have to think about how it was affecting himself.

Sherlock was still staring at him, looking as though he were completely lost for words, as though John was the most incomprehensible puzzle he'd ever seen.

Sherlock's scrutiny had never bothered John before – he wouldn't have lasted fifteen minutes in Baker Street if it had – but now it did. Now that there was another, darker reason for it besides Sherlock's desperate need to know everything about a person, John felt fidgety and uncomfortable beneath the weight of Sherlock's gaze, as though it were a razor raking him bare.

Suddenly, John didn't want to know the answer to his question. Sherlock was physically unharmed, that much was evident, and he dreaded to hear what else Sherlock might say.

“So, I take it I've been fixed up,” he said quickly.

Sherlock's head jerked forward in a nod, something dark momentarily flickering through his eyes, like a shadow passing across the surface of a lake.

John wanted to move, wanted to shift position and take stock of the work that had been done on him, but the memory of how much it had hurt simply to dress himself held him back. The painkillers ensured he felt little beyond a dull discomfort, but he wasn't sure if they'd hold up if he moved, and he had no desire to revisit that level of agony ever again.

“Is there some water around?” he asked. His throat was still horribly dry from screaming.

Sherlock jumped up as though he'd been electrified, and moved out of John's line of sight, prompting the doctor to struggle towards something resembling a sitting position to track him. It turned out there was a jug of ice water and some plastic cups on the table beside his bed, the table that had been positioned on the side John had been facing away from.

John never thought Sherlock would practically leap at the chance to get him a drink. Then again, he had probably been as uncomfortable with the conversation as John had, and getting water was an easy way out.

John took the opportunity to get a good look at the room – it was much more luxurious than he'd been expecting. For one, it was much larger than the usual hospital room, and there was a television and DVD player in one corner, along with chairs that actually looked comfortable instead of the
plastic, mass-produced monstrosities usually found in hospitals. The door at the far end probably led to a toilet and shower – private ones, but then, the whole room was private. John supposed the hospital didn’t house rape victims with the rest of the populace in case unpleasant situations arose and John wasn't going to let that thought run to completion.

Fortunately, Sherlock arrived at his side with a glass of water and an excuse to carrying on not thinking about it for the foreseeable future. John reached for it with his left hand automatically, then faltered as his shoulder suddenly tingled with pain, the old injury twinging afresh and reminding him of the abuse Moriarty had given it.

He took the water with his right hand instead, and met Sherlock's scalpel-sharp gaze with his own. John hadn't missed the way Sherlock's eyes had darted along his left arm, the way his lips had tightened as he obviously came to the conclusion that Moriarty had deliberately brutalised his wounded shoulder.

The right wasn't much better, strictly speaking – both of his wrists were equally mauled, and he could feel the burning of pulled and torn muscles, damaged from his prolonged struggles – but it was the lesser of two evils. And John absolutely refused to resort to having a cup held to his lips; he was *not* helpless, and he wouldn't act as though he were.

John drank to the soundtrack of Sherlock's fingers tapping restlessly on the arm of the chair. Sherlock’s eyes were flickering up and down John like he expected the doctor to spontaneously combust at any second.

John drained the cup as slowly as he could, dreading what was about to come, mainly because he didn't know what it was. He'd become fairly good at predicting how Sherlock would react to things – well, he got it right six out of ten times, which were better odds than most people could boast – but he honestly had no idea how Sherlock was taking this. To anyone else, he probably looked impatient; the relentless drumming of his fingers and the way he occasionally glared over John's shoulder as though the wall had personally offended him weren't exactly indicators of sympathy.

But John could see the way the corners of his eyes creased as the muscles pulled tight, the way his tapping was just a little too fast, a little too arrhythmic to be truly impatient, and the look on his face could only be called 'anguished'. John knew that this was a Sherlock wound so tight he was inches away from snapping.

It was that, more than anything else, that was tying John's intestines in knots. He'd promised himself that he'd keep it from Sherlock, that he'd deny Moriarty his final victory, that he'd spare Sherlock...this. And he'd failed. He couldn't even keep it hidden for half an hour.

For an instant John's self-loathing surged, and he gritted his teeth against the frustration that tightened his throat.

In that instant, Sherlock's head swivelled towards the door, and John had just enough presence of mind to smooth his features before it opened, admitting Mycroft and Donovan. Cassiopeia was nowhere to be seen – John assumed she was elsewhere, ensuring Mycroft's bloody 'Big Brother' network ran as planned.

John couldn't help scowling at the thought. He was still supremely pissed off at Mycroft and deeply resenting the injection of painkillers he'd been given. He was also very humiliated that Mycroft had aired extremely dirty, bloodstained laundry in front of all those people...but then, John *had* asked. He might not have liked the reply, but he'd been the one to ask in the first place and John was a great believer in taking responsibility.
He'd never asked for the injection, though. And he certainly didn't appreciate being drugged up on Mycroft's whim.

“I'm afraid I must apologise,” Mycroft said smoothly, as though having read his mind. Which, given that he was a Holmes, wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility. “I did not anticipate that your reaction would be quite so...dramatic.”

John's glare didn't let up for an instant. “For future reference, when a doctor tells you they're going to pass out, they're usually right.”

Mycroft simply inclined his head, which John supposed was the closest he was going to get to a concession.

Beside Mycroft, Donovan was doing her best to look sympathetic and understanding, but John could still tell that she wanted to be anywhere but here. He could sympathise – he didn't particularly want to be in this situation either.

“We've sent the rape kit off,” she said gently.

John stiffened, every muscle in his body suddenly snapping tight. He knew what rape kits involved, and the thought of someone doing that, of someone combing his pubic hair and scraping under his nails and swabbing his...

He clenched his eyes tight shut for a moment, and deliberately bit his tongue, using the sudden surge of pain to drown out the memories that roared in his brain. His skin tingled and tightened in expectation of blows, his injuries aching and throbbing as he remembered them being inflicted, remembered Moriarty's delighted laugh...

He forced his eyes open, and made himself speak. “Bet you fifty quid you get nothing.”

Donovan gave a high, jolting laugh, though it seemed more in surprise that he'd made a joke than anything else. Sherlock's hand was clenched so tightly on the arm of his chair John was a little worried he was about to snap it off.

Mycroft, of course, still looked supremely above it all, but John was beginning to think that was his default expression.

Donovan was very subtly shifting her weight, obviously uncomfortable, but looking as though she were about to speak. John turned his attention to her, which seemed to be a mistake as she only became more unsettled.

“I'm here to...” she trailed off, apparently re-thought, and started again. “We need...”

“I do have a general idea of how this works,” John pointed out, feeling that this was something that should be understood. “Though I'll admit I haven't done it from this side of the fence before...you want a statement, right?”

“Yes.” Donovan looked miserable, and John felt a little sorry for her. He'd treated rape victims before, and it was horrifying and sickening enough when he'd been dealing with strangers – he couldn't imagine what it would have been like if he'd actually known the person.

Of course, just because he knew what to expect didn't stop something in him quailing at the thought of verbalising what had been done to him. The idea of describing what he'd been through made John's hands clench in the hospital blanket, muscles going rigid as he fought the urge to retreat to the corner of the bed and curl into a ball.
“Right, you two – out!” Donovan ordered, snapping back into her no-nonsense, tough-as-nails police persona as she made to chivvy Sherlock and Mycroft out of the room.

Mycroft, placid as always, probably knew that no government post could grant him permission to listen in on a rape victim’s statement. Either that, or he just sensed that Donovan wasn't going to let up until he was outside – at the very least, he started moving towards the door.

Sherlock, on the other hand, looked almost panicked.

It was Sherlock’s version of panicked, which was a lot subtler than that of a normal person, but the signs were there for anyone who knew to look. Sherlock’s hand had shot out and grasped the edge of John’s bed as though he was fully prepared to physically hold himself in place if he had to. His eyes darted between John and the door, and John could practically see his mind churning in an effort to come up with a reason for him to remain there.

With a jolt that he could actually feel, John realised that Sherlock didn't want to leave him.

The words flew out of his mouth on impulse. “Sherlock can stay.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to him, all with varying expressions of surprise on their faces, and for a moment John allowed himself to bask in the triumph – however small – of actually managing to surprise both the Holmes brothers.

“John...” Sherlock had a very strange expression on his face – as though he was torn between being grateful and suspicious of John's mental state. Personally, John thought Sherlock was hardly someone to be making judgements on that subject.

“Well, you've probably deduced most of it already and you'll end up getting a copy of the statement from somewhere,” John explained. “So we might as well skip the intermediate step.”

He didn't mention the real, far more personal reason that he wanted Sherlock to stay – Sherlock might have been the one displaying something eerily similar to separation anxiety, but John didn’t think he'd be entirely comfortable watching Sherlock walk out the door, either. He knew it was going to be uncomfortable and humiliating to tell Donovan exactly what had happened with Sherlock sitting beside him, but he meant what he said. Sherlock was going to find out anyway...and he'd rather Sherlock stayed with him.

“You do realise I'm going to do the same,” Mycroft put in.

“Yes, getting that statement is probably going to be child’s play for you,” John admitted. “But I don’t like you very much right now, so you're not staying.”

Mycroft didn't even look disgruntled – just smiled as though he'd been expecting John's response and left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Donovan produced a tape recorder, and John felt strangely grateful that she was going to just let him talk instead of writing everything down. Something about the incessant scratch of pen on paper, the idea that someone was transcribing every word he spoke, just unsettled him.

The policewoman was clearly trying to find a nice, sensitive way to prod him into talking about what had happened, so he decided to spare her the bother. He gestured for Donovan to turn on the recorder and then began to speak, taking care to keep his voice low and even, as though he were describing a minor inconvenience, like getting a flat tyre.

“I was on my way to Sarah's. I'd only been walking for ten minutes before someone got me with a
tranquiliser gun...”

Sherlock had never had much to do with rape cases. They were, almost without exception, unutterably boring – usually someone the victim knew, and as it was such a physical crime there was almost always enough evidence for him to deduce who’d done it within the day.

Now, Sherlock was more convinced than ever that he wanted nothing to do with rape cases. Not because they were boring, but because they would make him remember. Remember John staring off at the wall, pointedly not making eye contact with anyone. Remember John wincing slightly each time he moved, obviously feeling his injuries even through the painkillers he'd been given. Remember John – in a voice carefully without inflection – describing acts that made Sherlock long to find Moriarty and inflict upon him a fraction of the pain he’d inflicted on John.

When John's voice faltered as he began to detail the flogging he'd received (which had begun after the second rape, and while that information was something Sherlock wished he could delete from his hard drive, he had a feeling he would remember it for the rest of his life), Sherlock had noticed an odd discrepancy. John's right hand was relaxed and steady, but his left was clenched into the hospital blanket so tightly it was shaking, the skin as white as polished bone and the knuckles protruding like bolts.

He reached forward automatically, his fingers brushing the back of John's hand in an instinctive attempt to ease the tension there. John flinched, and Sherlock made to withdraw, but in the next instant John's hand was tightly clenched around his.

It was a stupid, meaningless gesture...but it made the seething tangle in Sherlock’s chest ease somewhat.

John finished his statement without a flinch, or a wince, or any kind of reaction whatsoever. He never once actually looked at Sherlock, and he never let go of his hand.

But that was alright, because Sherlock didn't let go either.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to the wonderful ginbitch who looked this over for me!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After giving his statement, John closed his eyes, took several deep breaths and swallowed convulsively, trying to suppress the urge to vomit that curdled in his stomach and itched at the back of his throat.

Awkward silence had descended upon the room. He wished someone would speak, that they'd say something, anything, but there was nothing but thick atmosphere and the sound of his own breathing. John half-considered breaking the silence himself, but he wouldn't open his mouth until he was sure he wouldn't throw up or scream or both.

He tried to calm himself. He was with Sherlock and Sergeant Donovan now, not Moriarty. Admittedly, he was in the hospital, but he'd be out in a few days...

At that point, John's thoughts ground to a halt. He couldn't just get better, walk out of the hospital and forget all about this. There was no magic fix-it; there would be reminders, painful, ever-present reminders for at least the next six months or so. He could go home, but he'd need follow-up appointments and a host of further tests.

Not the least of which would be the HIV test. John knew he should be horrified at the idea that he might have contracted something from Moriarty, but somehow he wasn't unduly worried. It was difficult to think of Moriarty doing anything as human as contracting a disease.

But those were questions for the future. Feeling marginally calmer, John forced himself to face the silent room, and opened his eyes.

Donovan looked like she desperately wanted to leave and get back to work, the world she understood, but was remaining because she felt like she had to say something before she left and simply didn't know what. John doubted the usual police reassurances applied in his case – they were designed to be made to strangers, to people whose cases they'd work on and then forget, to people they'd see only for evidence and then the trial. Not someone you came into contact with at least once a week, someone you'd actually see mustering themselves by slow, painful degrees as they traversed the long, arduous road to recovery.

Sherlock, on the other hand, seemed to be doing his best to impersonate a statue. The warmth of his hand in John's and the strength in his grip was about the only reassurance that he was a living, breathing human being and not an object carved from marble. He was completely still, completely expressionless, his breathing and blinking as regular and steady as if they'd been operating on clockwork mechanisms.

Somehow, it was even more unsettling than the poorly-hidden tension of before.

Not knowing what to do – if there was even anything he should do – John lightly squeezed Sherlock's hand.

Sherlock twitched, and his face seemed to shift as though the touch had drawn him out of a deep reverie. He looked at John for a long moment, then glanced down and away, as though unsure of himself.

Sherlock actually seemed hesitant, and John was lost on how to respond to that. So he grinned –
even though it felt wrong, like trying to grin through a mask of plaster, pieces peeling off and hitting the floor – and teased him.

“You look ridiculous in that tracksuit.”

Sherlock blinked. John could almost see his mind shifting gears as he tried to dismiss whatever had been on his mind and follow John's attempt to lighten the room's strangling atmosphere.

It was interesting to know that apparently, when the situation called for an emotional response instead of an intellectual one, Sherlock's mind worked at the same speed as everyone else's. If anything, it seemed to work a little slower.

“They had to take my clothes into evidence,” Sherlock said mechanically. “They wanted to analyse the powder on them – it's completely harmless, by the way.”

“Well, that's good,” John sighed. “Glad to hear I won't be dying in my sleep of some mysterious poison.”

“Right!” Donovan said loudly, obviously feeling that she should announce her exit. “I'll be getting back to the station...is there anyone you want to call, or something?”

It took John a moment to realise the soft query at the end had been directed at him. He thought briefly of Harry, then just as quickly discarded the idea – he and Harry didn't have the best of relationships, and this was just something he didn't want her to know. Not yet, at least, not while it was so fresh and raw.

So, not telling Harry, and John didn't think there was anyone else...

“Sarah, maybe?” Donovan asked gently.

John could have kicked himself. She would have been expecting him hours ago – god only knew what she thought had happened to him.

He didn't want see her – not like this, not with him in the hospital bed and her trying to be sensitive and not let the pity show – but she should at least be told that he wasn't lying dead in an alleyway somewhere.

It occurred to John that he was going to have to break up with her – he couldn't in good conscience drag Sarah into this. It wasn't that he didn't think she was strong enough to face this with him...it was that their relationship wasn't strong enough. They hadn't known each other long enough to be able to go through something like this without it destroying them completely.

At least if he ended the relationship now, something could be salvaged. Sarah would protest, of course, but not too much – they hadn't been going out long enough to become truly emotionally invested – and they'd at least be able to stand the sight of each other afterwards.

Donovan was still looking at him expectantly, and John realised he hadn't actually verbalised his reply.

“Sarah, she...she should at least know where I am,” he told her, his voice thick. “But I'd prefer...could you not...”

Fortunately, Donovan understood what he was trying to say. She simply smiled – a tight, pinched smile, obviously forced but a smile nevertheless – and nodded in a way that told him she'd be discreet without actually saying a word. It was a gesture John was familiar with; he'd used it himself
whenever he was treating a particularly embarrassing ailment.

“I'll tell her you're still alive,” the policewoman said gently. “And I'll...would you like me to try to find someone for...well, you know...for you to talk to?”

John's gratitude withered a little at that question and he shook his head – a twitchy, abortive jerk that was more like a nervous spasm than actual movement. “Not now.”

Donovan nodded and left, quietly shutting the door behind her.

John knew he'd have to see a counsellor eventually, he knew it, just...not now. He didn't want a stranger barging into his room asking how he felt about this – he just wanted to be left alone. The rest of the world could just sod off.

Except Sherlock. John was happy with Sherlock right where he was.

He was still holding Sherlock's hand, and briefly wondered if he should let go, but just as swiftly decided against it. John liked the contact; it was reassuring to have Sherlock so tangibly close, and besides, if Sherlock had a problem with it John was sure he'd have said something by now.

Assuming he was even paying attention – Sherlock's face had taken on that distant, savagely focused expression he wore when he was thinking very hard about something.

“Sherlock?”

“I'm not like him.”

John swallowed, licking at his teeth in an effort to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. There was no doubt who Sherlock was referring to.

“I know,” he replied quietly.

“He said I was like him.” Sherlock's voice had a strange, almost absent intonation, as though he wasn't quite aware he was speaking aloud. “Consulting criminal, consulting detective, he said-”

“Well, he was wrong.” Of that, John had no doubt whatsoever. “I mean, you're a bit on the odd side, and sometimes you can be a right bastard, but you're nothing like him.”

Sherlock looked up at him, and there was a strange expression in his eyes – as though he were actually worried. “How do you know? I'm a sociopath, people have called me cruel on innumerable occasions...how do you know?”

Something in John's chest twisted at the hint of desperation in Sherlock's voice, at the honest yearning he could hear beneath the words.

“You're nothing like...Moriarty.” John wondered if the pause before he said the name was too obvious. It left a sour taste in his mouth and sent his pulse jumping, but he refused to shy away from the name – it was just a word, after all. “Maybe you can be cruel, but it's more out of...I don't know, disinterest, than anything else. You don't enjoy it.”

He grimaced, a shudder skating up his spine as memories seared over his brain like a bucket of icy water. “He...he enjoys it. He's cruel because he likes to be, because he gets off on it...quite literally.” The laugh that burst from John's mouth was black and ugly and felt like spitting poison.

John knew he was right about Moriarty. Rape might have been new to him, but cruelty certainly
wasn't – he'd probably been the kind of kid who did unspeakable things to butterflies and small, furry animals just for fun.

The thought of this made John's wrists ache with phantom pain as he remembered the handcuffs that had ringed them, his skin splitting against the sharp metal edge. Remembered the ropes around his ankles that held his legs apart, the gag that pulled at his lips and filled his mouth and kept him from protesting...

Long fingers tightened around John's hand, and he snapped into the present so quickly it was like getting whiplash.

Something in Sherlock's expression told him the taller man suspected where his thoughts had been. “John...”

John shook his head, trying to silence the edged, manic laughter that still echoed in his brain. Trying to rattle away the memories that crept at the edge of his mind. His skin crawled, he felt sick and irritated and suddenly he couldn't bear it any longer.

“I want a shower.”

Sherlock absorbed his non-sequitur with no sign of surprise. “Is that wise?”


He had no idea what kind of bandages had been used on him, but he suspected they wouldn't hold up to being inundated with water. Not to mention the irritation that hot, running water could cause to his injuries.

But none of those things mattered right now. Recovery could wait – he just needed to feel clean.

He had half-expected Sherlock to object, but he simply looked at John for several long, uncomfortable moments before nodding. Then his brow furrowed and he looked pensive.

“Can you...walk?”

For an instant John was terribly, inexplicably angry at the idea that Sherlock thought him helpless. Then he reminded himself that Sherlock had seen him drop in the middle of the street because he'd been injected with painkillers.

“I'm going to,” John said darkly.

He forced himself to slide his hand out of Sherlock's grasp – his fingers were somehow reluctant to let go – and grasped the edge of the bed, propping himself up in a sitting position.

It hurt, but compared to how much it had hurt beforehand, it was a walk in the park. Still, it was several moments before John felt like swinging his legs over the bed and trying to stand. He knew his legs were capable of taking his weight but they wavered dangerously underneath him, muscles and tendons throbbing painfully as he forced them into motion. Step by hesitant step, he approached the bathroom door.

Of course, the trembling of his limbs hadn't escaped Sherlock's notice. “John...”

“I'm fine!” he snapped.

Instead of calling John on his blatant lie, Sherlock settled for following him to the bathroom,
hovering like the world's scariest mother hen.

The doctor was grateful Sherlock hadn't taken his arm or tried to support him; he didn't think he could take that. The last thing he wanted was assistance.

Which made the realisation that he'd need someone to help with his bandages all the more galling. For a moment, John debated with himself: ask Sherlock or get him to call a nurse?

But in the end, there was really no choice to be made. “Sherlock, can you give me a hand?”

Sherlock, who'd probably been planning on waiting outside the door, looked rather surprised, and John hastened to clarify.

“I just need someone to get the bandages off my back.”

Sherlock's expression shuttered again, and his head jerked downwards and then up again, as though his muscles were too tense to actually let him nod.

John opened the bathroom door, and gestured Sherlock inside.

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Sherlock had thought he'd been prepared for John's injuries. He'd seen the bloodstained clothes, he'd even stolen a glance at John's chart to read the disturbingly long list of his wounds, so he'd believed that actually seeing them couldn't be any worse than what his mind had already imagined. Wrong.

Nothing could have prepared him for the way John tensed when he allowed Sherlock to unfasten the ties on his hospital gown, his shoulders hunching as he clearly fought his unease at having someone behind him. He hadn't expected the squeezing sensation in his chest as he watched John clutch the crumpled gown around his waist as though desperate to retain a sense of modesty.

And he certainly wasn't prepared to actually see the damage Moriarty had done.

He'd expected the stitches, the black lines of thread holding John's skin together. He'd expected the large patches of gauze, taped down wherever the flesh had split but not widely or deeply enough to justify stitches. He'd even expected the long, red welts that mingled with bruises in varying shades of blue and purple to make John's body look like an abstract painting.

He just hadn't expected the sheer number of them.

Something about the sight of John's back, marred by stitches and contusions and broken by stretches of white bandage, froze him in place as his stomach twisted, threatening to heave its contents back through his throat.

“You just need to peel off the gauze – the stitches will hold up fine,” John instructed, in the tone of a man advising amputation without anaesthetic.

Sherlock told himself the reluctance he was feeling was ridiculous and irrational, and made himself reach for the white square taped at the junction of John's neck and shoulder. John flinched when Sherlock's fingers touched his skin, a barely perceptible tremor running through his body that made Sherlock snatch his hand back as though it had been scalded.

“I'm fine,” John hissed, but Sherlock could hear the tremble in his voice – John wasn't 'fine' now any
more than he'd been 'fine' a few moments ago.

But commenting on it wouldn't change anything; John was determined to take a shower, and Sherlock was determined to see that whatever John wanted, he got. So he remained silent, and simply reached for the gauze once more.

In the interminable minutes that followed, Sherlock actively hated his mind. He hated it for noting the way the elongated bruises on John's left shoulder resembled fingers. He hated it for realising that the bruises on John's shoulder were almost identical to the ones curling around his hips. He hated it for observing that at least two of the bites were likely to scar.

In some ways, Sherlock was glad when he'd removed the last piece of gauze and had an excuse to stop looking. But then that meant he had no reason to stay, and John was already shifting uncomfortably and swallowing repeatedly, as though he wanted to throw Sherlock out of the room but was too polite to actually say anything.

Sherlock left without a word, and heard the shower start up perhaps three seconds after he'd shut the door.

He could still see John's back every time he blinked, as though it was inscribed on the inside of his eyelids. But he didn't shout or scream, or even punch the wall as he'd once seen John do after a particularly vicious nightmare.

He sat down in a chair, closed his eyes, and just breathed. He concentrated on nothing but the rise and fall of his chest while he let his mind spiral on, thoughts flashing past him like race cars on a track. Half-formed plans for hunting Moriarty down chased themselves about in his head, while another part of his brain insisted on mapping out John's recovery time, on flashing back through the images of John's injuries; the blood around his wrists, the bruises on his hips, the welts that patterned his back, the bites that littered his neck and shoulders...

Sherlock's breath hitched painfully, and he deliberately evened it once again. It was far more difficult than it should have been; his eyes burned, his cheeks were strangely hot and his throat felt tight and swollen.

The door latch clicked and Sherlock opened his eyes, blinking several times to clear his blurred vision.

Mycroft and Lestrade had entered, and both were staring at him with something approaching shock on their faces (Lestrade's expression more exaggerated than Mycroft's, of course).

“What do you want, Lestrade?” Sherlock asked, only half-surprised at the fact that his voice emerged as a hoarse croak.

“I was going to take your statement, but I...I think it can wait,” Lestrade said, the closest to hesitant Sherlock had ever seen him come.

The Inspector left the room as quickly as he could without outright running.

“What's wrong with him?” Sherlock refused to actually address the question to his brother – if he just asked the room in general, he was sure Mycroft would get the hint.

Mycroft's reply, when it came, was perfectly deadpan, only the slightest hesitation before he answered revealing that he was unsettled. “Sherlock...the last time I saw you cry without some pretence attached to it was when you were eight – I doubt Lestrade has ever seen it.”
Sherlock's first impulse was to snort derisively at his brother. Crying, like most reflexes, was something that could be controlled, something that he did control – he never cried without meaning to, never...

But he remembered how his eyes had felt warm, how his vision had blurred, and his hand rose to his face on instinct.

His cheeks were wet.

Sherlock pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids and wrestled his tears back under control.

He didn't want to say it. It galled him to even think of asking Mycroft the question.

“What do I do?”

He didn't know what happened next. He wanted a way to fix it, but he couldn't see a solution, and it left him feeling sickeningly helpless. He was Sherlock Holmes! He was good at fixing things! John was probably the only person in the world he could call a friend...surely he should be able to find a way to fix this, too? To help John the way John had helped him?

But there was nothing. No sudden wave of genius, no lightning-bolt inspiration that showed him what had happened and what had to be done...nothing.

“You can't fix this, Sherlock,” Mycroft said, with something approaching sympathy in his voice.

“There must be something!” Sherlock snapped.

Mycroft shook his head. “No matter what you do or say, John is going to suffer for some time – and I believe you will, as well. There is nothing you can do to change that, nothing that can help him beyond what you are already doing.”

Sherlock snorted.

“If you hunt for Moriarty now, all you will achieve is to leave John to suffer alone,” Mycroft said sternly. “I will be the one to look for him.”

For a moment, Sherlock spitefully hoped that Mycroft wouldn't find him. So Sherlock could have the pleasure of killing Moriarty and taking his time about it.

“I'm sure at some point in time, you will feel the impulse to wallow in guilt over what your association with John Watson resulted in,” Mycroft continued. “Try to resist it, I guarantee it will not aid you in helping John.”

Sherlock couldn't stop himself from sneering. “And how exactly am I meant to help John?”

“What you've been doing so far seems to be working.”

“What I'm doing?” Sherlock repeated, feeling a dangerously hysterical impulse to laugh in Mycroft's face. “Just what am I doing? As it stands, John's given me far more comfort than I've given him-”

“But you've stayed at his side, Sherlock,” Mycroft interrupted patiently. “I imagine that means a great deal more than any gestures of sympathy.”

Sherlock was mustering up an appropriately acidic reply when a shrill ringtone pierced the air. For a moment, he was honestly bewildered until he remembered the phone tucked into the pocket of his tracksuit pants. The pink phone that the police hadn't taken into evidence along with the rest of his
clothes because the technician had simply assumed it was Sherlock's own.

It was Moriarty.

With preternatural calm, Sherlock lifted the phone to his ear and answered the call.

He spoke as soon he heard the sound of the connection being made, and he didn't bother with greetings. “I am going to find you, and I am going to kill you as slowly as I can manage.”

Laughter, triumphant and vicious, rang down the line. “I suppose there's no need to ask if you've figured out how Johnny and I amused ourselves while we were waiting for you?”

“Mycroft will be looking for you as well,” Sherlock remarked coldly. “If you want a quick death, you should ensure he finds you.”

“Oh, don't take it so personally, Sherlock,” Moriarty sighed. “I just couldn't resist finding out what made your little pet so appealing. Besides, it's been a while since Johnny-boy's had that kind of fun, and all that screaming and moaning...honestly, I'm inclined to think he liked it—”

The next sound Sherlock was aware of was the sound of the phone smashing into pieces against the wall.

Standing there, his arm still outstretched, his chest heaving as though he'd just chased someone halfway across London, Sherlock felt bewildered. He was used to being in total control of himself, always aware of what he was doing and planning his next move several steps in advance. But tonight, he'd spoken without actually being aware of it, wept without any effort on his part to trigger tears, and he hadn't actually known he'd flung the phone away from him until he'd heard it shatter.

What was happening to him?

But that was a question for another time. He knew it was irrational, illogical, and completely pointless, but nothing could have stopped Sherlock from crossing the room and crushing the plastic shards into the floor with his heel.

He kept grinding and stamping until no piece larger than a postage stamp remained, wishing desperately he could stamp Moriarty out of existence just as easily.

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John didn't scrub or scrape at his skin. He didn't even touch the soap. He just sat under the stream of water and let it wash over him.

Maybe if he stayed here long enough, the heat and the water and the steam could just wash everything away, just strip him clean.

He could still feel him...

He could still feel the belt cracking against his back, his skin burning beneath the blows. He could still feel Moriarty's teeth against his neck, sinking into his flesh in slow, inexorable degrees. He could still feel the invasion, the tearing pain of his body splitting apart...

With the warm water beating down on his face, John wasn't sure if he actually cried or not.

Which, really, had been the whole point.
Thanks to my beta, ginbitch, who was an absolute saint and helped me practically re-write the entire first section! Seriously, girl, you're amazing!
Three days into his hospital stay, John was beginning to wonder if Sherlock ever actually left the room. Sherlock was there when he woke up, spent the day pacing, deducing things about the nurses and complaining about hospitals in general and this one in particular, and he was still there when John went to sleep. When John woke in the night, startled into alertness by a nightmare or by the ghost of malicious laughter, Sherlock was there at his bedside, his eyes on John.

Only once had he actually seen Sherlock sleeping. He'd awoken last night after a surprisingly peaceful rest at about two in the morning (the painkillers he'd been given on the first day and the various naps he'd slid into at their behest were really screwing with his internal clock) to find Sherlock asleep in the chair beside his bed. He was folded into it in a position that would make John worry over anyone else, but the way Sherlock tended to sprawl over the couch and kitchen table had long ago led John to decide the man had a spine made of rubber. Sherlock's legs were folded up and tucked into his chest, while he was somehow simultaneously resting his head on the arm of the chair.

John had smiled a little in spite of himself – he'd found himself wondering if Sherlock ever slept, and it was always nice to see that Sherlock was still a human being, however much he protested against it.

It was then that he'd realised that Sherlock's hand was on his knee. He hadn't noticed it before; Sherlock wasn't resting against the bed or leaning towards him or anything so obvious. The taller man was curled into his impossible position on the chair, limbs folded up like he'd been attempting origami with his own body. It just his right arm that was stretched out, his hand resting on John's leg. Not grabbing or clenching, just resting there, as though to confirm John was still with him.

Still half-asleep himself, John hadn't wanted to wake him – he'd just placed his hand carefully over Sherlock's, closed his eyes once more and drifted back into unconsciousness.

When he woken up five hours later, John was surprised to realise that Sherlock hadn't moved. Though a tapping, jerking leg betrayed his agitation, his hand was still resting beneath John's, even though his current position made it a bit of an awkward stretch.

“Have you gone home at all?” John asked, by way of announcing he'd woken up.

Sherlock started a little as John's voice snapped him out of his reverie, and his mouth quirked. “Not as such, no.”

John followed that train of thought to its conclusion. “Please tell me you've at least taken a shower.”

“I've used the shower when you're asleep,” Sherlock said, looking almost offended.

“How have you been getting food?”

Sherlock said nothing, and John's eyes narrowed. “You have been getting food, haven't you? If you've starved yourself for three days straight-”

“I've eaten,” Sherlock muttered, almost mulish.

John cast his mind back, and seemed to remember complaints about hospital food mixed in with
Sherlock's disdain for the places in general. Coupled with the fact that John hadn't had much appetite recently and he could guess where Sherlock had found sustenance.

“Have you been eating my leftovers?”

“It's not like you were going to eat them.”

“You need something more substantial than that,” John grumbled, but with no real force behind his words. He'd largely given up on lecturing Sherlock about what he ate, so long as he ate something.

“I've managed perfectly well.”

How often had John heard those words in regards to Sherlock's eating habits? Remembering their previous arguments on the subject, amusement brushed John like a swift breeze.

His laugh felt tight and wrong, like he'd forgotten how to do it.

“How have you managed to stay here all this time? Hospitals have these little things called visiting hours, you see, and the doctors and nurses tend to get a little irritable when you ignore them. Should I suspect Mycroft, or did you just deduce things about the hospital staff until they got scared and left you alone?”

Sherlock looked so put-out at the question John assumed Mycroft had made some calls or called in some favours or done whatever he did to control the world.

“Why'd you break the phone?” he asked abruptly.

He'd been springing that question on Sherlock at random intervals for the past two days in hopes of a response. Given that Sherlock had never replied once, John wasn't hopeful, but he kept at it.

Three days ago, he'd emerged from the bathroom to find Sherlock sitting in his chair with Lestrade standing over him, waving around an evidence bag with a handful of broken plastic and pink rubber inside, ranting about impulse control. Apparently Sherlock had smashed the pink phone Moriarty had sent him into little tiny pieces, and Lestrade had been less than pleased at the destruction of evidence.

Thinking about the phone inevitably led to thoughts of Moriarty, and John told his brain to shut up – this had been a good day so far, and he wasn't going to remember why he was in the hospital for at least an hour.

Except he was going to remember, of course he was. When you were lying in a hospital bed, there wasn't much to do but remember, as he had been doing for the past three days. It didn't help that he had police and doctors swarming around him like a cloud of benevolent wasps – they were kind and sympathetic and certainly meant well, but they were really only reminding John of what had happened.

As if he needed extra reminders with his injuries in the stiff and itchy stage of healing. He kept feeling the need to scratch at his wrists and back, but the impulse was easily stifled; his damaged muscle were now tight and hard, and very difficult to move. His left shoulder was a mass of throbbing, raw nerves that sent shooting pains down his arm whenever he moved it.

John knew an analgesic would make him feel better, but he refused to take any more painkillers. They made him feel sleepy and stupid, and the lethargy that seeped through his body was just a little too reminiscent of being tranquilised for his liking.

He didn't like the drugs, he didn't like everyone stepping gingerly around him like he'd crumble if
they breathed on him too hard...John just wanted to go home.

So he was going to. Last night, John had made up his mind that if he didn't get discharged today, he'd leave against medical advice.

It was almost amusing. He'd always thought people did that were idiots courting disaster, but now he understood why someone might be desperate to get away from the hospital. Besides, there wasn't really much the hospital could do for him at this point – it was just a matter of laying around and waiting to heal, and John would feel much, much better about the world if he could do that back in Baker Street.

It wasn't like he was completely clueless – he'd come back if he broke his stitches or started bleeding again.

And Sherlock was going to help him do it.

John opened his mouth to inform Sherlock just how he was going to be instrumental in getting John released from the hospital, when he realised Sherlock was – for once – completely oblivious to everything that had just passed through John's head. He was still scowling at the wall.

In a way, John wasn't truly surprised; mentioning the phone, when Sherlock didn't simply pretend he hadn't heard him, often made Sherlock glare at the wall or the window or John's chart or anything else that happened to offend him for upwards of ten minutes. Sometimes his upper lip began to curl, not like he was snarling, exactly...but as though he was considering it.

John made himself speak, glad that his throat was almost entirely recovered by this point. “Sherlock, there's something I'm going to need your help with...”

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Two hours later, John was in a wheelchair on his way out of the hospital, feeling the ghost of a true smile on lips. It didn't actually appear – the muscles seemed almost atrophied, unable to rearrange themselves as John remembered, like he'd suffered some kind of nerve damage – but the feel of it lingered.

John wasn't very happy about the wheelchair, but he'd learned to pick his battles. If they were going to let him go home, he'd let himself be pushed to the taxi stand in a wheelchair. Usually a nurse would be pushing him, but Sherlock had been rather scary about that. In fact, Sherlock had been rather scary ever since John had been ‘released into his care’. He'd cast aspersions about the nutritional value of the food John had been given, insulted the qualifications of doctors and nurses alike, and if it had been anyone else, John would have said Sherlock was fussing over him.

The back of John's neck prickled uncomfortably as they moved through the corridors – people kept giving them sidelong glances, and he couldn't shake the feeling that they all knew what had happened to him. That the rape was a brand, a stamp in blood-red ink scribed across his flesh, that everyone could read at a single glance. John knew it was ridiculous, knew it was nothing more his own paranoia talking...but he still felt it.

“I killed my fish, you know.”

John tipped his head back to get a look at Sherlock's face. “You had a fish?”

Sherlock nodded, and while it was hard to tell upside-down, John thought he looked...worried. “When I was eight. I forgot to feed it, and it died.”
John wasn't entirely sure how to respond. “Well...I'm sorry your fish died?”

“I was running a series of experiments, and I became...preoccupied,” Sherlock said, his tone just a shade defensive.

John thought he could see where this was going; Sherlock had been jumpy ever since that doctor had told him that John was his responsibility now. He had a feeling people rarely trusted Sherlock with their well-being.

“Sherlock, I'll be fine – unlike your fish, if I need something, I'm not going to be quiet about it.”

Sherlock still looked unsettled. “Still, are you sure you wouldn't prefer someone with more experience in...this sort of thing? Like Sarah?”

Sherlock actually grimaced as he said the last two words, looking almost physically ill at the prospect.

John only barely held himself back from grimacing as well. Sarah had visited twice, and both times had been unpleasant and awkward. John had enlisted Sherlock's help to hide his chart so she wouldn't know exactly why he was in the hospital, and Sarah seemed to be under the impression he'd been tortured. It was at least partly accurate – and with his bruises now turning yellow and green John knew he certainly looked the part.

Their conversation had been stilted and full of uncomfortable pauses, some part of John reluctant to break up with her while he was in a hospital bed – he just had a sense that it wasn't done. When he split with Sarah, he wanted to be able to stand on his own two feet and look her straight in the eyes when he did it.

“No,” John settled for replying.

“I know you don't want her to know-”

“It's more than that,” John interrupted, feeling they should be very clear on this point – Sarah was not going to get involved with his recovery. “I'm going to break up with her.”

There was a significant silence from Sherlock. Then, “Why?”

“Better now than later,” John replied, with a lightness he didn't feel. Any thought about the break-up inevitably roused memories of exactly why he was ending the relationship, prompting his stomach to churn and his skin to itch all over again.

“What makes you think you'd have to break up with her later?” Sherlock asked, with the air of someone selecting their words very carefully.

John sighed, and resigned himself to having to lay it all out for his friend – Sherlock wasn't the sort to just let something go.

“Our relationship isn't strong enough,” John said eventually. “We've only been dating for a few weeks; we don't have anywhere near enough of a foundation to deal with...all this. And I won't bring her down with me.”

A rather simplistic explanation, perhaps, but he'd learned Sherlock needed those kinds of explanations when it came to emotional matters. John thought that would satisfy Sherlock’s curiosity and that he'd dismiss it from his mind in the next second, and so was surprised to hear a swift intake of breath from behind him, as though Sherlock was in distress.
He tipped his head back again, to meet silvery eyes that had become as dark as the London sky right before a storm.

“I'll tell you now, John, to get any ideas about 'dragging people down with you' out of your head,” Sherlock spat. “And if you think for an instant that I'll tolerate—”

“I don't mean you!” John blurted, taken aback at Sherlock's misinterpretation. “I'm not going to leave you!”

He decided not to examine why that felt more like a reassurance you gave to a spouse than one you gave to a friend, and charged onwards with his explanation.

“We...we have a better foundation,” John said honestly. Then he forced himself to crack a smile. “And besides, I'm not completely convinced you wouldn't starve to death without me.”

Sherlock didn't smile in return. “So several months friendship is better than a few weeks of dating? The longer a relationship has been going on, the better this 'foundation' that you referred to?”

“Sort of.” John didn't fancy dissecting the reasons why he trusted Sherlock over a trained doctor, and faced forward again so he wouldn't have to look Sherlock in the eyes as he spoke. “And also because...well, we just seem to click. That's never happened to me before.”

“Nor to me,” Sherlock whispered, in a voice so soft the response sounded more accidental than anything else.

For some reason, that admission warmed John, and he tipped his head back again to catch Sherlock's expression. The taller man looked pensive and almost...wistful?

John reached over his shoulder – a little painfully, but it was worth it – and patted Sherlock's hand. “Don't worry, we'll be fine.”

And in that moment, John could almost make himself believe it.

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Sherlock sometimes wondered just what it was about John that let the other man read him so easily. He knew that by other's standards – by normal standards – John's inferences were chancy and sometimes far off the mark, but Sherlock had made it his business to be inscrutable. And with most people, he was, but with John...with John, it didn't quite seem to work.

Sometimes it did, and he surprised John with a bit of acting or those revelations that John always marvelled at. Other times Sherlock had to run the conversation through his head again just to make sure he hadn't actually shouted his thoughts and motives aloud, so well did John seem to know them. Usually it was pleasant – Sherlock had never had anyone understand him on the level John did, save Mycroft, perhaps – but occasionally it was so unexpected, so unprecedented, that it was almost uncomfortable.

Like now, when John had said he'd be fine under Sherlock's care. Seemingly ignoring the fact that Sherlock had informed him the last living creature to be placed in his care had died.

It was rather new to Sherlock, being trusted.

Still, he felt somehow obligated to alert John to the staggering array of better options for his care, Sarah among them; surely any sensible man would prefer to be looked after by a doctor rather than a sociopath? It was true that on the two occasions Sarah had visited, John had been distinctly uneasy in
her presence, but Sherlock had assumed it was the pressure of deceiving her as to exactly why he was in the hospital.

He hadn't expected John to be planning on the ending the relationship.

Sherlock ruthlessly suppressed the flicker of happiness that sparked up at the thought of John breaking up with Sarah. He had a good idea of exactly why John thought he should do it, and that wasn't something to be happy about; on the contrary, it made him feel sick.

He'd asked anyway, and had found himself quelling the urge to hit something when John expressed a wish not to 'drag someone down with him', as though what had happened had somehow rendered him damaged goods. John wasn't tainted – Moriarty had hurt him, yes (and Moriarty would pay dearly for it if Sherlock had anything to say about it), but he hadn't changed who John was.

He didn't smile at John's almost painful attempt at a joke because it wasn't funny in the slightest; he wouldn't starve to death without John, but he certainly wouldn't do well. In some ways, it was almost funny – before John, he'd been perfectly content with his life, but now the prospect of returning to that kind of existence filled him with something very close to horror. In the space of a few months, John Watson had seeped into Sherlock's world like some kind of strange disease, virulent, contagious and all-consuming.

As though he could sense his upset, and even though he was obviously stiff and sore, John twisted to pat Sherlock's hand. Sherlock stifled the impulse to seize onto his fingers and hold them in place.

“Don't worry, we'll be fine.”

And Sherlock knew it was true. Because beneath the bruises and the shadows in his eyes, John was as he had always been; shining and unbreakable and absolutely glorious.

“Oh, and Sherlock?” John said suddenly, as though just remembering something. “Why'd you break the phone?”

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to my marvellous beta, ginbitch!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sherlock was feeling almost triumphant – John's first day home had been much more successful than he'd predicted. Mrs. Hudson had welcomed them back,fluttered around them for a while and Sherlock had chased her out when John's smile became too brittle. He'd even managed to make a thin soup that strictly abided by the rules of John's diet, and he'd only burned it a little.

John had intended to watch his usual run of mundane television shows afterwards, but had only managed to get through half of some kind of talk show before he fell asleep on the couch.

Feeling as though this 'taking care of John' business might not be nearly as difficult as it had seemed, Sherlock took a shower and considered exactly what reason he should give for breaking the pink phone. There were few things John became honestly stubborn over, but when he did, he came very close to becoming proof of the theoretical unstoppable force.

John would ask again. He would keep asking until Sherlock gave him an answer.

An answer Sherlock wasn't sure he could give him. He barely knew himself why he'd broken the phone. He'd been sitting in the chair, Moriarty's voice hissing through the speaker...

"...all that screaming and moaning...honestly, I'm inclined to think he liked it..."

A sharp pain cut through his thoughts, and Sherlock realised he'd clenched his fists so tightly his hands were shaking, fingernails cutting into the flesh of his palm. He took a deep breath and forced his muscles to relax, his hands to uncoil.

It was perplexing. Sherlock never became angry over whatever verbal abuse people threw his way; there was simply no point to it. He'd never before felt so furious, so anguished, over mere words – words that were so blatantly untrue it was almost laughable.

John was the empathic one, the one who understood why people did things, the one who drew the line between good and not-good. Sherlock was certain if he recited that disgusting conversation to John, he would understand why Sherlock had broken the phone.

Sherlock was equally certain he would never, as long as he lived, tell John what Moriarty had said.

Which meant he had to come up with a different reason, and it had to be one John would believe. Usually, nothing would be simpler – Sherlock was an accomplished actor and liar when he had to be, but John was unusually difficult to lie to. Withholding information, little, so-called 'white' lies all seemed to pass, but the big ones...Sherlock had no idea how he gave himself away, but John just always seemed to know.

Still thinking it over, Sherlock tugged on one of his dressing-gowns and hurried back to the living room. The urgency he felt wasn't logical, he knew that, but some part of him couldn't help but remember that John hadn't been five feet away from him for the past three days. And that the last time John had been out of his sight, Moriarty had taken him, and...

If the relief that Sherlock felt upon seeing John still curled on the couch was perhaps a little too intense...well, that was hardly a problem, was it?
And that relief didn't last long when Sherlock realised John was making strange, almost strangled noises, as though he was choking.

Sherlock crossed the room in two strides, sucking in a breath when he realised John was still asleep, and that he seemed to be having a nightmare. But it was like no nightmare Sherlock had ever seen. He'd gone to a sleep centre once to observe people plagued with chronic nightmares for a case, and most people, when in the throes of a vivid nightmare, tended to move or vocalise. It wasn't 'thrashing' or 'screaming', as people often described it, but they certainly twisted and cried out.

John was doing none of those things. He was completely still, his muscles cording beneath his skin, as rigid as steel cables. His jaw was clenched, his teeth gritted, and he was making soft, choked sounds as though even asleep he was trying to silence himself.

For a moment, Sherlock didn't know what to do. John seemed to be having a nightmare, but like no nightmare Sherlock had ever seen, so...should he wake him? Was there something else he should do? Was there any specific action to take when your friend was having a nightmare without moving or crying out?

He didn't know...until his mind abruptly made the connection. John was most likely dreaming about Moriarty, so his body would mimic the actions he was taking in the nightmare, the actions he'd taken three days before.

When John had given his statement to Sergeant Donovan, he'd detailed Moriarty's behaviour, Moriarty's reactions, and had never said a word about his own. Now Sherlock knew why. When Moriarty raped him, John had tried to keep himself as still and silent as possible.

The thought made Sherlock's chest ache as though his ribs were constricting inch by inch. But now wasn't the time for self-reflection.

“John!” he called sharply, bending down and lightly jostling John's shoulder (ensuring he was grasping the uninjured one). “John, wake up! John!”

John's eyes snapped open, and the next thing Sherlock knew, he was sprawled on the floor, pain sparking across his cheekbone.

John had punched him.

Sherlock was rather impressed. John had just woken up, had been swinging from a position that made it difficult to put true power into the blow...and he'd still managed to knock Sherlock to the floor. But then again, Sherlock had always known John was stronger than he looked.

“Sherlock?” John's voice was breathless and disbelieving. “What did you...oh, bloody hell...”

Even with sore muscles and abused tissues, John moved remarkably quickly. The final syllable had barely left his lips before he was tugging Sherlock upright, one shaking hand cupping his chin, tilting Sherlock's cheek towards the light.

“That was me wasn't it? Shit, Sherlock, you can't just...I'm sorry, I didn't mean...”

Sherlock reflected while John was perfectly willing to inflict violence on his enemies, he was quite horrified when he inflicted it on his friends, however accidentally.

“At least it doesn't seem to be broken,” John was muttering, still steadying Sherlock's face with shaking fingers. “Is there any pain when you move your jaw?”
“That was quite impressive,” Sherlock remarked. “Is that a technique you learned in the Army or one you developed yourself? I'll admit when you first suggested it, I didn't think you'd actually be capable of breaking Mycroft's jaw, but in light of this new evidence—”

“New evidence', Sherlock?” John hissed, disbelieving. “Christ, I hit you!”

“That much is obvious. I assume that waking you up from your nightmare and continuing to loom over you wasn't one of my better ideas.”

“Probably not,” John muttered, his hands still trembling.

With an unpleasant jolt, Sherlock realised that the shaking wasn't limited to John's hands – his whole body was quivering as though an earthquake was going on beneath his skin. “John?”

“It's fine!” John whispered urgently, his face pale. “I'm fine, it's fine, it's all fine...”

John shut his eyes and swallowed painfully, taking a deep breath that shuddered in his throat. Sherlock was rapidly becoming truly alarmed. “John, what-?”

John's eyes slammed closed like the lids were barricades against the world. “Sherlock, don't...I can't...”

Another deep breath, as though John were trying to force the adrenaline and fear out of his system by sheer force of will. “I need to stop talking about this. I need you to turn back to the telly, and yell at it like you always do. Please.”

Sherlock couldn't see the point, but the addition of the 'please' – sounding scraped and broken, like a violin bow over dirty strings – had him moving to his chair before he was fully aware of it.

Interesting. For all his demands of John, it seemed that when John asked something of him in that tone, the one that suggested the doctor would break into little pieces if he wasn't obeyed, it was impossible for him to refuse.

So he turned up the volume and eviscerated the stupid murder mystery which was, as usual, very easy to do even if he was only hearing perhaps half of it because he was concentrating on measuring the rate of John's breathing. After three minutes, it stopped shuddering in his throat with every inhalation. After ten minutes, it had slowed and evened to something approaching normal.

But it was two hours before John fell asleep again.

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John was startled into consciousness, his muscles coiled as tight as steel springs. He never woke up gently any more. As he'd done every morning since he'd arrived back at Baker Street, he snapped awake with adrenaline humming through his veins, fear and helplessness gnawing at his gut like rats. His arms and legs were already moving, tearing the blankets away, unable to stand even their slight weight on his body, tangling his limbs, restricting his movement...

It was only when every blanket and sheet was crumpled at the foot of the bed that John finally felt himself beginning to calm down. He breathed carefully in and out, his eyes on the ceiling, his muscles trembling with the force of his exertions. He wiped at his eyes automatically, clearing away the dried mucus and salt – he must have cried during the nightmare again, though his eyes were always dry when he woke up.

Time to check his stitches again. That moment of panic he experienced upon waking up wasn't
exactly something he could control, but he knew the kind of damage it could do to his injuries. His sore muscles were almost completely healed – they barely even twinged – but his stitches could still be pulled or worse.

Resigned to the routine, John moved to put his back to the mirrored panel on his wardrobe, picking up a hand mirror along the way, angling it in just the right way to reflect the mirror behind him. He used to have to ask Sherlock to check, which had been an exercise in humiliation and discomfort – bad enough that he hadn't been able to hide it from him, but to make him see it every time he had a bad dream? – until Sherlock had produced the hand mirror from...somewhere. John had no idea where it had come from and what Sherlock had used it for before he gave it John, and he was in no hurry to find out.

John gave his back the perfunctory once-over, working from the bottom up, ready to discard the mirror and go downstairs, perhaps see about some breakfast...

Except there was a sprinkling of blood across his left shoulder blade. It was from one of the blows he'd taken from Moriarty's belt; at least two inches of stitches had torn, and the edge of the wound gaped like a toothless mouth.

He'd have to go back to the hospital. Or at least someone who could re-stitch it. Either he'd have to find the doctor that had originally done it and suffer the pity that practically fogged the room, or he'd have to find another and submit to the endless questions about how the injury was inflicted, what he'd been doing to take care of it, if there were any other problems...

He felt absolutely furious. It wasn't enough that he'd been raped, he had to be reminded of it every second of every day by his injuries? He had to sit through politely invasive questions and sickening pity, and he'd have scars that would always, always remind him of what had happened to him. It hadn't been enough for Moriarty to simply strap him to the bomb, no, he'd had to take it that extra step, didn't he?

Yet for all the fury and disgust at the doctors, at Moriarty, at the world, none of it could compare to the loathing John felt for himself. Because really, it was his own carelessness that had got him here. He should have been watching that night – he'd known Moriarty was still out there, hadn't he? But no, he'd been an idiot and got himself caught and he hadn't been able to stop Moriarty and surely he could have if he'd been smarter or stronger or just better...

The despairing shriek that left his mouth surprised even him, and he only realised he'd hurled the mirror to the floor when he heard the glass crack in two.

He felt nothing as he fought to erase the vision of his torn, ugly back, the mark of his helplessness, his weakness, and it was only when a drop of his own blood hit his face that he noticed he was smashing the mirror into the floor with his fists. There was no piece of glass bigger than his thumbnail, and his hands looked like he'd stuck them in a paper shredder.

For a moment, just a moment, John honestly wanted to curl into a ball and cry. Maybe if he just lay there and didn't do anything, he'd bleed to death and at this point he thought he'd honestly welcome it.

But no. If he died here that would leave Sherlock to find his body, and John wouldn't do that to him. So he made himself swallow down the emotion that clogged his throat, and left to find some bandages to fix his hands and a broom to sweep up the glass.

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Sherlock heard John scream, heard something crack, but he didn't move – John wouldn't want an audience. He'd hated having to consult Sherlock about the stitches every time he moved too quickly or too violently; Sherlock had bought the hand mirror specifically to allow John some privacy, and it had been a long walk to the all-night convenience store. It would have been easier to buy it during the day, but he hadn't wanted to leave John until he was (somewhat) peacefully asleep.

Still, something coiled uncomfortably in his chest, something a little too similar to anxiety, scraping at the edges of his ribs and urging him towards John's bedroom, just to see him, just to make sure he was all right...

Sherlock lasted two minutes before he found himself outside John's bedroom door. But it opened before he could call or knock or just barge in, revealing John with hollow eyes and bloodied hands.

Sherlock was aware of John suddenly tensing with surprise, spine snapping straight (a relic of his army training), but his eyes were fixed on the doctor's bleeding hands. There were covered in a myriad of tiny cuts – none particularly deep or wide, only remarkable in their sheer number.

In that moment, all Sherlock could think of was that he'd been right. He'd been right when he told John to stay with Sarah instead – what had made him think he could possibly be of any help? John was having nightmares almost every time he fell asleep, certain noises and smells made his eyes begin to dart like a hunted animal's, and now Sherlock had given John what he thought he wanted, privacy, and found him with bleeding hands.

"Sherlock!"

Sherlock's eyes jerked upwards automatically. John was looking faintly worried, which made him wonder what expression the doctor had just seen on his face.

"I'm okay," John said quietly, his voice not quite as steady as it should have been. "It looks worse than it is."

Sherlock glanced past him, taking in the glass shards scattered across the carpet of the bedroom. Coupled with the fine cuts and the crash he'd heard...

"I take it the mirror had it coming?"

John flushed. "I guess you heard that."

"I heard." And he should have come running.

John cocked his head to the side, his expression so eerily insightful the back of Sherlock's neck prickled. People often accused him of being a mind-reader, which was ridiculous; he just observed, there was no telepathy involved. John was the closest he'd ever seen a human being come to mind reading – at times even Sherlock was honestly baffled at how John seemed to be able to understand him.

"It's probably best you didn't come in," John said gently, once again blind-siding Sherlock with his intuition. John's mouth then twisted savagely, and he made a sound that was probably meant to be a laugh, but sounded more like the screech of rusty hinges. "If you'd come in I might've punched you again."

There was a measure of self-hatred in John's voice that settled in Sherlock's stomach like ill-digested food. But he thought he could see why John was so disconcerted. It wasn't the violence itself – John wouldn't have lasted a week in Afghanistan if he'd had a problem with violence – it was the fact that he was usually in control it, and now he wasn't. Now, violence was his first impulse whenever he felt
threatened or helpless. It was the most primitive human instinct, fight or flight, and John wasn't the type to choose flight. Moriarty had tied him down (and he was going to regret that, oh yes he was), had denied those instincts their expression...and now they were resurfacing with a vengeance.

“Anyway, I should probably get my hands fixed up,” John announced, his voice still sounding brittle and thin.

“I can help with that,” Sherlock volunteered, even though first aid had never been one of his strong points.

John's expression barely flickered, but then that was common nowadays. Under normal circumstances, John was one of the most honest people Sherlock had ever met; not that he didn't try to lie on occasion, because he did, but that his very nature was so earnest his feelings were usually written clearly on his face. But now, John was learning to set his face like plaster, to still his expression when he wanted to, such as when he was experiencing anger or fear or disgust, which meant he stilled it often.

And each time he did, there was a quick, sharp pain in Sherlock's throat.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on that. “I may not be a particularly skilled nurse, but I am sure you are capable of directing me.”

An echo of amusement dashed through John's eyes. “Yeah, but you following orders? I'll believe it when I see it.”

Sherlock would have come up with a suitably acerbic retort, but there was no retort to make.

“Oh, do shut up,” he said indignantly, already halfway down the stairs.

John didn't laugh, but the amused, almost humming noise he made sent a satisfied glow through Sherlock's skin.

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“And you're sure you need a doctor?”

“Yes, I'm sure, Sherlock,” John said wearily. “I don't have the materials to stitch myself up, now are you coming or not?”

Sherlock gave him a measured glance, and for a moment John thought he was going to refuse, to declare a doctor's surgery ‘boring’ and collapse onto the couch while John went alone. But then he simply nodded, grabbing hold of his scarf on the way out.

John was somehow simultaneously relieved and furious. Relieved because he hadn't relished the thought of going to the doctor's alone, and while Sherlock was far from a sympathetic companion his rude deductions and sarcastic mutterings had become almost comforting in their familiarity. John wasn't going to examine why, largely because he was certain he'd end up questioning his mental health.

He was furious because he was trying so hard to act normal, and he was reminded of how not normal the situation was every time Sherlock acquiesced to his requests without even a murmur of protest. Before...Moriarty...John couldn't even begin to imagine the absolute hell he would have had to go through before Sherlock agreed to accompany him to the doctor's. But now he was doing it with only the slightest of promptings on John's part, like John was some kind of fragile little flower and actually having an argument would upset his delicate sensibilities.
He knew it was a stupid thing to be angry over, which was why he didn't say a word about it. Besides, however furious he was at Sherlock, it didn't come close to how angry he was at himself.

He'd come back home expecting it to feel normal, for him to be happy there, for him to be 'fixed'. But it hadn't done that.

It hadn't fixed a thing.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my beta, ginbitch!
In the end, John went with the lesser of two evils, and chose the doctor who'd patched him up at the hospital. He'd take her pity over having to explain it all again.

Still, having to wait on Dr. Letier for over an hour seemed to have exhausted whatever reserves of patience Sherlock had possessed. John was almost grateful for Sherlock's casual verbal swipes at the world around them and the dull people who inhabited it.

Almost.

“And those ridiculous paintings – all flowers and and fields and colours as though the patients and visitors are meant to forget they're in the hospital. As if you ever could with that distressing smell of disinfectant about the place...one would think they had people bleeding out every two feet with the way they're layering it down...”

For a moment, just a moment, John could almost believe this was normal – well, his and Sherlock's version of normal, anyway.

Which is why his mouth opened on a retort automatically, instead of just basking in Sherlock's return to bitter sarcasm. “Oh, leave off, Sherlock, they do the best they can. Besides, some of us actually like nice, colourful paintings of flower fields.”

As soon as the words were out his mouth, John could have kicked himself. Now Sherlock would back off and shut up as he'd been doing for days, because god forbid John should get distressed in any way even though he'd been frustrated and on-edge since this whole train wreck had started, and really, there was very little Sherlock could do it make it worse.

But Sherlock paused in his stream of dialogue, narrowed his eyes briefly like he was looking at a blood sample under a microscope and then...acted as snotty as ever.

“Wouldn't have taken you for the type to like flowers, John.”

John was so relieved the words shot out of his mouth on pure reflex. “I was in the army, I shoot like a sniper, and I played rugby in spite of being the smallest guy on the field – at this point, you can't make me insecure about my masculinity just because I like flowers.”

Sherlock chuckled low in his throat, laughing without actually moving his mouth, and then spotted a couple arguing on the corner and launched into a diatribe about why they were shouting at each other based on the colour of the man's shirt...or something. John wasn't too certain – he wasn't really listening by that point.

Sherlock hadn't shut up. He hadn't acted like John couldn't deal with it, like John was fragile or weak...he'd just continued on, the way he'd always done.

For a moment, John was something resembling happy, until it occurred to him exactly what he'd done.

Sherlock wouldn't shut up.
John sighed. He probably should have enjoyed the acquiescence – and the silence – while it lasted, because there'd be no stopping Sherlock now.

Still, the idea that Sherlock seemed able to tell the difference between something John honestly needed and the usual griping he subjected his friend to was a comforting thought. John smiled, almost to himself, as they made their way back to Baker Street.

And he kept smiling right up until the point he saw the man waiting at the crossing.

He knew it was a stupid reaction, he knew it. He knew the man wasn't Moriarty, but the suit, the haircut...even the face looked like him, in profile.

And the resemblance was enough to lock his knees and set his heart pounding like it was determined to smash his ribs to pieces. John could feel himself sweating, his mouth becoming dry, his muscles trembling as his gut instinct to bolt competed with his rational mind.

It wasn't Moriarty. But it didn't stop his body was reacting as though it was. Didn't stop every logical thought grinding to a halt, didn't stop him from reaching for a gun that wasn't there. Adrenaline spiked his blood and dimmed his surroundings, and though he tried not to remember he couldn't help but remember, and he closed his eyes to keep out the voice and the smile and the hands and the...

"John!"

John opened his eyes, surprised to find himself in one of the narrow back-alleys Sherlock seemed to favour with the detective in front of him, not even a foot of space between them, and with an expression on Sherlock's face that was close to fear. John realised dimly that his whole body was trembling, and he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

He wouldn't have done it under normal circumstances, but these weren't normal circumstances. John was too strung out to care and so bloody tired of being like this and he just needed to lean on something, just for a moment...

So he leaned forward, pressed his forehead against Sherlock's collarbone, steadied himself with his hands on the taller man's hips, and just breathed.

In and out, steady and deep movements of his ribcage as John struggled to get his lungs back under control. Sherlock smelled vaguely of the hospital, of soap with an almost acidic overlay of chemicals, and of himself – that unique scent every person possessed that was a result of hormones or pheromones or something, John couldn't remember. All he knew was that somewhere along the line, that scent had come to mean 'safety' and 'belonging' and 'home' to him.

Which, really, probably just showed he'd been screwed in the head long before Moriarty had got to him.

That thought, more than anything, prompted a weak, stuttered laugh that was mostly smothered in Sherlock's shirt.

Sherlock, for his part, hadn't moved. He hadn't put his arms around John or touched him in return, but he hadn't stepped back or held himself rigidly, either. He hadn't reacted at all, for which John was inexpressibly thankful. He didn't think he could have dealt with rejection, and any gesture on Sherlock's part would have felt too much like pity.

But Sherlock had behaved as though what John had done was perfectly normal, entirely expected, and nothing out of the ordinary.
John didn't think he'd ever been as fond of anyone before in his life. Or as grateful to someone. And it was that, more than anything, that made John think he owed Sherlock an explanation; he should at least understand what had made John react that way.

He didn't move back, though, preferring to address his remarks to Sherlock's sternum.

“I thought...he looked like...”

Sherlock, predictably, saw where he was going. “That wasn't Moriarty.”

John snorted weakly, ruthlessly suppressing the urge to flinch at the name.

“If it had been, I would have killed him,” Sherlock said.

*That* made John lean back and glance upwards. Sherlock's voice had been completely flat, almost disinterested, and his face was almost entirely neutral, save the slight hints of anger in the way the muscles at the corners of his eyes and mouth had tightened. Sherlock didn't look particularly defiant or impassioned, and John realised that was because he simply wasn't.

Sherlock hadn't been making a declaration to put John at ease – he'd been stating a fact. John had no doubt that they could be in the middle of Piccadilly Circus, on international television, and Sherlock would still bash Moriarty's brains out against the pavement if he caught a glimpse of him.

John snorted again, and pressed his face into Sherlock's chest once more.

“Probably not good that I find that reassuring,” he commented.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock's voice was still bland, still perfectly at ease...but there was a quiet tension in it that had not been there before.

“No,” John said honestly, his voice bleak. “Give me a minute, yeah?”

Sherlock made an agreeable sort of noise that vibrated through his chest, and John closed his eyes and kept breathing.

In the end, John was pretty sure he took much longer than a minute – it was probably close to a quarter of an hour before he felt ready to step out onto the street and face the world once more. But it was hard to be precise, because Sherlock never commented on it; the whole time they were standing there he didn't say a word, and he didn't move away.

And if Sherlock had walked a bit closer to him the rest of the way back, John didn't consider that cause for complaint.

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Sherlock had known something was wrong the instant John stopped walking. The doctor had frozen completely where he stood, and begun to shake with a severity Sherlock hadn't observed since he'd roused John from a nightmare and been punched for it. John's eyes had stared, then clenched tightly shut, and Sherlock had known retreat was in order. From what, he hadn't known, only that something around them was distressing John and that couldn't be allowed.

It was disturbingly easy to pull John into the alley. The muscles of his arm were corded and stiff beneath Sherlock's hand, but his legs moved automatically, as though he were in some kind of daze.

Sherlock had to call John's name three times before he finally received a response. John's eyes
opened, but they looked only barely lucid, and his breath was coming so fast and so hard Sherlock was concerned he was about to pass out.

But John just looked up at him then, without question or explanation, leaned forward to press his face into Sherlock's chest. His hands – covered with steri-strips from the mishap with the mirror – went to Sherlock's hips and gripped like a drowning man holding onto a life buoy, so tightly Sherlock could feel his skin stretch taut across the bone.

Sherlock quelled the immediate instinct to wrap his arms around John and draw him closer. He wouldn't grab John, wouldn't hold him, trap him, so he forced his hands to stay where they were, instead cataloguing the myriad of observations his mind was suddenly bombarding him with.

Like the fact that every one of his exhales faintly stirred the hair on the back of John's head. The fact that John's weight rocked slightly with every breath Sherlock took. The way John smelled faintly of blood and that awful antiseptic the doctor had used on him, but still managed to smell like himself underneath it. Sherlock liked to categorise things, but he'd never found something to adequately compare to the way John smelled, only that the scent made him think of jumpers and late nights in front of the television, warm things and soft things and quiet things.

It was... reassuring. Yes, that was a good word for it, even if the concept didn't particularly make sense – John smelled reassuring.

Eventually, John started to offer an explanation, but before he'd got six words out Sherlock's mind had flashed back to the man on the corner. Remembered the suit, the face – he hadn't noticed any particular resemblance to Moriarty, but it seemed as if John's mind had.

“That wasn't Moriarty,” he said flatly, not wanting to hear John stumble over his words as he struggled to articulate something he probably saw as a weakness.

John made a soft, huffing sound – Sherlock felt the puff of cool air against his shirt. “I know. If it had been—”

Sherlock overrode him, wanting to ensure John knew why he should never fear meeting Moriarty on the street. “If it had been, I would have killed him.”

John shifted away, and Sherlock felt an irrational urge to grab him and drag him back to his previous position. John was peering up at him as though he couldn't quite credit what he'd just said, but Sherlock had no idea why he should look so surprised. Moriarty didn't deserve to live; he'd thought that fact was well-established. Sherlock would have happily had him arrested for the bombing spree, but for what he'd done to John – for what'd dared to do to John, who at times seemed the only good thing on the whole miserable planet – Sherlock would see Moriarty burn.

He did want to take his time about it, he couldn't deny that. If he managed to lay his hands on Moriarty in a nice, deserted warehouse or factory where Sherlock could be assured of several uninterrupted hours, then he'd make certain Moriarty suffered before he died. But if that couldn't be managed, if he just glimpsed Moriarty on the street one day, then Sherlock would take the more expedient route and simply smash the man's head against the road until he was dead.

John leaned forward again and hid his face against Sherlock's shirt, as though he were deliberately trying to block out the world around them. He made some inane comment about finding it reassuring that Sherlock would kill Moriarty, which seemed rather nonsensical – it was a simple fact, why should it be reassuring?

“Are you all right?” he found himself asking, feeling an entirely illogical hatred for the faint tremors
that still lingered under John's skin.

When John spoke, his voice was flat and horribly resigned. “No.” Then he seemed to fortify himself. “Give me a minute, yeah?”

So Sherlock stayed just as he was, letting time drag by without making any conscious effort to categorise it. It was strange; usually he couldn't stand inactivity, his mind demanding more stimulation, more puzzles, more facts, more everything, but now...

Now Sherlock thought he'd have no trouble staying like this, exactly like this, for the rest of the day. John could stay here until sunset, and Sherlock would consider it time well spent.

But it didn't take the day, of course it didn't – John had never let the fearful tricks his mind played on him beat him before, and he wasn't going to start now. It was barely fifteen minutes before he was leaning back, his hands slipping off Sherlock's hips as he squared his shoulders and straightened up like a man about to go into battle.

Sherlock could see the sheepishness on John's face, the awkward embarrassment as he mentally berated himself for his near-breakdown, but Sherlock forestalled the inevitable (and completely unnecessary) apologies by simply sweeping out of the alleyway ahead of him. John was clearly more at ease now, but tension and wariness still lingered in every movement.

So Sherlock kept himself a bit closer than he usually would, and made sure to scan for dark-haired men in well-fitted suits. There were two others on the way home, but there were no more panic-attacks; Sherlock ensured John never saw them.

This, at least, was something he could do for John.

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Almost as soon as he was inside Baker Street, John felt so much tension unwind that it was dizzying. He hadn't even been aware of how wary, how on-edge he'd been until he suddenly wasn't, and the abrupt release of energy almost set him shaking again.

John planted himself in his chair with a soft sigh, leaning back slowly, wary of his new stitches. He knew it was foolish – if they popped open at the pressure of him leaning on them, they wouldn't be very good stitches, but he couldn't shake the need to be careful with them.

Sherlock was clattering around in the kitchen, but there was a certain tension in his shoulders and randomness in his movements that suggested he didn't have any particular goal in mind, and was just rearranging his various experiments to have something to do.

John realised Sherlock was actually bothered by what had happened.

“You okay?” he asked.

Sherlock froze, glancing over his shoulder with a completely perplexed expression on his face, as though he knew what John had said but the data didn't make sense. “Sometimes, John, you're the most bewildering creature I've ever met.”

“Say again?” John said, feeling more than a little shocked at that pronouncement.

But Sherlock had turned away, as though he hadn't actually meant to let that slip and was now trying to pretend it hadn't happened.
So John sighed in frustration, and tried again with his first question. “Sherlock...are you okay?”

“I don’t understand this obsessive need to enquire into welfare,” was the sullen mutter from the kitchen. “I wasn't the one who broke my stitches just this morning, or-”

“Well, you're my friend, for one,” John announced loudly, determinedly drowning Sherlock out. “And for another...”

He trailed off, reluctant to voice the second reason, but feeling a need to admit it. Sherlock had just tolerated being all-but hugged by John, the least he could do was explain himself, even if only a little.

“It's...easier,” he said quietly, shutting his eyes and rubbing at his nose, feeling almost ashamed of what he was saying. “Not to think about myself, I mean. If...”

“If you focus on how it's affected me, rather than how it's affected you,” Sherlock finished, in the tone of someone who’d just put a puzzle together

The voice had come from right in front of him, and John opened his eyes to find Sherlock had left the kitchen and was now standing over him. He wondered idly how Sherlock had done that without John hearing him.

He also wondered how Sherlock had known to leave exactly enough space between them so that, in spite of Sherlock's vulture-like stare, John didn't feel as though the taller man was looming over him.

“And I am a bit worried about you,” John threw in. “But yeah, it makes it easier.”

Maybe it was the adrenaline crash, maybe it was the fact he'd had a panic attack in the middle of the street just because he'd seen a man in a high-priced suit, but John was feeling strangely resigned to the whole thing. “Besides, it's not like thinking about it is going to do any good, is it? I mean, there's not exactly anything else I can learn from it, other than to spin it around in my head and see how long it takes to drive me crazy. We know who, we know how, we know why-”

“I don't know why,” Sherlock muttered bitterly.

For the second time in as many minutes, words failed John. Sherlock seemed to realise belatedly what he'd just said and looked away again. His face twisted viciously as though he was honestly considering cutting his tongue out, and was mulling over the adjustments he'd have to make in his lifestyle and whether they'd be worth it.

John wanted to change the subject, wanted to get off the topic of Moriarty's various motives and the actions those various motives had led to, but for once, John didn't see the point. He'd be thinking about it for hours either way, so he might as well take the time to enlighten Sherlock.

“Well, I have no idea why he set this whole thing up other than that he's a psychotic bastard, but I know why he...raped me.”

Sherlock looked horrified but also slightly intrigued, as though he desperately wanted to know the answer but hated himself for it at the same time.

“It's war,” John stated, thinking that would make everything clearer.

Before he'd shipped out, John had read a few books on the psychology of war and the various traumas those that fought in them could expect. It wasn't nearly enough to be of any real help, but it had been enough to stop him sticking his foot in his mouth when he treated his patients, and he'd learned some interesting things along the way.
But going by Sherlock's scowl, John didn't think Sherlock understood.

“In war, rape is less about the person, and more about what the person represents,” John explained, able to feel nicely detached from everything as he recited what he’d memorised. For a moment, he could fool himself into thinking that he was just giving a lecture, that this had nothing to do with him. “And they represent the enemy. Rape is used to decrease the enemy’s morale and a way of citing conquest. Soldier's wives could expect to be raped by conquering forces.”

Here, John felt his lips curling in an expression that was less like a smile and more like a grimace. “But you don't have a wife, so I guess I was the next best thing.”

He wouldn't have thought it possible, but Sherlock actually flinched, his face twisting and jerking for an instant, as if he'd been slapped. His eyes were hard but also somehow withdrawn, as though he wanted desperately to retreat but was forcing himself to remain in place.

John didn't even think about it – he just wanted that look off Sherlock's face and blurted out the first thing that flew into his head.

“Why'd you break the phone?”

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“But you don't have a wife, so I guess I was the next best thing.”

Sherlock tried to control his reaction, he really did. But he could feel his skin tightening as the muscles beneath it jumped, his expression twisting even as he fought to keep it still.

Had Moriarty known? That he'd known John was the only way to truly get to Sherlock had been apparent, but had he known? Known the way Sherlock listened carefully every time John laughed, wanting to categorise the different cadences and nuances of that sound? Known the way Sherlock was sometimes gripped by the urge to see what John's smiles felt like against his own lips? Known the way Sherlock watched John almost obsessively, wanting to memorise every single detail of his expressions, his reactions...of him?

Had raping John been some revolting, school yard-esque comeuppance? A way to say he'd beaten Sherlock in one arena, that he'd got there first?

Nausea that rose at the idea, quick and vicious. He was half-wondering if he should make a run for the bathroom when John's voice broke into his thoughts.

“Why'd you break the phone?”

There was a certain desperation to John's voice, as though he'd seen where Sherlock's thoughts were going and was trying to stop them. And it certainly succeeded, the question derailing Sherlock's line of thought quite neatly.

For a moment, he considered lying. But something in him was reluctant to lie to John after he'd just made such an obviously painful admission.

Of course, that didn't mean he'd actually tell John what Moriarty had said. “I deemed it necessary at the time.”

John squinted as though Sherlock’s words had been scribed and he was reading the fine print. “Liar. You didn't even think about it, did you?”
Sherlock sat down and opened the newspaper with a particularly irritated flick of his hand, raising it between them.

There was a few moment's silence. Then, “He called, didn't he?”

Sherlock debated simply refusing to answer. But there was only the slightest hint of a question in John's voice – he wasn't fishing, he was simply seeking confirmation.

“Yes,” Sherlock said tightly, dropping the newspaper and the pretence that his attention was anywhere but on John. “He called. He called and he...laughed.”

Sherlock could feel his lips twisting, his tongue curling as though he'd just bitten into something sour. He watched John try to suppress a shudder and only mostly succeed, but the doctor forced himself to smile.

“So what you're saying is...you got mad. And you broke the phone in a fit of temper.”

Sometimes, John's sheer resilience honestly astounded Sherlock.

“It wasn't a 'fit','” he defended.

“If you say so,” John said, in the agreeable tone of voice Sherlock had learned usually meant John was subtly mocking him.

But he felt a smile threatening all the same. John's amusement had always been infectious, unusually so – at least, in Sherlock's experience, as he'd never found himself wanting to smile just because someone else was smiling, not before John came along.

Though perhaps that was the point; everything was different with John.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks once again to ginbitch, my wonderful beta!
John was bored.

He hadn't gone back to work since he'd returned from the hospital, largely because he wasn't sure what he'd do if a dark-haired man in a suit walked in the door. He'd like to think he could be professional, that he wouldn't slip into a flashback and bolt from the office or attack someone, but he couldn't be sure, and there was no way John was going to put his patients at risk.

But just because John's life had ground to a halt for the foreseeable future didn't mean Sherlock's had – Lestrade had called him in for another case earlier that morning. John was both grateful to the inspector and yet more annoyed at him than he'd like to admit.

Grateful because it didn't take long for Sherlock to go stir-crazy, and he'd already begun eyeing his array of experiments speculatively, as though he was planning something both large and disastrous. And he was annoyed because without Sherlock, without any sort of company, the flat was distressingly empty.

There was no way he could have gone along, either – John was healing, but still far from hale enough to go running about London. This meant he was stuck alone in the flat with only his thoughts for company. And at the moment, there was nothing John wanted less than to just sit at home and think, because all his thoughts and mental wanderings inevitably led to one place.

John sighed, and honestly considering bashing his head against the wall until the last week or so was simply erased from memory. He was exhausted, frustrated and fed up at how everything he saw and everything he did seemed to remind him of the rape in some way.

If he were Sherlock, this would be the point at which he resorted to indoor target practice. He found he was seriously considering it, if only because the deafening cracks of gunshots would clear his head for a little while. The worst it could do was make him remember Afghanistan, and at this point, that would actually be an improvement.

But John was a sensible person, and sensible people didn't shoot at walls just because they couldn't find anything better to do. Besides, there was a more reliable way of making his mind just stop for an hour or so.

After all, alcohol was a depressant, and often produced a sedative effect.

He knew it was a bad idea. Even as he strode into the kitchen and retrieved one of the bottles of beer there, he knew it was dangerous – self-medicating with alcohol was a slippery slope to tread.

But he was just going to have one beer, just this once. Just to make his brain shut up...

--

Donovan let Sherlock into the crime scene without a word. Mostly because her first thought, upon seeing him, was again 'poor bastard' as opposed to 'freak', but also partly because there was an expression on Sherlock's face that said, quite clearly, 'I can't get my hands on the person I actually want to eviscerate, so anyone that attracts my attention will stand in for him'.
As far as Sally was concerned, someone else could step in front of that bullet. She almost winced on the Inspector's behalf when Lestrade ended up getting the brunt of it, but there was an expression of resignation on his face, as though he'd been expecting this as much as she had.

The investigation into the rape had come to nothing – the DNA matched no one in their databases, and they'd found the mobile home John had been held in burnt to an empty, black husk at the side of the motorway. That and everything they could get on a 'Jim Masters' that had worked in St. Bart's IT department had been the sum total of their evidence.

They hadn't found him. But Donovan didn't think anyone was surprised by that.

Of course, just because that was what Sherlock was expecting them to find wouldn't stop him from ripping their guts out over it. Sally saw Sherlock cast his eyes about the scene as though looking for someone else to verbally disembowel, and mentally recalculating the blast radius, stepped out of his line of sight.

She supposed that she could get him to shut up if she really tried, or at least get him kicked off the crime scene. But some part of her just didn't want to. Sally could only imagine the absolute hell he was going through, and if yelling about the stupidity of Scotland Yard made him feel better, she wouldn't begrudge him that – it wasn't like they hadn't heard it all before, anyway, though usually not at that volume.

--

One hour and four beers later, John was feeling nicely foggy. His thoughts were just distant enough that even if they strayed into bad territory, the memories felt too removed to upset him.

It didn't matter that he still heard Moriarty's laughter in the night, just before he went to sleep – Sherlock was living proof a human being could survive on very little sleep. It didn't matter that he couldn't roll onto his stomach any more without wanting to leap up out of the bed – it was a bad position to sleep in anyway, he could strain his neck. It didn't matter that he freaked out when he saw dark-haired men in well-cut suits – how often was he going to see someone like that anyway? It didn't matter that he still had stitches, and that the scabs on his hands tightened unpleasantly when he tried to clench them – he barely felt any pain right now.

It didn't matter; nothing mattered. John just sat on the couch, grinning stupidly at the empty room, feeling vaguely amused but unable to articulate why. If this was what it felt like, John could understand why Harry drank so much...

Even through the hazy mist of alcohol, that thought sent panic spiralling through him, accompanied by a healthy dose of revulsion and self-loathing. Sitting on the couch, beer bottles at his feet, smiling foolishly at the ceiling...

He'd turned into his sister.

That thought was enough to send John skittering off the sofa, lurching a bit as he struggled to balance himself. It occurred to him that he should probably wait until he'd sobered up to do this, but John didn't dare – what if he sobered up and decided it wasn't a big deal, as long as he hadn't broken anything or hurt anybody? What if he sobered up and then it happened again, and he let it slide because he'd let it slide once already, and then the next thing he knew he'd be like Harry, throwing back something alcoholic at every meal and spending four nights out of seven in a drunken stupor.

As he determinedly emptied every bottle of alcohol in the flat down the sink, John knew he was overreacting. He also knew he'd much prefer to overreact than to ignore it.
Given his family's experience with addiction, John didn't think it would take much to turn him into an alcoholic, and that was one road he absolutely refused to travel. No matter how loud his memories got, no matter where his thoughts went...

No matter what Moriarty had done to him.

After all the alcohol was gone, John went upstairs and took another shower.

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When he got back to the flat, Sherlock was very unhappy with the world in general and certain policemen in particular. It hadn't even been an interesting case! The fire was arson, true, but it had been petty insurance fraud, and frankly, beneath his notice.

He wouldn't have bothered going if John hadn't made him. The doctor had actually threatened to throw him bodily out of the flat if he didn't answer Lestrade's summons.

"Your pacing and experiments are driving me nuts, Sherlock! Either go to the crime scene or I'm dragging you outside and locking you out of the flat – and don't think I won't do it! You're spending at least an hour out of this house either way, but how you do it is up to you."

The beginnings of a smile twitched at the corner of Sherlock's mouth as he remembered John's words. John's stitches meant he'd opted to sit this one out, which had been disappointing – if he'd come along, it might have made the whole experience bearable.

Sherlock was expecting to find John watching telly, possibly reading, or maybe catching a nap. Even he hadn't anticipated finding John sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a large collection of empty bottles, most of them beer but two of them wine.

"Sherlock," John said, turning to him, his voice and expression as solemn as if he were about to announce someone had died. "From this moment onwards, I give you complete and total authority to rip alcohol out of my hands if you see me drinking it."

And once again, John surprised him. Sherlock wondered dimly if there'd ever come a time when John didn't surprise him at least three times a week.

"I'm serious," John went on, perhaps reading Sherlock's confusion. "No matter how stroppy I get about it. In this moment, when I'm...mostly sober, and completely in control, I give you permission to prevent me drinking alcohol by any means necessary."

"Isn't that a little extreme?" Sherlock asked cautiously, feeling as though he were skirting dangerous territory. Dangerous emotional territory, at that, which always left him at a loss.

"It's not forever," John clarified quietly. "Just until...until I've got this under control."

His voice broke a little on the last word, so slightly it would likely have been undetectable to anyone but Sherlock, who had made studying John a curriculum. He knew the way John's voice sounded when he was relaxed, when he was tense but not overtly so, when he was distressed...and when he was like this. When he was swallowing back paralysing fear of his own vulnerabilities, his own weaknesses...

"You are not your sister," Sherlock said bluntly.

"Yeah, I got that memo, thanks!" John snapped, rubbing a hand over his face and avoiding Sherlock's eyes. "But it...it wouldn't take much, Sherlock. Not right now."
“But you stopped,” Sherlock pointed out, rather redundantly in his opinion. There was no conceivable way John could have drunk all those bottles and still remained conscious, so clearly he'd deliberately emptied most of them before placing them symbolically on the kitchen table (and what had he done with Sherlock's experiment with the mould?). John had claimed to be 'mostly sober', though, which meant he had drunk something, though it was either at least an hour or so ago or he hadn't drunk enough to truly impair him, but the fact that he'd changed clothes suggested the former.

But what Sherlock's mind was fixating on was the fact that John had stopped. It was an overreaction, true – one experience did not an addiction make – but his sister's experience had obviously made him extremely wary of alcohol. So much so that he wouldn't permit even one lapse of control without ensuring it couldn't happen again.

Sherlock highly doubted John was as close to addiction as he obviously thought he was. But if this was John's decision, then Sherlock would abide by it.

“I think I need to talk to someone,” John continued, and Sherlock could hear in his voice how much that admission cost him.

In that moment, Sherlock believed he understood what people meant when they described an awkward moment. He'd never really experienced them himself – they arose primarily when people's wants and limitations collided with society's expectations, something Sherlock had never really put much stock in to begin with. But now...

Now he wanted to do something, say something, to help, but had literally no idea what. There was no previous experience to base it off, no formula for the 'right' thing to do, so he just stood there, feeling dangerously close to useless.

It was a horrible thing to feel, and Sherlock wanted to put an end to it as swiftly as possible. He cast about for something less...disconcerting to focus on. An experiment, perhaps?

“John, what did you do with my experiment?”

It was only when John made a muffled noise that Sherlock realised it was probably not-good to ask about an experiment just seconds after your friend had admitted to a need for counselling after being raped by your arch-enemy. And Moriarty was his arch-enemy – Mycroft had been officially deposed, especially since he was working to find Moriarty.

But hopefully not to kill him; Sherlock wanted to do that himself. Preferably over the course of several days. Weeks, if he could manage it.

“The grubby coffee cups that you assure me are experiments and not merely your efforts to put off the washing up for as long as possible are on the counter,” John said, gesturing vaguely. “Under the tea towel.”

Sherlock had been convinced he'd said the wrong thing, that he'd stepped well over the line into not-good...so then why was John smiling?

--

John had made a call as soon as he could, largely because he was sure that he'd lose his nerve if he put it off. Actually doing it had been...unpleasant...but he'd got the information he needed, had an appointment with a rape crisis counsellor, and nothing about that sentence made him feel optimistic in any way.

Sherlock had insisted on getting the name of his counsellor-to-be, and had promptly run background
checks, financial checks and who knew what else on the poor man. But he’d tolerated that – it wasn’t as if he was expecting anything less, really – and it was only when Sherlock seemed inclined to follow him to the clinic that John finally told him, in no uncertain terms, to push off.

Now he was rather regretting that. The train ride had been a nightmare – as in the hospital, John had felt convinced that everyone he saw knew where he was going and why just by looking at him. And every stop had only increased the nausea writhing in his gut, until John was half-tempted to find a public bathroom and make himself throw up, just to get it over with.

Standing in front of the rape crisis centre, John honestly considered turning around and just running away. He’d never understood people who said they felt buildings were mocking them – they were inanimate constructs of stone and wood, how much mocking could they do? – but for the first time, he thought he could see what they meant. It was as though just standing front of it was somehow admitting that he wasn't strong enough, that he needed someone to hold his hand. That even though it was over, he was too weak, too helpless, to simply deal with it and move on.

Logically, he knew that was a very stupid line of thought. But logic had nothing on the venomous voices that hissed in the back of his mind until John just wanted to plug his ears and scream at them to shut up.

John took a deep breath, and pushed open the door.

--

The package was wrapped up like a present in bright floral paper, complete with ribbon and bow in an eye-smarting shade of pink. Usually, Sherlock would have assumed the package came from Sarah, or Molly, or was one of Mycroft’s jokes, except for the fact that there was no return address. There were no stamps, either – the box had obviously been left on the doorstep by someone other than a postal worker.

Which was why Sherlock had carried it upstairs and set it down on the kitchen table, instead of just leaving it on the step.

The package measured thirty centimetres by twenty centimetres by seven centimetres. It wasn't particularly heavy, and nothing had rattled or clicked when he picked it up, making it unlikely there was an explosive device concealed inside. But the lack of explosives was in no way an indication it wasn’t from Moriarty.

Sherlock pulled on rubber gloves and cut the ribbon, ensuring he preserved the knot as he did so. He cut the wrapping paper diagonally, careful not to touch the tape in case of fingerprints, and peeled it away to reveal a plain cardboard box.

There hadn't been any nasty surprises so far, but Sherlock was going to assume this had been sent by Moriarty until there was credible evidence to the contrary. He made sure to stand back as he eased the top off the box.

But nothing happened. It seemed there were no explosives or poison capsules or gas canister awaiting, only white material.

Intriguing.

Beginning to entertain the idea that this was not Moriarty's work, Sherlock inspected what he'd just revealed. It looked be plain white cotton, folded many times to fit into the box; most likely sheets from a double bed, judging by the size.
It wasn't often that Sherlock was confused, but he was now. Why would anyone send him a package of bedsheets?

He grasped the corner and lifted the first sheet partway out of the box, scanning for more clues. And yes, there it was – stains. The pattern of brown spots and smears suggested a liquid, could be dried blood but fruit, rust and mud were also a possibility. There was also a musky, protein-like smell hanging on them, which increased the likelihood of the stains being blood.

Sherlock pulled the sheet free, intending to hang it up and glean whatever clues he could from it, when a small rectangle of card – obviously hidden within the sheet's folds – fell onto the kitchen table.

It was thick, obviously expensive, and clearly meant to be one of those cards usually attached to presents or gift baskets. There was writing on it, words scribed with a fountain pen in elegant, almost calligraphic script.

Sherlock noted all those features absently, then he picked up the card and read it.

*Thought Johnny might like a little memento of our time together.*

*Love,*

*M*

Sherlock's mind snapped the pieces into place.

These were the sheets John had been raped on.

Sherlock felt his stomach and throat contract, nausea and horror rising, and he felt the sudden need to drop the sheet and run to the bathroom to scrub his hands, as though he'd touched something carrying the Ebola virus.

Then he felt an eerie calm descend, and he knew exactly what he was going to do. For a moment, he wondered if this was how John felt when he had his gun in his hand.

Sherlock carefully folded the sheet again and placed it back into the box, with the card on top of it. He put the lid back on, slid it back into the wrapping paper, and replaced the ribbon. Then he carried the box into the living room and set it down in the fireplace.

He opened the flue, scrounged some kindling, and lit a match.

Sherlock knew he could be destroying valuable evidence – fingerprints at the very least, and who knew how many clues Moriarty might have left in the trace evidence on the sheets and in the package.

He didn't care.

The sheets weren't going to stay in their home. John wouldn't see them, wouldn't touch them, and Sherlock was going to ensure that by erasing them.

He set the package alight, and watched it burn.

Chapter End Notes
Many thanks to ginbitch, my lovely beta!
When he was scooping the charred ashes of the package and those repulsive sheets into a rubbish bag, there was a moment when Sherlock regretted breaking the pink phone. He wanted Moriarty to call him, wanted to be able to tell Moriarty exactly what he was going to do to him in excruciating detail...

But he had broken the phone, so there was no point to his fantasies.

Sherlock was tempted to fling the bag into the Thames with the rest of the sewage, but held himself back – John wouldn't appreciate littering. He settled for walking a few streets away and tossing it in the first skip he found, before returning to Baker Street to strip off his gloves and wash his hands.

He knew washing his hands wasn't necessary; he'd touched nothing without his gloves on, so there was no possibility of contamination. But his brain, the brain that usually focused on everything at once, inundating him with information, was now doing nothing but screaming that his hands had actually touched the sheets John was raped on, and he needed to get them clean, to get it off.

He turned on the water as hot as it could go without blistering his skin, and grabbed the rough sponge John used to wash the dishes.

Sherlock knew it was irrational, but he needed to scour away the imagined taint on his own fingers and the tendrils of guilt that prodded at the back of his mind.

He knew it wasn't his fault. It had been Moriarty who'd raped John, Moriarty who had set this all in motion...

But Sherlock couldn't escape the fact that if John had never met him, Moriarty would never have been interested in the doctor. If Sherlock had kept John with him that night, had made some excuse about danger to keep him from venturing to Sarah's, then Moriarty would never have taken him.

He had known Moriarty was still out there, and he'd let John go out alone. He'd been waiting by the pink phone when John had been kidnapped. He'd been sitting in the flat, counting down to the deadline he'd given, while John had been...

Sherlock snarled under his breath, and scrubbed harder.

--

When he left the centre, John was surprised to find himself actually feeling a little better. Still not exactly 'good' or 'happy'...but better.

He'd expected to find Sherlock bent over some bizarre experiment, and was only mildly surprised to find him in the kitchen. However, John thought the intent way he was bent over the sink might be something to worry about.

“Sherlock?” he asked cautiously.

Sherlock jerked as though he'd been completely unaware of John's approach – which was a reason for concern all by itself – and as he half-turned John caught a glimpse of his hands.
“Christ!” he hissed, practically leaping across the room.

He took a firm hold of Sherlock's wrists and assessed the damage in an instant. Sherlock's hands were a deep red as though they'd been exposed to an uncomfortable level of heat, and light scrapes littered his palms and fingers – some of them bleeding – as though his skin had been rubbed raw.

In a second, John had spun the tap on the sink until it was gushing cold water instead of hot and pushed Sherlock's hands under the cool spray.

“Keep them there,” John barked, already going to the cupboard he kept the first-aid kit in.

The kit was well-stocked, of course – living with Sherlock had taught John to keep rather extensive medical supplies close to hand. He grabbed a handful of plasters and cotton wool balls, along with a bottle of antiseptic, and it was only when he turned back to Sherlock that the medical part of his mind slowed enough to realise whatever was wrong was much bigger than a few scrapes.

Sherlock hadn't moved an inch which, while gratifying, was certainly uncharacteristic, and he was staring at his hands with a confused expression on his face. Like he couldn't quite remember how they'd come to be in this state, and was trying to work it out.

“Sherlock, are you all right?” John asked quietly. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No,” Sherlock said, his voice flat.

“This will sting,” John warned, before dabbing a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic along some of the oozing scratches.

His unease only deepened when Sherlock didn't respond, not even with a condescending 'obviously' or sarcastic quip. His eyes looked vacant, which was enough to send a chill down John's spine because Sherlock's mind was never vacant.

“Sherlock...how did this happen?”

Sherlock's eyes drifted to the sink. “I was washing my hands.”

John cursed himself for an unobservant idiot. The tap had been running with hot water when he'd entered, and he thought he'd glimpsed the rough sponge in Sherlock's hand...

So, Sherlock had been washing his hands. But what could possibly have caused him to scrub so hard he had broken the skin? John had no idea, but Sherlock's blank expression told him that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

“Why?” he asked quietly, now gently manipulating Sherlock's fingers as he checked for other injuries.

“...I touched something filthy.”

John could tell that wasn't the whole story, but he let it pass – of all people, John understood when not to press a subject. So he settled for finishing his examination of Sherlock's hands, satisfying himself that Sherlock hadn't done himself any damage other than what John had already seen. He then began applying plasters to the scrapes, Sherlock's hands lying limp and trusting in his grasp.

In a twisted way, there was actually something amusing about this – it was only a day or so ago that they'd been in these exact same positions, but with Sherlock treating John's hands.
At times, John really could be a fascinating contradiction.

His hands were rough – the calloused flesh of someone who wasn't afraid to get their hands dirty. John could shoot with an accuracy professional hit-men would envy and punched like a boxer (as Sherlock had discovered), yet those same hands were light and gentle on Sherlock's fingers as John bent them carefully, his expression intent.

Sherlock knew John didn't quite believe the reason he'd given for scrubbing at his hands. The doctor had looked at him, his eyes narrow and an expression of his face that suggested Sherlock was as transparent as glass, but he hadn't said another word. He just went about covering Sherlock's hands with plasters, which Sherlock felt he should probably object to, just because it was what he did.

“Are all those strictly necessary?”

“With the kind of stuff you tend to handle, let's err on the side of caution, all right?”

Sherlock's fingers twitched, suddenly longing for his phone so he could make his displeasure known to his brother. He'd assumed Mycroft was hunting Moriarty down, but obviously he wasn't trying hard enough if Moriarty had that kind of time to devote to tormenting John.

Sherlock vowed that from this moment on, he wouldn't let John out of his sight. If it was that easy for Moriarty to drop that hideous package on their doorstep, then it wouldn't be difficult for him to have John kidnapped again.

--

Mycroft wasn't at all surprised when he received a text from his brother. The package had unfortunately slipped past his surveillance (heads were going to roll for that), and Sherlock had discovered it before anyone could be sent to pick it up.

What his surveillance could tell him was that the package had contained soiled bedsheets, which Sherlock had then burnt to ash in the fireplace.

It was easy enough to the connection to Moriarty and John's rape. Sherlock had deduced what the sheets were and destroyed them, and it seemed as though he was determined not to inform John of what had just transpired.

Of course, the fact that he couldn't be honest about his fury would in no way spare Mycroft.

With nothing but weary resignation, Mycroft raised his phone and opened the message he'd just been sent.

*Are you completely incompetent? Or is it just your minions?*

*SH*

Mycroft phoned Sherlock's mobile; he only texted when he had to. It was a force of habit, really – some threats needed an appropriately sinister voice to be fully appreciated.

The moment Sherlock answered, Mycroft knew his brother wasn't in the same room as John; Sherlock's voice would never have been that acidic within the doctor's hearing.

“I don't want your excuses, or your platitudes, Mycroft! I want to know what you've been doing.
because it clearly isn't enough!"

“A person like Moriarty has many layers to their organisation, Sherlock,” Mycroft said placidly, resisting the urge to layer on an undertone of scorn. “He is protected. In spite of your delusions as to my reach, I cannot produce him immediately.”

“John could have opened that package,” Sherlock spat, in the same tone an ordinary person would use for a phrase like ‘you committed genocide’.

“That's true,” Mycroft agreed. “And he would have turned it in to the police.”

At the rebuke in his tone, Sherlock made a sound that was close to a growl of frustration. “They wouldn't have found anything anyway! He's not stupid enough to have handled the box with his bare hands; at most we'd have managed to track down one of his lackeys. And he would have made certain it was someone who played a very minor role and couldn't lead us to anyone of interest.”

“You may be right, but was it necessary to burn it?”

There was only silence on the other end, but Mycroft hadn't expected a response. There was no logical reason for burning the package, and Sherlock would never admit to having been driven by emotion rather than reason. He might acknowledge it to himself, but he'd never actually say that he'd burned the sheets because their existence repelled him.

At least, not to Mycroft – John might have had better luck.

“I suppose we must be thankful that your surveillance isn't completely useless,” Sherlock grumbled, in a transparent attempt to change the subject.

“Do give me some credit, Sherlock,” was all Mycroft said before he hung up.

--

John had spoken to his counsellor about the nightmares, worried they were a sign that his whole mental state was decaying.

Apparently, in a really twisted way, the nightmares were actually a good sign. They showed his mind was trying to process what had happened, trying to deal with it and move on. Which would have been nice, if his mind hadn't insisted on reliving the whole unpleasant experience whenever he closed his eyes.

The counsellor had told him to expect the nightmares, and to only become worried if the exact same dream was repeating over several days, or if he had a dream about the rape more than once a night. That apparently showed that there were problems, that his brain had hit a roadblock, of sorts – John's counsellor had likened it to a CD being jolted and then getting stuck on a single track – but until he saw signs of that, he shouldn't worry.

“Remember, don't be too hard on yourself, or expect too much too soon,” John had been told. “You were raped barely a week and a half ago – at this point, I'd be shocked if you were sleeping well.”

It was nice to know he wasn't going insane, but it didn't stop him from unconsciously bracing himself every time he went to bed.

John lay back against his pillow, closed his eyes...and waited for the nightmare.

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Sherlock's eyes flew open, a cry choked off in his throat.

The first thing he realised was that he'd had a nightmare. The second thing he realised was that he'd apparently broken into a cold sweat at some point during said nightmare. The third conclusion he came to was that he was absolutely not going back to sleep.

He knew it was irrational – it was a nightmare, it hadn't actually happened – but Sherlock wasn't accustomed to having nightmares and was far from enamoured with his first experience of them.

At least, the first one he could remember. He'd probably had a few nightmares in his formative years but they were long forgotten; he doubted he'd ever forget the one he'd just had.

He'd been at the pool again, only this time the rifle had gone off, and the bullet had hit the jacket John was wearing.

Except he hadn't exploded. Instead, he'd burned.

John hadn't screamed, hadn't cried, hadn't tried to get away. He just stood there, looking straight at Sherlock the way he had that night, eyes flat and trapped as his hair caught alight, as his skin melted off the bone until there was nothing but a handful of grey ash on the tiles.

Sherlock knew it hadn't happened. It was nothing more than his subconscious mind stringing together a few images and sounds, certainly nothing to get worked up about.

Then why the sudden need to creep upstairs and make sure that John was still there, still with him, still alive?

Sherlock was quite determined that he would stay downstairs, that he wouldn't risk waking John up just to assuage his ridiculous and ungrounded fears...

Until he heard a clatter in the kitchen, and realised he wasn't the only one awake.

He left his bedroom to find John making tea, which in and of itself was a perfectly normal activity for him, though one usually not performed at three in the morning.

Sherlock noted the doctor's shadowed eyes, the unnaturally restless yet sluggish movements that suggested he was tired but unwilling to go back to bed, and surmised he wasn't the only one having disturbing dreams.

“Hey, Sherlock,” John said, as though it was perfectly natural to run into flatmates wandering the kitchen in the early hours of the morning. “You couldn't sleep either, huh?”

“Inherently inaccurate on both accounts,” Sherlock couldn't resist pointing out. “We are not incapable of going to sleep, we just do not wish to.”

John paused, and for a moment Sherlock thought he might have done something not-good, until John shrugged. “True.”

He busied himself at the counter, and Sherlock sat down at the table. He peered out the window at the night sky (no stars, but that was hardly surprising, they were in London), toying with the idea of playing his violin for the next hour or so.

Sherlock's view was suddenly blocked by John's shoulder and half of his chest as the man set down a cup of tea in front of him. “Here.”
“Technically, while not producing as exaggerated a reaction as coffee, tea *is* a stimulant, so this won’t assist in helping either of us sleep—”

“Just drink the damn tea, Sherlock.” But John was smiling as he said it.

Sherlock felt the corner of his mouth quirk in response, some part of him wondering what Mycroft’s surveillance would make of this.

If nothing else, Sherlock had to admit it was probably an interesting tableau. Both of them sitting at the kitchen table with cups of tea in front of them, himself staring out the window as John stared at the wall.

They weren’t actually looking at each other, and given what had roused them there was a definite air of suffering in the room, but it was still...nice. It was a contradiction, but John was good at those, and Sherlock was getting used to them.

Sherlock sipped at his tea, slowly but steadily draining the cup.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to ginbitch, who beta-d this for me in spite of it being pretty unpolished.
John was going to break up with Sarah.

He was resolute, and he was determined that it would done by the end of the day. Which wouldn't have been a problem, except that he had to wait until Sarah got off work to talk to her. Three hours, twelve minutes to go...far too much time to think.

They'd only been on a handful of dates and neither of them were particularly emotionally involved – they hadn't even slept together yet – but breaking up with someone always made him feel guilty. Even that time he'd broken up with Matthew, who had been an utter arsehole and completely unsuited for a long-term relationship.

And, of course, thinking about breaking up with Sarah inevitably led to exactly why he'd felt it was necessary. Another thing he didn't want to think about.

He knew he was doing the right thing – he didn't have anything to offer a relationship right now. Just the thought of kissing someone, let alone having sex, was enough to make him feel nauseous, and he was self-aware to enough to know that even purely emotional support would probably be rather beyond him at this point.

Still, John was dreading it. It wasn't so much about Sarah as it was about what the break-up and the necessity of it said about him (and that sounded horribly selfish, but it was true). It was as though ending the relationship was admitting that he was deficient, that even in this small way, Moriarty had won.

He needed something to distract him, and since he was going to have to check how Sherlock's hands were healing, an obvious solution presented itself.

John left the living room – where he'd been channel-surfing and trying not to look at the clock – for the kitchen, where Sherlock was surfing the internet on John's laptop and shooting occasional, impatient glances towards the boiling kettle. John toyed with the idea of asking what he was doing, but decided it was best if he didn't know.

“Sherlock, how are your hands?”

Sherlock glanced at his fingers, still patched with sticking plaster. “Adequate.”

“Do they feel tight? Itchy? Swollen or painful?”

Sherlock's gaze cut to John, his eyes as hard as industrial diamond. “What's wrong?”

Sometimes, it was nice to have a friend he didn't need to bother keeping secrets from. At other times, it was just uncomfortable to have Sherlock know almost everything that went through his brain.

“Just give me your hands, Sherlock.”

“...I'll surrender my hands to your inspection if you tell me what's wrong.”

John sighed and bowed to the inevitable – he just didn't have the energy to fight with Sherlock right
“I'm going to break up with Sarah when she gets off work, and I'm trying to get my mind off it.”

“Oh.” Surprisingly, Sherlock offered his hands without further comment.

There wasn't anything John could do. In spite of the hot water, Sherlock had been fortunate enough not to burn himself, and all of the scrapes were shallow and likely didn't even need the plasters John had insisted on applying.

“Should I relocate to my bedroom?” Sherlock asked abruptly.

As usual, John didn't quite follow his thought process. “What?”

“For the...break-up,” Sherlock said, a faint hint of distaste in his voice. “I'm told a measure of privacy is appreciated for such matters.”

John frowned. “I'm not going to break up with her here. I'm walking over to her place.”

Sherlock scowled. “You're not going alone.”

“Excuse me? What happened to 'a measure of privacy is appreciated for such matters'?”

“It's not safe,” Sherlock muttered, his tone unexpectedly vicious and his eyes dropping to the laptop as his scowl deepened.

A shiver skated up John's spine at the implications behind Sherlock's objection. He hadn't even considered the idea that Moriarty might attack him again – he'd got what he wanted after all, so why would he bother? – but now that it had occurred to him, he cursed himself for a bloody idiot for not realising it sooner. Of course Moriarty would still consider him a viable target; he was just the kind of person to kidnap John purely to make Sherlock dance to his tune.

The thought of somehow ending up in Moriarty's clutches had John suppressing the urge to run upstairs and hide under the covers of his bed, like when he was five years old and terrified of the nameless shadows that lived in his cupboard.

Suddenly, the idea of Sherlock accompanying him to Sarah's house seemed quite welcome.

“Just do me a favour and don't listen in.”

--

If Sarah was honest with herself, she knew this day had been coming. John had been uncomfortable and standoffish whenever she visited him in the hospital, and had always made an excuse to prevent her visiting him when he'd returned to his flat. Some of it might be PTSD – John had clearly been tortured, and god, it made her sick to think about that – but Sarah knew how to spot a man who was about to initiate a break-up.

And if she were truly, painfully honest with herself, she'd been expecting it for much longer than that. She'd seen the way Sherlock acted around John, and more importantly, she'd seen the way John acted around Sherlock.

Sometimes she truly wondered why he'd started dating her in the first place. Did he think Sherlock wasn't interested, or had he convinced himself it wouldn't work out?

Well, whatever the reason, Sarah knew it wouldn't have been out of boredom or a desire to provoke
Sherlock’s jealousy. John had his faults – being a closeted adrenaline junkie was one of them – but at heart, he was a good man. Something that was becoming all-too rare these days.

That was probably why Sarah had continued seeing him even when some part of her had known it was a lost cause. Because John was honest, and brave, and loyal to his very bones, and was the kind of person who became a doctor because they truly wanted to help people, the sort who always tried to do what was right.

Which was why Sarah knew that soon they'd be having that conversation. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, but soon. Because John Watson wasn't the sort of man who broke up with someone over the phone; he'd do it face to face.

So when someone rang her doorbell, she felt absolutely no surprise when it turned out to be John.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly, his expression serious. But his mouth was wrinkled at the corners, as though he was uncomfortable and trying not to show it.

Sarah simply nodded, feeling nothing but acceptance and a dull sense of regret. “I know.”

--

The fact that Sarah had taken it so well had left John feeling relieved, and then guilty that he felt relieved.

Sherlock had honoured John's condition of not-eavesdropping by taking himself off...somewhere...when they were three houses away, reappearing just as abruptly when it was over.

“Jesus, Sherlock!” John yelped when the man seemed to materialise beside him. “How can a man your size move so bloody quietly?”

“You were distracted,” Sherlock replied, sounding close to bitter for no reason John could determine.

Under normal circumstances, John would have tried to puzzle out what had upset Sherlock – with varying degrees of success – but now he was just too exhausted and emotionally drained to bother. He'd been dreading breaking up with Sarah, then he'd been relieved she'd taken it so well, then guilty for being relieved, and now he'd progressed to a strange sense of shame, horribly similar to what he'd felt when he'd stood outside the crisis centre.

He knew he shouldn't feel that way. He and Sarah hadn't really been going anywhere – that it had been more a question of when they would break up rather than if – but ending the relationship now felt like surrendering. Felt like admitting that Moriarty had screwed him up so badly he'd never have a relationship again.

John knew, logically, that wasn't true, that it might take years to recover but that recovery was an option...but right now, he couldn't see it. He thought ruefully that it seemed stupid that a few hours of torment could have traumatised him more than months at war, but perhaps that was because the war – for all its violence and terror – had never been personal.

This...what Moriarty had done...was sickeningly personal.

John shook his head once, sharply, like a dog shaking away water. He wouldn't think about that. Instead, he would focus on the fact that he undoubtedly felt lighter, now that the break-up was over and done with.

He was surprised to realise they were already home – apparently he'd been so absorbed in his
thoughts he hadn't even noticed when they'd turned into Baker Street. John gave a small huff of amusement at himself, conceding that it had been a good idea to have Sherlock tag along, if only because he might have walked himself into a bus otherwise.

“You seem...happier,” Sherlock observed quietly when they were back in the flat, the detective in his chair and tapping away at John's laptop again while John tried to scrounge something edible from the fridge.

“Well, it was the right thing to do,” John mused without turning around. “It's not like I could keep her hanging on until I got over it.”

And John wasn't going to think about how impossible it seemed that he'd ever 'get over it'.

Although in the hospital, he'd thought about what happened every second of the day. But now, back home, he'd be caught off-guard and as much as ten minutes would pass without it demanding his attention.

It was similar to what had happened when his parents had died. In the first few days, he used to think about it every moment, and each time it hurt just as much as it had the first time. But eventually he went hours without truly thinking on it, then days. It wasn't as though it had never happened, but that he absorbed it, and it became something that was there but not remarked upon. It changed him, but it didn't marr him forever.

“Besides, Sarah took it pretty well,” John continued. “Seemed a bit relieved, to be honest.”

“Imbecile,” Sherlock muttered, in the kind of soft tone that suggested he'd mostly been talking to himself.

John turned around. “I beg your pardon?”

“Imbecile,” Sherlock repeated. “She's going to give up on you just because it might be a bit of work? As I said, imbecile.”

Sherlock hadn't looked at John – his eyes were still fixed on the laptop screen – but there was a strange intensity to both his face and his voice. As though Sarah accepting the break-up had personally offended him in some manner.

“She's not,” John said, feeling the need to defend his ex-girlfriend; after all, it hadn't been her fault they'd split up. “Look, Sherlock, when you get into a relationship, you expect certain things from your partner, things that I'm not...I'm not in any fit state to provide right now.”

If that last part was a little bitter, John thought he certainly had the right to be.

Sherlock had abandoned the laptop to focus on him completely now, a small line between his eyebrows showing his confusion. “Like what?”

John wondered how he could explain it. Then he wondered why he was even considering explaining it – shouldn't this be the point where, if he was in a conversation with anyone else, he'd declare it none of their business?

“Look, Sherlock, Sarah and I went into this expecting, at its most basic, two things from each other: sex and emotional availability. Now emotional availability I might be able to swing on a good day, but right now, pulling out all my fingernails with pliers holds more appeal than the idea of having sex.”
Sherlock snorted. “So? She'd still have you, wouldn't she? If I was in a relationship with you, I wouldn't let anything so paltry as lack of sex deter me.”

For a moment, John froze, torn between conflicting impulses. On the one hand, the problems that would have inevitably developed had he continued seeing Sarah were hardly ‘paltry’, and it infuriated him to hear them referred to like that. On the other hand, that came close to being the nicest thing Sherlock had ever said about him.

“That's all well and good to say,” John made himself respond. “But you don't want a relationship with me, so—”

“Patently untrue.”

“...what?” It was all John could say.

“You claimed that I did not want a relationship with you, which isn't true,” Sherlock said, a little too calmly for John's peace of mind. “In actual fact, going by the symptoms and the common definition of the state, I'm probably in love with you. Of course, given that this is a new experience for me, that may be a premature conclusion.”

John collapsed into his chair because really, there was nothing else he could do. Actual words were beyond him, and he simply gaped at Sherlock like the police tended to do when the detective made one of his more outlandish deductions.

Sherlock was frowning at him again. “Is this news to you? I didn't think I was particularly subtle.”

“Some of us need things spelled out every now and then,” John said, his voice still flat with shock – it was a lot to take in, and it had been a very emotional day.

“You really had no idea?” Sherlock asked, his head cocked slightly as though he were marvelling at John's obtuseness.

“I had absolutely no bloody clue,” John said honestly, still reeling as he gathered himself to be equally as honest in turn. “If it helps, I...well...me, too.”

He could tell Sherlock understood. For a moment, the furrows in his brow deepened, and John could tell he was going through his memory, re-examining John's every word and action in light of the new information. Then, all at once, his face smoothed out in a particularly self-satisfied smile.

This would usually be the point at which John kissed him. But as that was out of the question, he just remained sitting opposite Sherlock, feeling awkward.

The insane, emotionally-stunted man John was in love with had just told him he felt the same way...so shouldn't he be feeling happier? While joy and contentment were curling through his chest, they were like wisps of smoke rather than the raging bonfire he'd half-expected. He was happy, but...not much. Maybe it was because that, even though he'd been handed exactly what he wanted on a platter, he couldn't yet see the way to ever actually taking it.

“Why couldn't we have had this discussion before?” John asked, half to himself and half to the universe at large.

“...perhaps the timing could have been better,” Sherlock conceded.

“I mean, it won't be sunshine and roses. Shit, Sherlock, do you have any idea how difficult this will be?”
“I’m told I’m difficult all the time,” Sherlock pointed out affably. “Maybe it’s your turn.”

John probably should have been angry at the flippant dismissal of what he knew would be a long, hard road to come, but all he felt was a dim sense of amusement.

But still, he felt compelled to ask, “What happens if I don’t get better?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Then we’ll continue on as we have been.”

John snorted, thinking it typical of Sherlock that, having made up his mind to hold onto something, he wouldn’t let go of it for anything. “You don’t do anything by halves or – god forbid – normally, do you?”

“Normal is boring. Besides, you will get better.”

“Just like that? You just know that I’m going to get better?” John said, the scepticism heavy in his voice.

“Of course.”

John knew his look would be politely described as ’disbelieving’.

“Oh, all right then,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes. “Be like the police and don’t believe me without solid proof. It’s tiresome, but eventually you’ll realise I was right.”

Looking at Sherlock in front of him, all pale skin and dark hair and sharp angles and completely, arrogantly confident that he was right, John could almost believe it. It was as though if Sherlock said he was going to recover, then that made it true.

John realised that was probably a bit of a warped view of the world, and it was that more than anything that prompted him to laugh.

The sound of it surprised him. It wasn’t bitter or choked off or strained as all his laughs had been since he awoke in the hospital. It came from deep in his belly and sent his ribs into spasms so rapid he could barely draw breath between them.

It was exactly the way he’d laughed before he’d even known Moriarty’s name. It felt rich and warm and above all, real.

John allowed himself to think that maybe, just maybe, Sherlock was right.

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Sherlock had made himself scarce when they approached Sarah’s house, and hadn’t even given in to the temptation to peek in a window. Probably for the best, really; he certainly didn’t want to see or overhear Sarah dissolving into tears when John explained why he’d come over.

And he had no doubt she would be crying at some point. After all, John was walking out of her life, what sane person wouldn’t be upset? If John had tried to leave their flat, to leave Sherlock after something like this, Sherlock knew he would have done anything and everything he could to make John stay.

In the end, the visit didn’t take nearly as long as Sherlock had anticipated, but John was so distracted when he left that Sherlock was right beside him before the doctor noticed his presence. John was largely silent all the way home, and it was only when they were actually inside the flat that he
seemed to come back to himself somewhat. He seemed happier, unburdened almost, and while it was certainly pleasing, Sherlock couldn't help but wonder exactly why. He'd been exceedingly reluctant to end his relationship with Sarah, so why did he seem so relaxed now? Shouldn't he be angry, regretful, depressed or some combination of the three?

So Sherlock did what he usually did when he was puzzled about John – he asked. With anyone else, he'd simply try to deduce it; most people prevaricated to extraordinary degrees when faced with questions about their emotional state. But with John, Sherlock was guaranteed an honest answer, guaranteed that he'd at least try to explain it.

“It was the right thing to do,” came John's voice from the kitchen. “It's not like I could keep her hanging on until I got over it. Besides, Sarah took it pretty well. Seemed a bit relieved, to be honest.”

Relieved? Sarah was relieved that John ended their relationship? Why? She wasn't a closeted lesbian, didn't seem to be hiding any shameful secrets that John was on the verge of discovering...

“Imbecile,” he stated. It was the only conclusion.

But apparently that confused John, and Sherlock had to elaborate; if Sarah didn't actually want a relationship with John, then clearly she was a monumental idiot. John, however, seemed to take Sherlock's perfectly reasonable conclusion as a signal to launch into a superfluous explanation.

John seemed to think he would be incapable of providing what Sarah needed, which Sherlock found frankly ridiculous. So Sarah would have to go without sex for a while, so John would have some emotional problems – she still would have had John. In Sherlock's opinion, that more than outweighed any problems. If it had been him John was in a relationship with, he wouldn't have accepted any of those excuses. If, in that hypothetical relationship, John had ever considered breaking up with him simply because he thought it was for Sherlock's own good or that it would spare him pain, Sherlock would have swiftly disabused him of the notion.

But then again, Sherlock suspected he was in love with John, and he supposed it was possible Sarah wasn't as attached.

He made his opinions known, and was honestly taken aback at John's surprise. He'd always believed John was aware of his affection (Sherlock had hardly been discreet), but was simply politely ignoring it because he didn't feel the same way. He'd known John was sexually attracted to him, but there was a large gulf between physical attraction and actually desiring a sexual relationship with someone, and Sherlock had always assumed John felt nothing beyond friendship for him. And even if it was an unusually loyal and patient friendship...well, that was simply John's nature.

John was looking rather dazed. “I had absolutely no bloody clue.”

There was a slight pause, and John seemed to be struggling with something. For a moment, Sherlock was worried that this new knowledge would make John uneasy. It was ridiculous, as they'd managed to get along perfectly well for quite some time, and his knowledge of Sherlock's feelings wouldn't actually change anything, but most people were funny about things like that.

“If it helps, I...well...me, too.”

For a moment, Sherlock was certain he'd misunderstood. John couldn't be referring to...but yes, he was looking ever so slightly flustered but still as earnest as ever – he was telling the absolute truth.

John was in love with him.

Sherlock dissected that thought. If John was in love with him, why had he been dating Sarah?
Except he'd been unaware that Sherlock reciprocated, as evidenced by his surprise earlier, so taking that into account...

Sherlock reviewed his interactions with John over the past few weeks, incorporating the new variable of John's feelings for him, and felt a slow smile begin to pull at his cheeks.

John loved him.

Sherlock had a sudden impulse to go to John's chair, bend over him, and finally determine what kissing John was actually like. But he quelled the desire almost as soon as it formed; John wouldn't welcome such a gesture, not now.

“Why couldn't we have had this discussion before?” John sighed, and Sherlock had to admit to a vague, frustrated sense of regret.

“...perhaps the timing could have been better,” was all he said.

“I mean, it won't be sunshine and roses,” John went on, beginning to look distressed. “Shit, Sherlock, do you have any idea how difficult this will be?”

Sherlock had a conceptual expectation, but he knew it was probably nowhere near the reality. So he settled for pointing out the obvious – that he was difficult as well – in the hopes that John might understand that on occasion, some things were worth the complications.

“What happens if I don't get better?” John suddenly asked, and Sherlock heard the vulnerability in his voice. However much John might like to pretend otherwise, this was a concept that truly frightened him.

But Sherlock had never been much good at platitudes or comfort, so he settled for the truth. “Then we'll continue on as we have been.”

And he meant it. Sherlock supposed it was conceivable that there might be someone else in the world like John, but he thought it highly unlikely. There was little factual basis for his conclusion but something told him that what he'd found with John, he wouldn't find with anyone else.

John prattled something about normality, but it couldn't disguise the fact that he was still worried.

“Just like that? You just know that I'm going to get better?”

“Of course.” Sherlock would have thought it self-evident, but John still looked sceptical.

Sherlock gave in to the urge to roll his eyes. “Oh, all right then. Be like the police and don't believe me without solid proof. It's tiresome, but eventually you'll realise I was right.”

It was true that he was wrong on occasion – John's sister sprang to mind – but Sherlock knew he was right about this. John would emerge from this ordeal different, yes, but certainly not broken. While Sherlock would have liked to think it was because John was not alone, he knew that was pure narcissism on his part; John would have survived regardless, because of his own will and his own strength.

John blinked at him, as though startled by the assurance in Sherlock's voice, then quite suddenly burst into laughter.

It wasn't scraped or broken-sounding – John wasn't laughing to hide his own pain or in an effort to reassure Sherlock. It was an honest laugh, deep in tone and slightly wheezing, sounding almost as
though he were out of breath. The kind of laugh John had frequently given in to before Sherlock had received the pink phone.

In spite of the fact that Sherlock had no idea what had amused John so, he found himself smiling.

It was a start.

-Fin-

Chapter End Notes

I know some people will be disappointed at my ending it here, but this felt like the right place to bring this story to a close. Enough to imply that there's still a lot of darkness to go, but that John and Sherlock will get through it together. And thanks so much to ginbitch, who beta-d so many chapters of this story and helped me improve it!

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