A Medieval AU Johnlock romance. John Watson is a captive Highlander tasked to heal the Gaaldinian Prince from a strange malady. In return for his pains, John is forced into the service of the Prince, known only as Monseigneur.
Chapter 1

Thanks so much to ile_o (NavyDream) for the lovely fanart!

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Chinese translations available courtesy of Yutrans54 at MT Slash and 221D (registration required) for the first five chapters, and chapter 6 onwards courtesy of Eazio711.

Hebrew translation courtesy of ronvvy

Italian translation courtesy of Ellipse at EFP fanfic.net (registration required)

Korean translation courtesy of Kay (Soonripe) at her Naver blog, Totally Cumberbatched

Thank you so much, my dears!!

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Far above the earth the hawk flew.

Below her and spread out as far as her eyes could see, the green plains and cultivated fields of Gaaldine in bright hues of yellows and oranges looked every bit like picturesque little squares sewn into a gigantic quilt. Here and there arose white wisps of smoke from fires lit by farmers, clearing the fields for the next wave of crops to be planted. A great flock of sheep was nothing but white moving dots from her lofty vantage point.

If she cared to know at all, to her south lay the deep blue sea, and a short way beyond it, the warmer shores of Gondal. To her north lay Angria- the Highlands and the Lowlands- that vast stretch of land
where winter reigned nearly all year round in some of its distant mountains. A land of still, cold lakes, treacherous marshes and dark, whispering woods— ancient, impenetrable. A land haunted by centuries of war and strife, and her own special brand of ghosts.

Yet here in Gaaldine, it was early spring, with all its attendant sights and smells of fresh, growing things. Soon the nourishing rains would end and summer would settle down for a brief spell before autumn moved in, followed by white winter. A kaleidoscope of seasons.

The hawk was majestically impervious to it all. She was a creature who lived very much in the here and now, with hardly a care in the world. Wingtips fully spread and gliding silently with the wind, she made an impressive view of appearing to be suspended in mid-air. From her height, it was easy to forget all things earthly and material. Here in the vast nothingness of the heavens, nothing counted more than the liberty that belonged uniquely to her kind.

But alas, even a winged being such as herself could not stay in the heavens indefinitely. After she had had her fill of the air and her time in the sun, she headed back from where she started off, her sense of direction unerring. She passed the peaceful, carefully tended fields and the wild grasslands, heading further north where the air was much cooler, the clouds thicker and pressed lower to the earth.

Just at the point where Gaaldine ended and Angria began, she made her descent, spurred on by a strange, high whistle— made by a man.

Her master.

Down, down she glided, the sights of a noisy, sprawling human encampment fully coming into view at last. A military camp, no less.

Here it was harder to dismiss earthly affairs and think that everything was fine. A swarming mass of people and horses in varying amounts of armor hardly ever meant that things were all right. It was much harder here to mistake the signs of seething tension barely restrained and violence about to be unleashed— it was something that humans specialized in creating, apparently.

War was looming.

But war was the affair of men, not hawks.

She swung down and swept low over the heads of these creatures, so full of mayhem and noise, and flew steadily past them all until she came to land on her rightful perch— an outstretched, well-muscled arm and a slender hand, encased entirely in black leather.

"Welcome back, Azrail," murmured her owner in a deep voice.

Author's Notes and Disclaimer: (sorry, going to be quite long)

As much as I am interested in reading historical biographies, the notion of doing serious, extensive and accurate research into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance quite overwhelmed me, I'm sorry to say. There is so much interesting material to be found in this fascinating period in English history, and I will try to incorporate them into the story as much as possible, but historical accuracy (or accuracy of any kind, for that matter) will have to take a back seat. Details from the early, middle and late medieval ages as well as the Renaissance will be jumbled together. All possible mistakes are mine.
The story is a romance set in medieval times. It will borrow elements from traditional medieval lit and from modern bodice rippers that give their own fantastical interpretations of those times (and the story will incline more heavily on the latter. Please read this tumblr post as to why I decided to fashion the story after bodice rippers). Thus, a great deal of overused and cliched romantic/dramatic mechanisms (beginning with the pokey title and plot device), not to mention certain dom-sub and consent issues, will be in use. Please check the tags before proceeding; they will be updated regularly as each new chapter is posted. This story is not going to be everyone's cup of tea but I would appreciate constructive reviews. Also, please do not expect an accurate portrayal of medieval mannerisms in the characters, as the plot and characters are going to be highly stylized. At heart, this is a love story and an homage to the highly versatile, colorful and exciting genre that is medieval romance.

Because of the very real possibility of historical errors, I have gone a step farther and fictionalized real places and events (e.g. Angria will serve in lieu of Scotland, Gaaldine for England, Gondal for France. However, Gondalians and the Gaaldinian royal family will retain the use of French, as I cannot invent a new language for them. Also, as Angela Carter once said, French is "the only language in which you can purr” ^_~). Even the names of these places are not mine; they are lifted from another source: Angria, Gaaldine and Gondal were places in the imaginary worlds of the Bronte children: Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne.

Finally, the phrase "Welcome back, Azrail" is from a favorite 1990s anime, The Heroic Legend of Arslan. Such a shame that it was discontinued halfway through its run and it never reached a conclusion. Azrael (Azrail) is the name of the Archangel of Death. More to come regarding her mysterious owner and the man he's going to come across in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

Listen to the opening scenes, read by awickedgiraffe, in her brilliant podfic! Thank you so much, dear!

Illustrations by the lovely Meetingyourmaker. Thank you sooo much!!

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It was raining when John first met him.

It was not yet raining hard, just a drizzle—fine needles of rain slanting down occasionally from the dark grey sky above to cut across John’s cheek and touch upon his eyelashes, forming droplets that
bounced off the windswept hair on his bare head as he ran for his life.

His situation was dire.

Behind him, he could hear his adversary closing in fast. How could he not, when he was astride a horse while John had only his two legs to carry him and the light rain making the grass beneath his feet a slippery mass of sod?

The devil on horseback, out hunting for his favorite kind of quarry: a lost soul.

Because the plain and simple fact was: John should not be here.

Hunger had driven him, together with the two men who formed their small party, into the woods at the very edge of Angria to forage for food and before they had known it, they were lost. They had continued to be lost in those thick, dark woods for well almost three days before they emerged, blinking, into the grey, open light.

Into foreign country.

And an ambush.

From their vantage point on top of the gently sloping hill where the forest had disgorged them, they had spied a tiny village farther down below—a tiny cluster of cottages, desolate looking, with no smoke rising from the stumped chimneys. They did not know where they were, but they had agreed it would be best to take shelter before the rains broke fully on top of their heads. Yet before they could act on their agreement, an arrow had come whizzing through the air and sliced at young Alec's shoulder.

As far as John could ascertain there were three: a man with grey hair and a dark woman on foot, with another man on horseback, dressed completely in black. Appearing as if from nowhere and charging quickly toward them.

John had not waited for another arrow to find its mark. "Run!" he had shouted, shoving Alec and his other companion to scatter to different directions even as he took another one. He had dropped his heavy bag, laden with things from the forest, and had not looked back.

Even so, he knew by the thundering sound of hooves behind him who among the three was after him.

That man in black, astride that demon of a horse as dark as its master.

His own breathing loud in his ears, John finally risked a glance back and saw that the beast was but a few paces away from him now. He could feel its heavy breath misting down his back, see its wicked head and frothing mouth as it drew up several feet away and alongside him.

At the last instant, John swerved away, but he was not fast enough to dodge the lance thrown at his legs to trip him up. He stumbled and fell, his momentum sending him rolling for a few paces before he was up again and running.

But nowhere to run. The rider on the dark horse rounded on him, cutting off all avenues of escape.

The drizzle was heavier now, but not enough to obscure his view of his opponent.

For the first time, with the light rain all around them, John took stock of him in full: the dark curls made wild by the wind on that unprotected head, his body suit made entirely of black armor, partly
obscured by a rich, flowing cape, also black. Most daunting: John could not make out his features at all. A black mask hid his visage from the nose up, leaving the lower part of his face free. And John could see that he was smiling.

A most sinister figure. One of those demon-villains featured in countless, old wives' tales to frighten the young. John could feel the hairs on his nape begin to stand on end.

"Surrender," he heard the stranger say in a deep, drawling voice. "Or die."

Gaaldinian. John had no doubt about it, to judge from the accent. So they had, indeed, left the borders of Angria behind. He would have to fight then. That was fine. More than fine. John was a soldier. Fighting was what he did.

John drew his battered sword from his hip holster and held it before him. "Let me go," he said. "Let my comrades go. This should not be made a deeper mistake than it is already."

The smile became a laugh, deep and throaty. "So you acknowledge this as a mistake on your part."

John bit down on his lip, refused to let fear or rage get the better of him. "We were lost in the woods. We had no way of knowing—"

"Excuses, one too many. Let me not hear another one from your mouth," declared the man on the horse. "It bores me, and does not affect the outcome in any way."

"All right," muttered John. "If it's a fight you're itching for. What's the matter though? Are you not sure that you can win over me without the aid of your steed?"

That seemed to check the other man. John was glad.

"Insolent, are we?" the man finally said, his voice cold.

But he dismounted.

John suppressed the wild hope that sprung from the idea that he might be getting a fair fight after all, and merely tightened his grip on his sword. He eyed the figure warily as it slowly advanced toward him, unsheathing his own sword from a jeweled scabbard.

All around them, splinters of silvery rain continued to fall softly.

His sword, John could tell, was very finely made. That much was obvious. The blade looked sharp, viciously so. Definitely not the sort of weapon that John was carrying—scrapes of metal partially melted and molded and hastily put together again. It was not much, but it had seen John through his battles so far. John could only pray that it would carry him through this one, because the stranger blocking his path had just said that he wasn't letting him go.

"We don't need to do this," repeated John, buying for time, though what he could possibly do with more time he did not know.

"Drop your weapon then," replied the deep voice coldly.

John considered his choices, and decided he didn't like the notion of being held captive by the enemy. "No," he said stubbornly. "Just let me go. We're not at war yet."

His adversary regarded him with the stillness of a serpent. Then, "You have strong nerves to propose a solution that is not available to you. Your only options are to surrender or fight. I strongly suggest
the former if you value your life."

Almost without their knowing it, they had begun to circle one another.

"You are a soldier and a healer, clearly from the Highlands," continued the figure in black. "What may we deduce from your setting foot here, along the borders of Gaaldine, at this most inopportune time?"

If John was surprised at the man's words, he refused to act on it. "Enough talk then!" he cried as he finally made his move, swinging his sword in an arc. "Let's fight, if we must!"

The stranger was quick to intercept his blow, their swords clashing, meeting. There was a second or so when both men were caught in a strange, precarious balance, neither of them capable of advancing against the other. A second or so when their faces were merely inches apart, breathing each other's breath which turned to fine mist in the cold rain. John's blue eyes were dark and unrelenting as he stared into the wide, pale ones of his adversary. The very air around them seemed to shiver with something invisible, like a current.

Impossibly light, the color of those eyes. The mask obscuring the stranger's face could not hide the naked astonishment in them.

A mere second, nothing more. But John had been through enough skirmishes to have a feeling of this fight's possible outcome: against all odds, he might just win this fight after all.

The man before him was good- there was no doubt that he had classical training behind him. But the sword was clearly not his weapon of choice. John could tell the very moment their swords met, as if swords could speak to him and tell him something of their bearers.

He withdrew his sword roughly, suddenly. He heard the shrill screech of metal against metal as they disengaged, and he brought his blade forward on his opponent with a short, savage swing. He was not going to give the man any chance to launch an offensive.

The man caught his sword again against his, but his hold over his own sword was weakening under the force of John's onslaught. The man must have sensed it, for he suddenly broke off their stalemate with a rough shove of his sword against John's.

"Monseigneur!" A man's voice sounded from a few dozen yards away.

"Get back, Lestrade!" John heard the man in black snarl. "This one's mine."

Oh no, I'm not, thought John grimly. It's the other way around, mate.

He lunged at the man, parried his sword, sidestepped and thrust back, bringing his weight to bear on his sword— a complex, little dance made more intimate because of all that was at stake. Surely they had not been fighting for more than five minutes, and yet it felt like an eternity to John. In that tiny pocket of time when everything else stood still, they were giving it everything they got. Evenly matched in all aspects, until suddenly they were not. John saw it, that almost imperceptible move that marked an error in his opponent's stance— his window of opportunity. With one final swing with all his strength behind it, he pounded on the adversary's weapon with his own. And watched as the enemy's beautiful sword flew out of the man's hands, did a brief somersault in the rain before landing with a dull thud on the grassy mud.

A sword, no matter how finely made, was but a sword, John would have wanted to say, but he was not to have the chance. Before he could even bring his sword back in front of him and consider what he would do to the man before him, he heard a faint hiss in the air. A soft whoosh.
Just the sound, foreign and incomprehensible, and John would not know what hit him as something struck him from behind. He was unconscious before he hit the soft mud at his feet.

The heavens high above him continued to weep unnoticed.

He might have been out a couple of hours. Or perhaps it was an entire day. It was hard to tell. When he slowly came to, everything in his body hurt like hell, but not as much as the throbbing at the back of his head. Somebody close by was moaning - a low, monotonous bleat. With difficulty, John shut his dry mouth and realized that he was the one making the dreadful sound.

Long moments of disorientation. A hand on his shoulder, rousing him. Somebody was talking above his head in agitated tones. For a moment, John could not make sense of the words he was hearing. When he finally opened his eyes, he realized that it was Alec, looming over him.

So young Alec was all right. Their other companion was nowhere in sight.

John licked his dry lips with an equally dry tongue, and croaked, "Where-?"

John wasn't really sure what he was looking at, high above him. A tapered, canvas roof with the harsh sound of incessant rain beating upon it from outside. A tent. They were inside a tent.

Alec was shaking his head miserably and was about to open his mouth when a voice said behind him, "So you're all up now, are you?"

The words were spoken in a gruff drawl.

It only took a second for John to piece together everything. He stared past Alec's wounded shoulder at the man who had entered. Yes, he had seen him. He was that man with the grey hair in the field, heavy of build, square of jaw.

Lestrade. The man in black had called him Lestrade.

The man was now shaking his head ruefully. "Bleeding Christ," he muttered, staring at the two prisoners before him. "As if I don't have enough on my hands right now."


Lestrade nodded at Alec. "Go ahead. Give him some," he said. "Let it not be said that we are depriving you of any basic necessity."

John drank thirstily from a cup offered by Alec.

"I suppose you gents might want to start answering some questions, while you're our... guests?" remarked Lestrade, his tone almost congenial.

John was not paying attention to him. "You're still bleeding," he said to Alec, eyeing the clumsily tied rag around his shoulder that served as a bandage.

"It's just a flesh wound," whispered Alec. Fear was etched in his wide blue eyes like a shadow.

John raised his eyes to the newcomer. "He's injured," he pointed out. "Can't we have somebody to treat him?"

Lestrade crossed his arms over his chest. "Our doctor will be along shortly," he said, his tone
indifferent, "after he's done with his duties around the camp. May take a while though. I'd be more worried over that bump you sustained at the back of your head than his little wound there. At least Sally did not end up killing you outright."

The man's last words did not mean anything to John. "Our bag," he said suddenly. "We have medicine. From the forest. I can...did you get our bag, at least?"

Lestrade raised his brows, stepped out nonchalantly to speak to someone outside the tent. "Yes, we've got your bag," he said, moving back.

"Might I at least treat my comrade, if you are unwilling?" said John, slowly sitting up. He fought to keep from wincing as he rubbed over the sore area behind his head with an unsteady hand.

God, what had taken him down? It felt like it had taken away half his head as well.

"Oh?" said Lestrade, eyebrows raised. "You're a doctor, are you?"

John said nothing, merely regarded the man warily.

A movement outside the tent. Lestrade moved to intercept the heavy bag as it was handed in.

Oh no, thought John. He could only hope the contents had been spared from the rain. It had taken him so much time to forage for all of this, and they would be ruined if they got wet.

Lestrade frowned as John opened the bag and slowly scooped out the contents: sheaves of tree fungi, dry bark, dark moss, strange leaves. A cluster of small white flowers, rapidly wilting. Granules of dirt, along everything. John sighed in relief. They were pretty much intact.

"It all looks like forest debris," noted Lestrade, eyeing the things in John's tender hands the way he would a basket of worms.

Yes, what would a philistine know about forest medicine? John thought grimly, fighting the urge to snort. Ignoring the man, he began sorting out the necessary ingredients he would need to treat Alec's injury.

Carefully, he unwrapped the bloody bandage from Alec's shoulder. Examining the wound, he said softly, "Yeah, not so bad, but rather deep. We wouldn't want it to start festering."

He ground bits of tree bark with his fingers until they crumbled. He mixed them together with a pinch of dark moss in the cup of water until it turned into a soggy, dark brown paste. This he rubbed on Alec's wound with a practiced hand. Lestrade watched the proceedings in bemused silence.

"Where did you learn all of this?" he asked after John was finished, sounding interested despite himself.

John did not acknowledge his question and, determined to make a complete nuisance of himself, announced instead, "We're hungry. Are we not to have anything to eat?"

He watched in grim satisfaction as their captor's features twisted in annoyance, but before he could say anything, somebody from outside interrupted yet again. "My lord," John heard somebody murmur.

A brief conversation. Finally Lestrade turned back to them. "We're not done yet," he said as he swept aside a fold of the canvas tent and let himself out.
Hours went by and the man did not return. In his absence they had been given a thin, tasteless porridge that served as breakfast. Lestrade's continued absence gave John some time to doze and gather his strength back, and to ply Alec with questions.

It was all a mess, their plan. Whatever it was, to begin with. Yet they knew that if they chose to stay longer in their fragmenting unit of a fighting corps, they would starve. Made up of a motley crew of men from several villages up further north, they had come to the southern borders of Angria only to find that war may or may not happen with Gaaldine, depending on certain negotiations still being done on both sides. Worse, the lord they were serving was a young, inexperienced whelp who had recently replaced his elderly father. This was his first campaign, and the first disaster to await him was the realization that he was unprepared to feed and shelter the multitude of men under him who had heard of a war and rushed to take full advantage of its possibilities. Nor did the young lord have enough sway over these particular kinds of men. Before the first few days were out, his camp had dissolved into a series of infighting and some of the soldiers had decided to leave in disgust.

One of them was John.

He had not really known what to do next—perhaps join another regiment—but had finally decided he had better things to occupy his time than wait for war to break out. He had not been paid nor fed properly while he was still in camp, so he would have to find his own food. That had been the reason why he, being newly masterless, had gone into the forest with Alec close at his heels. And then they had gotten lost.

And now this.

Their other companion, a man they only knew as Stephen, had managed to elude their captors and made it back to the forest. God only knew how he was going to make it through that wilderness alone.

From what Alec had told him, John was able to make out what happened after he was struck unconscious.

Alec had seen the weapon that brought him down, but he could not really tell what it was. A slim, triangular object that the dark-skinned woman had wielded. It flew in the air in an arc and could be maneuvered to return to the woman's clutches. Alec had never seen anything like it. The woman who had thrown it was skilled enough so that the thing had only grazed at John's head. Clearly not an easy thing to do. If it had struck him at full impact, he had no doubt that he would have been killed.

After he was down, he had to be half-carried, half-dragged by Alec to the enemy's camp. It was a good hour away from the forest edge, and the leader on the horse—already furious at the woman for her intervention with the strange weapon—had finally lost all patience at their snail's pace in the heavy rain, and barked, "Oh for God's sake, just sling him over here and let's get on with it!"

So John had ridden the rest of the way to camp slung over the man's horse.

"Why didn't they just leave me behind," wondered John, casting a glance at the canvas flap.

The man Lestrade had not returned. What would happen next if he did return? What did they plan to do to him and Alec? Would he be seeing that man in black again? Clearly he was somebody of high rank. Lestrade's superior officer, no doubt. Strange that he would go around with a mask on his face. What did it all mean?
So many questions.

Or they could just barge out of here, said John to himself as his thoughts turned to a different avenue in his mind. He didn't know how many men were outside, didn't know if they had any chance in hell in overpowering the murmuring guards, but he had heard enough stories about Gaaldinians—Gaaldinian men, especially—to consider escape as a necessity.

"What?" Alec's query brought John back to the present. "The enemy leaving you behind to risk your escaping?"

"Not if the cold got to me first," John remarked. "Which it would have."

It was early spring, but the nights were still cold. Leave an unconscious man out in the open long enough and he would not regain consciousness.

This wasn't making sense, any of it.

According to Alec's calculations, that was all from last night. Surely, they were now into early morning, but there was no way of telling the time. For now they were safely away from the rain and that was all that mattered. Their clothes and boots were still damp, but they were intact, and doing a good job in keeping the cold at bay. There was no solution for chilled hands or heads, other than rub the former together and breathe into their cupped hands to borrow some warmth for their faces. Their enemies would have to wait before they got any answers from them.

"You know, he was here," said Alec during a lull in their conversation.

"Who?"

"That masked man," said Alec. "He came while you were still out. He looked over your head and tried to rouse you, but he couldn't so he left."

John blinked, surprised. "He...he was here?" he asked. "Wait, what--?"

Just then, the heavy canvas fold lifted as it was held back and the grey-haired man known as Lestrade entered the enclosure once again. His face was set in stern lines, his jaw set. He looked winded, as though he had been running.

"You." He gestured at John. "Come with me."

He held the tent flap open for John to pass through. "Guard the boy," he heard Lestrade give instructions to the guards outside.

In the heavy downpour, John could make out the shapes of men going to and fro, and realized that escape was virtually impossible. They were in the middle of a garrison armed to the teeth. But right now, there was no time to make further observations as he was herded through the maze of tents, past the men and beasts going about their business, sidestepping pools of mud and rain on the uneven ground, until he and Lestrade stopped outside a larger, opulent-looking tent.

The heavy, cloying smell of incense wafted out to greet them as soon as the older man lifted the flap of the tent and ushered John in. He fought not to gag.

"Anderson!" cried Lestrade, coughing. "What the hell are you doing!"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" snapped his comrade, a tall man with narrow, rodent-like features as he stood over a bed, holding a quivering white wrist in his hand. Beside him stood a boy
no older than sixteen or seventeen, looking quite panicked. "I'm trying everything I can think of to help him!"

It was then that John saw the bed's occupant.

_No_, he thought.

"Well, he's not going to like it if he realizes you've been near him!" interjected Lestrade angrily.

"I don't think he will realize that just now," muttered Anderson.

"Oh, Jesus bloody Christ!" Lestrade exclaimed as he took a closer look at the man on the bed.

It was him. The man in black. But what a difference from yesterday: the tall, haughty form who had barred John's way with his horse and his imposing demeanor now lay prostrate in bed, sweating into his bed linens, tossing restlessly in a very high fever.

Lestrade turned to John.

"You can heal people," said Lestrade urgently. "Start healing him, then!"

John gazed down at the writhing form in front of him, in the throes of fever and delirium, and he could not help but remember the vivid details of their fight just yesterday. He had bested this man in hand-to-hand combat, yet he was now this man's captive. His hostage.

This man before him who was no less than his enemy.

John raised hooded eyes to glare at Lestrade. "Give me one good reason why I should help you save him," he said.

Lestrade swallowed. "If he dies," he said, his voice a low, hoarse rasp. "If Monseigneur dies, we are all. Dead."

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**Author's notes:** Monseigneur is fashioned after Edward of Woodstock, Prince of Wales, more popularly known as the **Black Prince**.
Monseigneur unmasked by Moriarghty. Thank you so much, my lovely! (please see second pic embedded in the story)

"If Monseigneur dies, then we are all. Dead."

John stared at Lestrade blankly, as if still waiting for him to deliver the punch line of a joke. He might as well have asked, "So?"

Lestrade raised a hand and swept it over his face in exasperation. "Do you understand what I just said?" he ground out.

"As your captive, I may be as good as dead," said John, clarifying the issue. "How will this affect me any differently?"

In short, What's in it for me?

"Obviously, you don't get to die if you save this man's life," said Lestrade tersely. "On the other hand, if he dies now, I will see to it that I cut your head off personally before they lop off mine."

Time to put the cards on the table, at last.

"My freedom, in exchange for treating him?" John asked carefully, nodding at the man lying on the bed.
"All right," replied Lestrade, readily.

"My companion—"

"Yes, he may go, too."

A pause, as if John were thinking of saying something else. Something more. Lestrade waited, shoulders tense. But John finally nodded.

All right then.

John looked down again at his new patient, licking his lips.

God, even now, the man was still masked. What the bleeding hell.

He glanced up at Lestrade, but the man was ahead of him: "The mask stays. For your own sake, you don't get to see his face. Ever. Is that understood?"

There was something in Lestrade's voice that brooked no opposition. John nodded before he brought his attention back on his patient and gingerly moved his hand forward, but before he could lay it on the man before him, there was Lestrade again.

"Oh no, you're not touching him with paws like that," he declared, eyeing John's rough hands and the dirt lining the creases of his palms, his fingernails.

He turned to the panicky youth standing beside the bed. "Billy, fetch us some water for the doctor to wash his hands," said Lestrade.

"Look, I can handle this," snapped Anderson. "You don't need to drag in some mountain man—"

"You've been 'treating' him for hours with your holy oils and whatnot, and all I've seen is Monseigneur lapsing into delirium," growled Lestrade. "Now move away from there and let this man through."

John was soon presented with a bowl of water and a cake of fragrant soap.

John regarded the soap with raised eyebrows but said nothing as he started to wash his hands in the warm water. He watched as the suds turned brown and his hands slowly turned white.

"Tell me what happened before he fell ill," he finally said.

Lestrade thought for a moment, then said, "Nothing extraordinary. You saw him yesterday, he was well then, and a little rain has never done Monseigneur any harm before. This started three, four hours ago when he complained of being dizzy. It just came on so fast, the fever. Chills. The sweats. I came to fetch you as soon as he started babbling."

After John was done washing up, he raised his clean hands in the air to show to Lestrade, as if sarcastically inviting his sanction. Brows lowered, Lestrade merely bit his lip and nodded, refusing to be baited into another argument.

John laid a light hand on the man's forehead and another on his neck.

He was burning up, no doubt about it. John's hand moved slowly to feel the pulse at the base of his neck. A purse of John's lips as he registered the frenzied pace of his patient's heart.

"It's an imbalance of the humours, is what it is," said Anderson in a low mutter. "The black bile and
"Just shut it, why don't you?" snapped Lestrade in irritation, his eyes never leaving John's hands as they carefully examined Monseigneur's neck, doing small massaging motions, checking under his jaw, behind his ears.

"No swellings," murmured John abstractedly.

"What? What does that mean?" Lestrade wanted to know.

John merely shook his head, deep in thought. Gently, he peeled Monseigneur's eyelids open and peered into his pale eyes.

He frowned. *Dilated pupils.*

Things were not adding up.

"Or it's the plague," continued Anderson, heedless of Lestrade's admonition to stay quiet. "That's what he gets for gallivanting off, insisting on visiting some God-forsaken village that's been—"

Lestrade's next outburst finally startled John enough to lift his head: "Allez-vous en! *Allez!*"

John was sure he did not understand a word Lestrade had just shouted, although he got the general idea what he meant. The tent was suddenly a great deal quieter after Anderson had slunk away.

"You can take that incense burner out as well," said John, nodding at the small, fuming pot a few feet away. The page, Billy, scurried quickly to do his bidding.

"Well?" Lestrade asked, anxiously, watching as John carefully pried Monseigneur's mouth open, took a sniff and looked in. Strange: his mouth was very dry.

John remained silent, absorbed in his task. His hands moved down to part the man's damp linen shirt, exposing his chest. He stared for a moment at the medallion slung around his neck, rising and falling rapidly with each breath the man took.

"Holy medal," explained Lestrade. "It's mine. I thought—"

"You can have it back," said John shortly. "I can promise you it's not going to be of much help."

Lestrade stared at him for a moment before he stretched out a hand to remove the medal from his master's neck.

John lowered his head to press an ear over the man's heaving chest. Lung sounds clear.

What was this, then?

A moment later, and Lestrade was asking the same thing: "What is it? Wait, what are you doing?"

"I need to check every part of him, to be sure I don't miss anything," said John, dragging the patient's shirt away and turning him over. "Help me."

John's hand travelled swiftly over the man's well-muscled back and swept over his long arms as Billy and Lestrade helped to secure the writhing man down.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to a small cut on the man's right upper arm, already healing.
"Monseigneur has had it for a few days, before we arrived here," said Billy nervously, glancing at Lestrade. "He thought perhaps it was from that jousting match held for His Majesty."

Lestrade turned to John. "I don't think it's related to this, do you?" he said.

"Maybe not," murmured John. "I will need to see the rest of him."

"Is this really necessary?" complained Lestrade as he watched John undoing Monseigneur's breeches.

John raised his head to look mildly at Lestrade. "Do you want me to do a thorough job or not? It's all up to you."

Lestrade blew out an exasperated breath, but grudgingly gave way. He watched as John methodically examined Monseigneur from the waist down, fingers kneading gently on the crux of his hips, feeling for something that was not there. Satisfied, his gaze swept clinically past Monseigneur's unmentionable parts, going down to legs thick with saddle muscle and farther down to his feet before going back up.

Nothing.

"Well?"

John straightened up, frowning, and offered no explanation. "Let's get the fever out of the way first. I will need my bag."

Nodding at Billy, John continued, "Now would be a good time to change him out of these clothes. Change him into something that we can easily take off him."

"Anderson said we may have to bleed him, if the fever doesn't go down soon," said Lestrade heavily as they watched Billy pull a new nightgown down over Monseigneur. "Do we really need to?"

"Let's hope not," answered John.

While they were waiting for the medicine bag, John asked, "Anderson. That man you sent out- that's your camp doctor?"

Lestrade heaved a weary sigh and nodded.

"I don't want him anywhere near my comrade's wounded shoulder," said John.

Lestrade nodded, not quite looking at him. "What's your name, by the way?" he said. "I didn't catch it."

"John."

"Just John?"

"Watson."

Lestrade nodded. "Lestrade," he said.

"I know," said John.

Lestrade appeared reluctant to part with his first name, and John did not press him. He was not really interested in knowing anything about the man, anyway.
John's bag finally arrived. He removed some of the ingredients and said, "I'll need a pot, and some clean water. These will have to be boiled."

He was taken outside to another tent by Billy to cook his medicine.

"Please, sir," said the young page as he watched John prepare the concoction. "Will this really cure Monseigneur?"

John glanced at Billy and saw the concern in his eyes to be genuine. "We will see," he said as he cut his ingredients and tossed them into the boiling water. "We will need a sieve to strain the fluid."

Half an hour later and after much pounding and squeezing, a huge handful of the roots and leaves from the forest finally yielded enough medicine to fill one small cup.

Lestrade stared at the amount when John came back with it and said, "That's it?"

"We're lucky even to have this much," said John. "He'll need to drink at least half of it for tonight."

"All right," said Lestrade. "But you first."

John's lips twitched.

Fair enough. Without another word, he took a sip of the bitter concoction.

Lestrade finally nodded, satisfied that there was no foul play in the brew. He stared for a moment as John offered the cup to him.

"Not for you," said John. "For him."

Finally understanding, Lestrade turned to Billy and said, "Prop Monseigneur up. I'll bring the cup to his mouth."

It was no easy task. The man thrashed in Lestrade and Billy's combined hold and the precious medicine dribbled down his chin as Lestrade pushed the cup to his lips.

"Careful! You're wasting it!" cried John at last.

Lestrade and Billy finally desisted in their efforts. John took the cup back, looked down at the contents and scowled: almost half of it was already gone.

"You'll have to administer it by mouth," he told Lestrade.

"I beg your pardon?" Lestrade was suddenly all blank incomprehension.

John looked at Billy, who involuntarily took a step back.

Oh for the love of...!

John took a mouthful of the medicine and stepped up to the bed. Firmly, he took Monseigneur's head in one hand and opened the man's mouth by pressing his fingers into his cheeks. Quickly, John pressed his mouth down on his, feeling the feverish heat in that impossibly dry orifice as he sealed it securely with his own. He did not let go even as the man tried to move his head away, his hands reaching up to claw and clutch weakly at John's hands. Lestrade and Billy held him down even as John forced the medicine into his mouth and down his throat.

Lestrade watched as his master's throat worked, heard him swallow that first drought, and he sagged
back in relief. "Oh, thank God," he said, his voice suddenly tired.

His brief demonstration done, John wiped his mouth on his sleeve and lifted the cup of medicine to hand over to Lestrade.

Lestrade pulled back, hands crossed defensively over his chest. "Well, carry on then," he said. "You're doing very well and I wouldn't want to interrupt. I...uh...I need to check on some things around the garrison. Billy will be here to help out. Continue..." he motioned vaguely at the cup, then at Monseigneur, "...that."

John stared in disbelief as Lestrade turned tail and slipped out of the tent.

God. He was earning his freedom. Every single fucking sip of the way.

By the time he had finished administering the last mouthful of medicine, John's jaw was positively aching and his body was ready to drop from fatigue. The dull throb at the back of his head was making itself manifest again, and John wished he had swallowed some of the medicine for himself.

Billy had pulled up a stool for him and they sat slumped on either side of the narrow bed, watching as Monseigneur finally drifted off to sleep. John clutched at his wrist lightly with one hand, his index and middle fingers feeling that frantic pulse ease up a little.

"He will want to have a bath when he wakes," Billy finally murmured.

John cast an eye on the bed linens, damp with sweat, but he could no longer smell anything. In fact, he could feel nothing, not even his legs beneath him. "That ought to be the least of our worries right now," he said tiredly.

To change the subject, he said, "You people call him Monseigneur. I take it that's his title, not his name. What does it mean?"

"'My lord',' answered Billy. "It's Gondalian."

"Oh? He's from Gondal, then?"

"His mother's side of the family, yes."

"Who is he?" asked John, curious despite himself.

Billy seemed surprised. "Don't you know who he is?" A look of sudden caution entered his features and his next words were guarded. "Perhaps my Lord Lestrade would be the better person to ask these things."

"He's important, I gather as much," said John, nodding at the mask. "I just don't see why there is such a need for secrecy."

Billy shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "It's not really that," he said. "It's simply a tradition among Monseigneur's class. They don't show their faces to the general public."

"Why?"

Billy shook his head. "It's their way. Ours is not to reason why," he said, his tone almost apologetic. Silence for a moment, then John finally asked, "Well, what's his name then?"
Billy looked faintly scandalized. "Nobody mentions his name, especially to his face," he said.

John fixed him with a stare. "But he has a name, hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Billy, but he would say nothing more.

Just then their patient shifted uneasily in his sleep. John and Billy watched as he tossed his head restlessly on the pillow, his lips parting to form a word, softly repeated: "Maman, Maman..."

John turned to Billy just in time to see the boy close his eyes, as if pained. "Mother," he translated.

John sighed and said nothing.

If anyone were to tell him he'd be seeing this man-- this man who, just yesterday, he had been fighting with-- reduced to this, he probably would not have believed it.

John stared at Monseigneur's mouth thoughtfully, taking in that distinctive cupid's bow of an upper lip, and remembered with a flash of resentment that mouth stretched into a cruel smile as the deep voice informed him, John, to surrender or die. The very same mouth that could now only utter "Maman" as weakly as a kitten.

An ironic little twist that life specializes in bringing.

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John must have drifted off for a moment; he started awake as he heard a voice say, "Oh, thank God."

He lifted his head from a folded arm and saw Lestrade bent over Monseigneur, a hand on his forehead.

"The fever's broken," said Lestrade, relief clearly etched in his voice.

"It will come back," answered John, his hand never leaving Monseigneur's wrist. His skin still felt abnormally warm, his pulse still running and running away.

"You'll need to make more medicine then."

"I can make enough to last for one more day," said John, "but I won't have enough of the ingredients after that."

Lestrade glanced up at the roof of the tent, the incessant rain still pattering on the canvas. "Let's hope the weather clears by tomorrow," he said.

A pause. "You must be hungry," Lestrade said. "I've asked Billy to bring you some food."

John blinked, feeling the subtle change in Lestrade's tone and not sure what to make of it. Before he could think to refuse, his stomach growled as if in complete agreement with Lestrade's assessment.

Billy came in bearing a tray of aromatic meat stew and bread as well as a small pitcher of ale. He set it down on a small table nearby and stood next to it expectantly.

John glanced at Lestrade, who nodded. "Go ahead," he said. "Eat. You won't be of any use to us if you're drooping about like a wilted flower."

John rose slowly, wincing at the pins and needles in his cramped legs, and made his way over to the table. Billy handed him a clean, damp towel. John wiped his hands with it, then stared at Billy, who
smiled as he pointed at John's face and mimed a wiping motion.

His face too.

John raised his brows at the dirt and grime from his face that came away with the towel, and turned just in time to see Lestrade wipe a small smile from his lips.

A change in the air, yes. What it meant, John had no idea.

He settled down to eat, breaking bread and dipping a chunk of it in the stew. It tasted good. Very good. He fought to keep himself from wolfing it all down. He did not realize just how famished he really was. This would be the first warm meal he had had in days.

"So, John," said Lestrade from his seat beside Monseigneur. "Tell me what you were doing outside our end of the forest out there."

"We were lost, my companions and I," said John, taking a swig of the ale. "We've been lost in the woods for nearly three days."

Lestrade looked bemused. "Three days in those woods," he said, "is all that separates Gaaldine and Angria in these parts, is it?"

"If you think," said John, "that we are going to march on you through those woods, you're mistaken. There is a lot of flat, clear terrain between us that will make an advance easier, believe me."

"Agreed," said Lestrade. "On the other hand, God only knows just how many of you are sneaking over here through those very same woods right now."

"Can't wait for the war to start, can you?" John asked, his tone dry.

"Let's hope there won't be one," said Lestrade, correcting him. "Right now your queen is still...negotiating some terms with His Majesty. Let's hope she will decide to accept a compromise and that would be that."

John frowned. "What sort of negotiations?" he asked.

Lestrade stood up. "Not for us to understand, I'm sure," he said easily. Then: "Gregory."

He continued as he took in John's blank expression: "Gregory Lestrade. That's...my name. Well. I'll leave you to finish your meal in peace, John."

As soon as Lestrade left, Billy turned to John and said, "Would it be all right if I give Monseigneur a bath now? At least, just with a wash cloth?"

Really, what was this bathing obsession with these Gaaldinians? thought John, slightly irate.

"Yeah, go ahead."

John watched as Billy carried in a heavy basin of water. John frowned as he stared at the pink and red things floating on top of the water.

Rose petals.

*Rose petals!*

Whatever would these mad Gaaldinians think of next?
John chewed the last of his bread thoughtfully as he watched Billy wash the rose-scented water over Monseigneur's chest, over his arms—tenderly as a mother would administer to her babe.

Having finished his meal, John approached the sick bed and resumed his seat, clasping his patient's wrist and feeling his pulse. No change. Contrary to the rest of his body temperature, Monseigneur's fingers now seemed made of ice.

*What is this?* thought John once again, staring at Billy's wash cloth as he rubbed it over Monseigneur's sculpted chest, the muscled planes of his stomach. *What am I missing?*

Billy dropped the wash cloth into the basin. "I'm sorry, I forgot to bring in Monseigneur's night shifts," he said. "Excuse me."

John nodded absently as the page bustled away. For a moment, he was left alone with his patient.

John stared at the sheen of sweat on Monseigneur's face, his damp curls. Strangely enough, Billy had not thought to cleanse his face first.

The sick man mumbled in his sleep, raised a hand to claw at the mask shielding his face in a small, irritated movement. Quite weak and ineffectual. For the first time, John felt a wave of pity for the man.

That, he would later realize, was his first mistake.

John glanced at the flap of the tent and back at Monseigneur, biting his lower lip as he wrestled with himself.

What lay behind that mask? Why take such pains to hide his features? Was he ugly or deformed in some way that he had to hide his face from the rest of the world?

John felt the strong, irresistible pull of curiosity and was powerless to stop himself.

*This is totally absurd, this is,* he decided. He had seen the man totally unclothed, had seen his private parts exposed, and yet he was not allowed to view his face! Only Gaaldinians would have been capable of such artifice.

*Do it now, while nobody's here,* whispered a voice deep inside him. *What harm can it possibly do? Nobody needs to know that you've seen him."

John did not need further prompting. With that thought, he raised a hand and, with deft and gentle fingers, peeled the mask off the man's face. His second mistake for the evening.
There. He didn't look so bad. His skin was very pale and smooth, like porcelain. Thick, dark eyebrows over closed eyes fringed with dark lashes. Eyes that slanted up ever so slightly at their ends. A straight nose. High, chiseled cheekbones. That extraordinary mouth. A firm chin. Not really handsome, but not bad looking at all.

John did not know how long he sat there, staring at that face, transfixed; he started as the man's eyes suddenly fluttered open and for a moment he found himself staring into those pale blue orbs, the pupils still unnaturally large. Mutely, Monseigneur stared back at John, his gaze unfocused, unaware. Lost.

John fumbled quickly for the wash cloth and wiped it across the man's forehead, over his eyes, his nose, down over his cheeks. And then he smoothed the mask back into place over the man's face. Monseigneur was already unconscious once again by the time he was done.

He glanced around him surreptitiously and exhaled a gusty sigh. He dunked the wash cloth back into the basin and settled back in his seat, and that was how Billy found him a moment later when he reentered the tent with a clean nightgown for Monseigneur.

~*~*~*~*~

The fever was back in a few hours.

Lestrade paced anxiously around the sick bed, watching John as he placed soothing fingers over the man's chest and pinned him down just as he started writhing again.

"He seems in very great pain," said John, frowning. "Ask him where."

Lestrade bent down to whisper into Monseigneur's ear.

They weren't sure if it would register with the man, but he did mutter something in reply, and Lestrade straightened up to say, "Everywhere."

Well, that was helpful.

"Ask him how the pain feels like," said John.

He watched as Monseigneur did a fluid, coiling motion with his entire body, like a snake, but he grunted a reply to Lestrade's query that was quite incomprehensible to John.
"He says it's like burning pins and needles all over," Lestrade said, shrugging a little helplessly.

Monseigneur was moaning softly now, rubbing his face into the pillow, as if by digging deeper into the bed he could somehow ward off the pain.

John was starting to shake his head, stymied, unable to untangle the knot of symptoms and what they meant. And then quite suddenly it hit him like a slap on the face.

The dilated pupils, the dry mouth, that unusually fast heartbeat. The fluctuating, burning pain. Fever that was masking something else.

Something monstrous.

He turned sharply to stare down at Monseigneur, coiling and writhing like a serpent on the bed.

Like a serpent.

John looked up at Lestrade, his eyes wide and alight with horrified enlightenment.

Lestrade stopped his pacing. "What?" he demanded.


""Allez-vous en: Go away"
Chapter 4

"Poison," John said.

Lestrade recoiled from the softly whispered word as though it had been shrieked into his ear suddenly, with no warning. Behind him, Billy made an inquiring sound and leaned in to catch what John had just said.

Lestrade quickly turned to the boy and said, "Billy, leave us for a moment, that's a good lad."

When he was gone, Lestrade turned back to John and shook his head in warning. "You did not just say what I thought you said," he growled. His face had turned ashen.

"I just did," John said.

"Fucking hell!" exploded Lestrade, the bottom seeming to drop out of his deep voice so that for a moment, it quivered in near-panic.

John felt pretty much the same thing. He fought to keep from spitting, from wiping his tongue on his sleeve. What use was it now? God only knew how many times he had placed his mouth on that man's to force him to take his medicine in the last few hours. His mouth, in contact with the mouth of a poisoned man! How could he have been so thoughtless? God!

John did not waste any more time. Already, he was digging into the bag of medicine beside him even as Lestrade mouthed "poison" again silently to himself in stunned disbelief.

"How can you be sure?” demanded Lestrade, wiping his mouth with a hand that was visibly trembling. "More importantly, what's to be done? Can anything be done?"

"I can't be entirely sure, but it's the only diagnosis to fit all the symptoms," said John as he dumped the contents of his bag onto the floor and began sifting through the ingredients impatiently.

"John, you cannot be not sure about something as serious as this!” exclaimed Lestrade. "What in God's name are we going to do? Poison!"

John lifted a small cluster of wilting white flowers. "Do you know what this is?” he said.

Lestrade stared at the sorry-looking bouquet. "I'm sure I have no idea," he said. "But please tell me that's the antidote that you're clutching there."

"Right you are," said John. "This is what we call the White Star. It's more like white gold. Rarer than gold, in fact, and definitely worth much, much more. Three days in the forest, and I only got to find this much. I'm lucky to find any at all. This is what we use to treat people who accidentally ate the berries of deadly Nightshade."

"Nightshade." Lestrade's jaw dropped as his eyes widened. "You mean, Monseigneur has been poisoned with Nightshade?!"

"Or a derivative of it," said John, tearing the white flowers into bits in a bowl. "The symptoms are not a complete fit. If it were really pure Nightshade, he would be gone by now, given the amount of time that's elapsed since he fell ill. But the enlarged pupils in his eyes were the giveaway. I was a fool not to have thought of it earlier. I've never treated a patient poisoned like this before."
"But there is no cure for Nightshade poisoning," argued Lestrade, but he could not suppress the gleam of hope that sprang in his eyes as he stared at John's white flowers.

John looked up. "Now you know differently," he said, a slight smile on his lips.

Upon hearing those words—spoken so quietly yet so full of self-assurance—relief flooded Lestrade, so much so that he seemed to deflate for a moment. As if remembering himself at the last minute, he straightened. "But how did he get to ingest Nightshade?" he asked, bewildered. "We've all eaten and drunk the same thing since we came here. I made doubly sure Monseigneur was never given anything untested—"

"But the fact remains that it somehow got into his system," said John as he started mashing the flowers. *And that's all there is to it,* he added silently. "I will need something to dissolve this. An oil. Tincture of myrrh would be the best, but—"

"We've got myrrh," Lestrade said quickly.

John blinked. The way Lestrade sounded, it was as though he were saying, from one neighbor to another, *"We've got flour."

"All right. That would be perfect," John said.

Lestrade marched away to call Billy back in. "Young man," he said, "what did you hear the doctor say earlier?"

Billy shrugged. "I…I don't know, sir," he said. "I didn't quite hear—"

"You heard nothing," said Lestrade firmly. "You did not even see his lips move, and you are to keep a still tongue in your head about all this. From now on, nobody outside gets to know about what goes on inside this tent. Am I clear?"

Billy gulped. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now go ask for some myrrh from Anderson for the doctor."

Lestrade turned to find John's gaze alternating between himself and the departing page. "Don't worry about him," said Lestrade, "he's my nephew. I can trust him to keep his mouth shut."

"Oh." John looked down at the crushed flowers in the bowl.

And what about me? He wondered. *Are you not worried about trusting me so unquestioningly? Just a few hours ago, I'm nothing but your captive. Your master's enemy in the field. Are you not worried that I might be having you on all this time? I can very easily lead you down the wrong path and kill your master in front of you, and you won't be able to do anything about it until it's too late. You can kill me afterwards but then the damage would have been done.*

Thank God Lestrade could not read minds. John kept his head down for a moment, just to be sure, crushing the flowers in the bowl with more energy than was necessary until they turned into a gooey paste.

The man on the bed was curled into a tight ball of agony, moaning softly, incoherently, into the pillow. John watched as Lestrade put out a hesitant hand to touch his master's shoulder. The contact was brief, awkward, as was the arrangement of his face. It lasted only a moment, and then Lestrade was pulling his hand away.
There was no faking Lestrade's concern for his master. He cared about him, obviously. Whatever his feelings and their depth, though, it was clear that he was not the demonstrative type, John thought. Or perhaps Monseigneur was just not the type of man to invite the expression of such feelings.

A rustle of canvas as Billy returned with the tincture of myrrh, and John added a few drops to the paste.

"What? That's it?" asked Lestrade, staring at the liquid which would have been no more than four or five teaspoons worth of medicine at most.

"He needs only a drop or two every time he takes his medicine," said John. "I'll need a small bottle."

It took a moment for Billy to find one for him, but he got John a dainty little glass bottle where he could carefully scrape the medicine into. John used his finger to wipe away any remaining medicine from the bowl and this he put into his own mouth. He grimaced from the bitter taste.

"Hold him down," instructed John to Lestrade and Billy as he added a few drops of the new extract into what was left of Monseigneur's fever medicine.

Once again he took the medicine into his mouth and, with smooth, practiced movements, bent over Monseigneur to fasten his mouth upon his and push the medicine into him.

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They sat for a while and watched Monseigneur's agonized writhing ease up as he slipped into deep sleep.

"That's the last of the fever medicine," said John, weariness creeping into his voice. "I'll need to go back to the forest to look for more of the ingredients."

"I'll have someone escort you there tomorrow," said Lestrade.

A brooding silence settled over them as they stared at Monseigneur's sleeping form.

"Your comrade, Anderson," John said suddenly. "He mentioned something about the plague, about Mo— him, going to some God-forsaken village. What was that all about?"

Lestrade sighed heavily. "Anderson was being stupid," he said. "And anyway, you think this isn't it. The plague, I mean."

"It's only something worse, yeah," agreed John.

Lestrade shifted uneasily in his seat. "Monseigneur has heard of reports that one or two villages around the border with Angria have succumbed to some sort of mysterious illness," he said. "People were said to be well in the morning and then dead in the afternoon. There was panic and a whole lot of hearsay. You know how it is. Rumors travel on swift wings."

He paused. "How did you know this wasn't the plague?" Lestrade asked.

"No tender lumps in his hips and armpits," John said. "I've not treated a plague patient before, but I've heard that's one quick way to tell whether it is or it isn't. And a rash, like small rings of roses, on the skin."

Lestrade nodded. "Oh. So that was what you were doing, feeling around his hips," he said.
John gave him a shuttered look. "Of course," he murmured. "What did you suppose I was doing?"

Lestrade refused to be lured into an argument. For the first time, he grinned at John. "You know a
lot, don't you?" he said. "What we'd give to have a doctor like you in our ranks."

He cleared his throat and looked away as John stared at him. "Anyway, is that medicine working
already or not?" he asked.

"Too soon to tell," said John. "Although he's sleeping soundly. That's a good start."

"Yeah, good," said Lestrade. "Very good."

He sighed and stood up, stretching the kink out of his legs. "I'll need to check on some things around
camp. I'll leave him to you then, John."

"Right."

There it was again. That little, niggling thought at the back of John's mind as he watched Lestrade's
departure.

Billy moved to take Lestrade's seat. Supper, he said. They must have some supper.

"Long night ahead of us," John told Billy in reply. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

Lestrade came again sometime late in the night and, satisfied that Monseigneur's condition was stable
and had not worsened, he left again to attend to other matters. The never-ending responsibilities of a
general in his garrison.

For a while, Billy talked to John about falconry, his one obsession. A safe topic. Something that
would do neither of them any harm to talk about. John disclosed very little about himself, thinking
there was not much about him that Billy would be interested in knowing. After that, there had been
longer and longer stretches of silence that were almost comfortable between them. In the end, they
might have gotten too comfortable, or perhaps it was just the fatigue finally making itself manifest.
Either way, John awoke suddenly to the realization that he and Billy had both dozed off.

The light in the tent was dim- the candle behind him had burned low. It must be very early in the
morning. The rain outside had stopped and all was still, quiet. John wasn't sure what it was that had
waked him— perhaps a movement from Monseigneur. He glanced at the hand lying beside him and
felt for his pulse. Slowing down to normal, at last. His skin was warm but not hot. The fever had
finally broken.

John stood up quietly so as not to disturb Billy and gently placed both hands on Monseigneur's face.
Carefully, he lifted his eyelids and turned him towards the light. His pupils were back to their normal
sizes; John could see the pale blue in his eyes once again.

"Oh thank God," John said, his voice a mere breath.

He let go of Monseigneur's face and hovered uncertainly for a moment above him. When he did not
wake, John slowly sat back in his seat and regarded his patient.

Even in illness, he looked quite extraordinary. His skin was as pale as the white linen sheets of the
bed, his wayward, curling hair raven-black against the cream-colored pillow. That silly black mask, hiding his face from the world. Whatever for? A face, John realized with a start, that he found he wanted very much to see once again. But it was too risky; Billy was here. He might wake any moment and see what John was up to.

John's eyes travelled slowly down Monseigneur's covered features to settle on his lips, slightly parted as he pulled air in and let it go softly, rhythmically. John swallowed, remembering the softness of those lips beneath his, the way they had moved against his as he sealed his mouth over Monseigneur's to make sure he swallowed his medicine.

John frowned. *What is this?* He asked himself.

He'd administered medicine to patients by mouth before— men and women— yet he was sure he had never felt like this about any of them. He'd never allowed himself to be affected. But then again, he'd never met anybody like Monseigneur. A study in contrasts: the man was all black and white, powerful and vulnerable, inherently dangerous and yet helpless as a babe, for now— all manner of contradictions combining in his person to form a strange, perfectly balanced picture.

And beautiful.

He was beautiful. He really shouldn't be, but he was. From his unusual features to the sweep of his hair; from the long, graceful line of his throat to his broad, sculpted chest, disappearing into the folds of his loose nightshirt; the muscled, sinewy arms and fine hands with long, tapering fingers. Monseigneur's hands were very white, as though it were he, not John, who was born and raised in snow country.

John took an unsteady breath and looked away, feeling a strange heat staining his cheeks. This was absolutely disturbing. What he was feeling was quite alien to him, and highly improper. They were both men. And he must never forget that this person was not, and could never be, a friend of his.

John sighed. It was just as well that Monseigneur was getting better. That would mean that he himself would be departing sooner. Away from this oddity of a man and back to his own end of the world. Back to his life and its ordinary hardships— a life full of care and hard work, with very little time to rest.

John yawned.

Rest, yes. For now perhaps he could. Rest for a little while longer...

He felt drowsiness settle on him once more with gentle insistence. He did not resist it very much. Soon he was nodding off again.

Perhaps that was the reason why he never saw Monseigneur open his eyes a fraction to study him for long minutes, with such silent intensity. He touched him too— lifting his pale fingers to repeat the tiny gesture that had roused John as he brushed them fleetingly, experimentally, at John's fingertips.

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**Author's Notes:** The symptoms of poisoning as experienced by Monseigneur is based on those induced by belladonna alkaloids, derived from deadly *Nightshade*— one of the more commonly known poisons of the medieval ages. Dilated pupils would be the most obvious finding, followed by a dry mouth, increased heart rate and heightened temperature. Sweating would not be so common—
skin dryness would be more along its line. There was no adequate cure for Nightshade poisoning during those times—the white star is just a product of my imagination.

Myrrh (derived from "murr"—Armaic for "bitter") is an oleoresin (essential oil+resin) known since ancient biblical times for its many medicinal properties and for making perfume. An expensive luxury, it was used as an antiseptic, for embalming the dead, and for religious rituals. As medicine during the Middle Ages, it was used for the treatment of bleeding gums, oral ulcers and sore throat. It was also used as an expectorant for colds and congestion. Its use here in this fic is chiefly an invention of mine.

There is an urban legend, dismissed by folklorists as baseless, that the signs and symptoms of the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) that swept across Europe in the Middle Ages were summarized by the (sinister) nursery rhyme: Ring a ring o' roses (to indicate the skin lesions seen)/ A pocket full of posies (people carried posies of flowers thinking these could drive the disease away)/ Atishoo! Atishoo! (accompanying flu-like symptoms such as sneezing)/ We all fall down (and millions did, back then). It was called "bubonic" because of the telltale swelling of the lymph nodes (buboes) in the armpits and groin. However, the rhyme was pointed out to have appeared in print sometime around 1881 and had several points which were incongruent to describing the Plague. For more details, see the Wikipedia entry, Ring a Ring o' Roses.
Chapter 5

Morning came, and with it, Lestrade.

He came striding in just as John and Billy were finishing their breakfast of bread and cheese, sharing the inevitable pitcher of ale. He had his back turned to John as he bent over Monseigneur to touch his master's forehead with his hand; all the same, John registered the moment his tense shoulders relaxed when he noted the fever had gone.

Lestrade turned to John, a question lighting up his eyes.

"He's been free of the fever for several hours now," answered John, "and his pupils have gone back to normal. He awoke briefly an hour ago to ask for something to drink."

Lestrade exhaled his relief noisily, then placed a heavy hand on John's shoulder and squeezed briefly. He was smiling. It lit his face and for a brief moment, John could almost see the boy in the man. Lestrade's gesture, John realized, was more expressive than what he had given his master the night before.

John gave him a brief smile, unsure of how to react to Lestrade's gratefulness. They had struck a deal, but John had not expected such a thawing of relations, so fast. Were Gaaldinians really this soft on their captives?

"Your escorts are waiting outside to take you to the forest," Lestrade said.

John left the bottle of antidote with Billy after placing a drop or two directly on Monseigneur's tongue. Already his mouth was moist again, another good sign that the antidote was working.

After imparting his instructions to Billy, John stepped out of the tent with Lestrade. He squinted at the early morning sunlight, at the familiar, welcome sights and sounds of a busy garrison starting a new day...even if it were the enemy's garrison.

"Those are your escorts right there," said Lestrade, nodding to their right.

John turned and checked at the sight of the figures standing a few feet away from them.

"John, this is Sally Donovan," said Lestrade, pertaining to the dark-skinned woman whose triangular weapon had cost John his fight with Monseigneur the other day. "Sally, John Watson."

Sally did not seem to be particularly thrilled with the idea of escorting John through the forest. She returned his wary and veiled gaze with one of her own. The other person close by was a young man, obviously one of the stable boys in charge of the horses.

"And John, just remember we still have your companion with us, in case you get tempted by the fine weather to wander away?" Lestrade said amiably. "Not that you need the reminder, I'm sure."

John's lips thinned, but he nodded. Now this was more the norm between captor and captive.

"Back in four hours, maximum, understood?" said Lestrade to Sally.

"Aye, sir." Sally Donovan turned away after giving John one last, oblique look and headed for a couple of horses, saddled and ready.

She waved a hand to John to take the other horse as she vaulted up effortlessly over her own. The
servant boy pulled up behind them on his own steed. Ready to go.

"Let's get some things clear," Donovan said to John in a peremptory tone even before they could leave the garrison. "My lord Lestrade was skeptical that I should accompany you alone into the forest. I told him I can handle you and bring you back in one piece. Prove me wrong by being difficult, or by running away, and I shall bring you back in pieces. Clear?"

She had a high, slightly nasal voice, annoying when one was exposed to it short-term and positively grating to the ear when exposed to it for a longer time.

"How are you going to do that?" asked John, not at all cowed by her impressive little speech. "With that triangular thing you used to bop me in the head with the other day?"

Donovan dropped the heavy cloak draped around her person to show him the weapon slung on her back. "It's a boomerang," she declared haughtily. "If you must talk about it, call it by its proper name. And I didn't mean to spare you the other day: you moved out of range at the last moment. I won't miss your head this time around, so don't get any fancy ideas."

Let's see about that with trees all around us, thought John grimly, but it was an idle threat, even to himself. He couldn't jeopardize Alec's safety, and for all his newfound congeniality, John was sure Lestrade could be implacable when he chose to be.

Besides, Sally Donovan carried with her an additional weapon: a longbow and arrows. Her boomerang might get stuck in the trees, but he doubted all her arrows would. All it would take was one, accurately aimed, to take him down.

Soon the garrison was behind them and they rode out into the open country. With the early morning sun shining in a clear blue sky and the air crisp and clean, the rains from yesterday seemed like they had never been. John felt his spirits rise with the wind.

For all her sour reluctance to be in his company, Sally Donovan was not one to keep her mouth shut for long. "He's a fine one, isn't he?" she said as they galloped along. "As if we don't have enough work to do, he comes traipsing in, incommoding everyone with his whims and his little games to keep himself amused. I mean, who in their right minds would want to go near a plague-infested village within a stone's throw from enemy lines, on the eve of a war? None other than our Monseigneur!"

"You don't seem terribly fond of him," observed John dryly.

Donovan let out a short, barking laugh. "Please," she said. "You've not been around him long enough, have you? Not long enough while he's lucid, anyway. So what is it? Has he really caught the plague?"

"Nothing but a little fever," said John evasively. "He'll be up in a few days."

"Woe to us, then," said Donovan carelessly. "On the other hand, if something were to happen to him while he's here—if he were really to die on us, we are all as good as dead."

She looked at him with something close to distaste in her eyes. "Imagine dying for someone like him," she said. "I've got better things to do with my life."

"Your loyalty and devotion are quite overwhelming," remarked John flatly.

"I'm loyal and devoted to Gaaldine," she said, shrugging, "and to the King. I serve the King's brother under my lord Lestrade, but that doesn't mean I have to like him."
"You'd think he's here to lead the garrison in preparation for war," she continued disparagingly. "But no! He's here to investigate the little mystery about a couple of deserted, plague-infested villages on the border!"

"So you were there," said John. "The other day, that village a mile or so away from—"

"Aye. That's the one."

"Found anything?" asked John casually.

"What's there to find?" asked Donovan shortly. "The dead have long since been buried, the village deserted. Monseigneur would waste his time inspecting the village well for all he's worth and it's not going to help bring anything back. We had to burn our clothes when we got back to camp."

"So you found nothing?"

"Well, we found you and your friend some distance away not long after that, didn't we?" said Donovan with a smirk.

John looked away. What was Monseigneur doing, coming all this way to inspect a well in a village, deserted and of ill-repute? To believe Donovan, he had not come here for the war, after all.

"Of course, your winning over Monseigneur in that swordfight was something else," admitted Donovan. "I've never seen anyone beat him that easily before, not even Lestrade. So who are you?"

John swallowed. "I'm...nobody," he said.

"Hard to believe, if Lestrade would choose to retain you like this." Donovan's deference to her superior appeared to be diminishing as they got farther and farther away from camp. "Until you came along, nobody may look upon Monseigneur. And now nobody may say anything about your winning over him, either."

John chose to ignore the last part of her comment. "Really? Nobody may look upon his person?" he said. "Not even his personal physician?"

"He does not have a physician, that's the point," said Donovan. "Until now he's been able to get on without one. He said he does not believe in them."

Before John could say anything, Donovan raised her voice: "We're here!"

The forest loomed over them like a vast, impenetrable wall. They dismounted just where the trees began. Sally gave specific instructions to the stable boy in charge of their horses: "We should be back in two hours, perhaps two and a half. If we're not back by then, send for reinforcements."

John stared as she produced a ball of string from her bag slung over one shoulder. "What?" she queried, returning his gaze. "I have no intention of getting lost in the woods. With or without you."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?" asked John, watching her tie the string to a nearby tree.

"I do my best."

With just two hours in the forest, John figured they would not be able to come across much. Donovan kept up a steady stream of chatter as they made their way along the dense undergrowth.
John's question, "You're not really from Gaaldine, are you?" had sparked a flood of information—interesting tidbits, John had to admit.

No, she was not originally from Gaaldine. She was not even from Gondal, though she had been brought there at a young age. She was from one of the Gondalian colonies located farther south across not one, but two seas—a land where there was never any snow and the women were brought up to be splendid, prized fighters. Amazons, they were called. None of the shrinking little milksops who were the epitome of womanhood in Gondal or Gaaldine, and perhaps even in Angria, though she wouldn't really know much about John's country and his people. She had seen more of the world than John, and compared to hers, his seemed a dull, uneventful life.

"So Gondalians and Gaaldinians have women in their armies?" said John, interested despite himself. He would have wanted to say that Angrian women, in their defense, were hardy women—learned in the arts of healing and intensely practical—but it was also quite true that Angrian men preferred to keep them out of sight and behind closed, domestic doors.

Donovan gave him a derisive snort. "Angrians are just about the only ones who don't," she said. She meant it as an insult, a way of showing John just how backward and unprogressive his people were. It worked. It struck a nerve.

"You won't mind getting captured in battle then?" John's tone carried a heavier undertone of menace than he had intended. "From the way you're making us sound, we may not be able to restrain ourselves in the company of a lovely warrior woman or two. An entire garrison of randy, barely civilized men—just think of the possibilities."

"We'd kill ourselves first rather than risk being caught," she said loftily, her chin raised. "Anyway, you're a fine one to talk. Aren't you frightened, being a captive of the wicked Black Wolf of Gaaldine?"

"Oh? Is that his full title? The Wicked Black Wolf of Gaaldine?" said John, deliberately accentuating each word for comic effect.

Donovan laughed. "It may as well be," she said. "The King's brother is a freak, don't you know? I thought his reputation precedes him, even in Angria. There's nobody in the kingdom more twisted than he. Talk has it he's got some very strange practices down in his chateau—his castle. Wolf's Lair, he calls it. They say he has had lovers locked up in his dungeons for his unspeakable pleasures, never to be seen alive again. Male lovers. You see, he refuses to be mundane and have normal tastes, even in that area. I'd be trembling in my boots, if I were you. He might just have a taste for rough-and-ready Highlanders such as yourself."

John's patience with the woman had worn thin as he listened to this fantastic bit of outlandish gossip. "Surely you wouldn't believe in such stories?" he said shortly. "They sound like outright lies. Even I'd have trouble believing them, and I don't know a thing about the man."

Donovan was unperturbed. "Are they really outright lies?" she said. "Well, I've been to the Lair. I can tell you firsthand that there really is something going on in the dungeons, late at night. Unearthly noises. Stinking smells that ought to remain confined in Hell. God only knows what Monseigneur does down there for hours at a time when he is in residence. I wouldn't be surprised if he's into black magic. How else can he be what he is?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," John said as they picked their way deeper into the forest.

"Wait until he's lucid," said Donovan, her voice heavy with dark promise. "Wait until he gets his
wits back about him, and you're going to see what I mean. He's going to strip you— take you apart piece by piece and put you back together again until you'd think you don't know yourself. But he'll know."

"Know what?" John asked, slightly irked that the woman was talking riddles.

"Everything about you, of course. And one or two things you don't know about yourself. He will tell you everything there is to know about you even before you open your mouth. The man is a demon. It's the only explanation."

"And you have no qualms, serving under a demon?" John asked, eyebrows raised questioningly.

Donovan smiled bitterly. "You don't understand," she said, her voice brittle. "Not yet, anyway. But perhaps you will, soon. You will find that those who serve him simply do not have a choice in the matter."

She turned away from him abruptly, as if finally conscious that she had said too much. She looked around, taking in the green darkness of their surroundings. "Anyway, just what are we looking for here, exactly? It's like we've been walking forever," she said.

John blinked at her abrupt change of topic. So absorbed was he in Donovan's narration that it took him a moment to process her question.

"Keep your eyes open for a certain white flower," he said. "It's going to be small, about this size—" John motioned with his thumb and index finger. "It may or may not grow in clusters. It's shaped like a star, with six, pointed petals."

"Got it," said Donovan.

An additional half hour of searching got them nothing remotely resembling the flower in question, though John found a tree that could help with Alec's wound. Donovan watched as John bent to scrape off the bark with a knife. He deposited his shavings in his bag.

He wished she would continue her narration about the wickedness of Monseigneur. Against his better judgment, he was finding her accounts engrossing, but she was now as tight-lipped as an uncooked clam, her impatience to get away from the forest evident in every line of her face and body.

Almost an hour went by, and they were only able to find the bark shavings and a few mushrooms.

"This is like finding a needle in a haystack," fumed Donovan, swatting at mosquitoes.

"More like a needle in a haystack the size of a forest," corrected John. "We can cover more ground if we split up, but of course, that would be out of the question."

"Most definitely," she agreed darkly. "Just where did you find those flowers in the first place?"

"It would have been helpful if my companions and I were not lost," John said blithely. "But as things stood…"

She pinned him with a glare before he got any further. She was sick and tired of the mosquitoes and wading shin-deep in the nasty, clinging undergrowth that could hide a myriad selection of nameless, creeping things, and John's misplaced, bantering sarcasm was not helping any.

"Well, definitely deeper in the forest," said John, cutting his conversation short. Donovan might be
an Amazon, but charming she definitely was not.

In the end, they found some of the ingredients for the fever concoction, though John felt sure Monseigneur would not need those now.

But no white stars.

"Time's up," Donovan finally announced, reeling in her string.

"Leave it. Just leave it," said John. "That way, we will know we've already been through this part of the forest when we need to come back next time."

If I'm coming back, he thought. With any luck, I'll be on my way back to Angria in a few days. And not through here, either.

So they left the string tied to a tree and retraced their steps back to the well-lighted world beyond the cool, green gloom of the forest.

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Billy was there to meet them as soon as they returned to the garrison.

"John Watson, sir," he said. "My lord Lestrade asked me to come and fetch you as soon as you arrive."

John felt the skin of his nape prickle in sudden alarm. "What is it?" he asked. "What's happened?"

Billy grinned. "Nothing bad, sir," he said. "My lord Lestrade asked me to take you to your bath. And to give you a shave and a haircut as well. You will need them, he said, before he can present you to Monseigneur."

John turned sharply to stare at Billy, who smiled happily. "Yes, Monseigneur has awakened not long after you're gone, sir," he said.

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**Author's Notes: Wolf's Lair**, the name of Monseigneur's castle, is (unfortunately) the name of Hitler's largest wartime headquarters (Wolfsschanze in German). I thought an otherwise cool name deserves a little rehab.

A note on medieval eating habits, especially during the early medieval period: people only got to have two meals a day. The major meal was dinner (our lunch), followed by a lighter meal at the end of the day. Because the original basis for this latter meal was soup, or sops, it became known as supper. Eating breakfast was not standard practice until during the later medieval period, to accommodate the increasingly intense amount of labor required during the day. Breakfast items included all varieties of bread, with tasty additions such as cheese, pieces of dried fish or boiled meat. Ale, wine or beer was almost always drunk instead of water, due to the unhygienic state of most water sources at the time. (Source: Godecookery.com)
"You...you don't have to do that," spluttered John in the large, wooden tub as Billy poured a bucket of warm, soapy water over him. "I can do it myself."

"Sorry, sir," said Billy, taking up a scrub brush made of twigs that looked dangerously spiky to John. "My orders are to see to it that you get a proper and thorough bath."

John wiped away a wet lock of hair from his eyes and stared, nonplussed, at Billy. What the boy meant by "proper and thorough", John did not care to know.

"You know what? You can stand right over there and watch while I take a bath, how is that? Give me that," said John, grabbing at the brush before Billy could start wreaking havoc with it on his person. Gingerly, he started scrubbing his back. "So what did your master say, when he woke up?"

"Well, he asked where he was. That was a bit worrisome, but he just needed a moment to get his bearings," said Billy. "He asked for a cup of ale, then my lord Lestrade."

"Oh." John continued to scrub his back thoughtfully. "Anything else?"

"He said he could drink an entire ocean," said Billy, breaking into a grin. "He was so thirsty."

John smiled as he transferred the brush to scrub at his shoulders.

Apprently, Billy had been booted out of the tent as soon as his uncle had entered, so there was very little else that John could glean from him.

John stared down at the bath water as it foamed gently around him, thinking just how much dirt one could accumulate by being stranded in the forest for three whole days. Thinking about something like that was good, because John did not want to think about Monseigneur and what it meant for him to be awake, now.

After John's bath, a barber came in to have his bristly, several-days old beard shaved off and his longish, unruly mop of hair trimmed close to his head, after the fashion of Gaaldinian men. It was all mildly alarming, as though he were shedding a layer of himself, familiar and comfortable, and donning on the persona of somebody else.

A stranger.

In the mirror that Billy held out for him, he looked like a stranger— out of his well-worn tunic and into a clean, white linen shirt, new breeches and soft boots. He had not seen himself properly for so long, except perhaps in the distorted reflection of running water whenever he could pause by a river to drink or wash himself, that for a moment he had not recognized the face peering back at him in the large, smooth mirror.

Is that really me? Thought John, gazing at himself and frowning as if deeply puzzled. A man, no longer young, with short blond hair and inquisitive blue eyes frowned back at him in the mirror. Shorn of his beard, he never realized he had such thin lips.

As a final touch, Billy gave him a soft jacket of grey lamb's wool to don over his shirt, and he was suddenly indistinguishable from any Gaaldinian out of armor in the camp.

"What's that?" John warily eyed the bottle that Billy was raising toward him.
"Scent, sir," said Billy, looking surprised.

Scent!

"I'm not wearing any scent," said John, disgusted.

"But sir—"

John was already striding out of the tent, fast, lest it would occur to Billy to spray the perfume after him. He was shaking his head all the while.

*These mad, mad Gaaldinians!*

People paused to stare at him as he made his way past them. Judging from their stares, it seemed they knew him. Obviously they knew all about the two captive Angrians, one of whom was now running around loose in the garrison in new clothes, preparing to be presented to their Prince.

John felt a heavy wave of unreality wash over him, as though these were scenarios in a dream. This was all wrong. This wasn't how things were supposed to be for a captive soldier in an enemy camp, was it?

Billy ran to catch up with him. "Were you able to find anything of interest in the forest, sir?" he asked.

*Sir, sir sir.* Billy had been polite and friendly to John from the very first, but even so, the word was relatively new in his vocabulary as he addressed John.

"John," John said, stopping abruptly and turning to face Billy. He couldn't bear it any longer. He had to put an end to this.

Billy blinked. "Sir?"

"John. Just call me John. Don't call me…that."

"Yes, sir— John." Billy cleared his throat.

John swore to himself that he wasn't going to ask it, but the question flew out of his lips before he could stop himself, "He didn't…ask for me, did he?"

"Sir? Oh, you mean Monseigneur," said Billy. He shook his head. *No.*

"All right."

Fine. It's all fine. It's not as if he really cared one way or the other. John was simply wondering when he was going to be released, now that Monseigneur was awake and apparently on the road to recovery.

They were now nearing the huge, opulent tent. Lestrade came out just then, looking this way and that before catching sight of them. To Billy he said, "Monseigneur says you may let Azrail out for an hour or two."

Lestrade then beckoned to John. *Come in, quickly.*

John hesitated at the threshold of the tent. He found that he was unprepared for this. He was not sure if he was ever going to be prepared to face Monseigneur, awake and in possession of himself again. But then he was stepping into the tent, away from the bright, open sunlight and into the lush, dark
interiors of Monseigneur's quarters.

"The doctor, Monseigneur," he heard Lestrade say as way of introduction.

It took a moment for John's eyes to adjust to the new, subdued lighting, and when he did, he caught sight of his patient, awake and propped up on a mound of soft pillows.

Silence as doctor and patient regarded each other across the confines of the tent. Monseigneur was still as a statue as he lay on his heap of pillows, his masked face giving nothing away as he gazed at John. John, for his part, stood straight, feet slightly apart. He realized his fingers were trembling slightly; he kept his hands linked behind his back.

Then the deep voice, possessing something of the cool darkness of the tent's interior, sounded: "Come closer."

John approached the bed cautiously then stopped a few feet away from Monseigneur. He forced himself to meet that intense, pale gaze and remembered the last time he had seen it, burning into him, as they fought in that vast green field in the nascent rain. He returned a look as steady and neutral as he could make it.

Monseigneur's mask gave John no chance to make out what its owner was thinking.

"Your name?" The deep voice issued from lips that barely moved.

As if he does not know, thought John. Surely Lestrade would have told him by now.

"John." He cleared his throat. Then almost as an afterthought, he added, "Watson."

"John," repeated Monseigneur, letting his breath out in one smooth rush so that John's name came out sounding slightly different: Zhuhn.

"Lestrade says we have you to thank for taking care of me," the deep voice continued. It was firmer now, but still languid. "Though it must feel strange, must it not, to find yourself in roles suddenly reversed and unclear to you?"

Damn right, said John to himself. And it would be wonderful if someone were to enlighten me as to what I really am to you right now.

John wasn't sure if Monseigneur was really expecting an answer though, so he kept quiet.

"So tell me, John," continued Monseigneur, reverting to the usual pronunciation of John's name as he fixed him with that unearthly gaze once again. "Why did a healer decide to leave everything behind to become a soldier? To look at you, you've only been a soldier for the past four, five years. A good one, I might add, but why the sudden change in profession?"

John frowned. How did the man know he was a healer first and a soldier much, much later?

He opened his mouth, found he couldn't really frame an answer to that query—such a deeply personal query, too—and turned to stare at Lestrade. But Lestrade was not helping. Standing a little behind John, he kept his gaze fixedly on his boots, a slight, bemused smile playing on his lips.

"The Angrian armies need healers in their ranks, same as any other army," John finally replied, shrugging.

"Hmm. But that's hardly your reason for joining the Angrian armies, is it?" Monseigneur said.
He ignored the look of naked surprise on John's face. He was already moving on. "Lestrade says you made a very interesting diagnosis from my...condition."

John felt his eyebrows rising further. So Monseigneur thought it was interesting, being poisoned? Was that all he thought of the situation?

"Poison, you think?" The mask obstructed John's attempts to make out the man's expression, but judging from the slight widening of those pale, slanting eyes, John thought he was at least interested to hear what he had to say.

"Yes," John said. "We thought—"

"Poison." Monseigneur repeated the word again, sounding faintly incredulous. "How did you diagnose it?"

"Your dilated pupils," said John. "It's the first thing that didn't fit in the picture of an ordinary fever."

"Lestrade told me that you think it's deadly Nightshade," continued Monseigneur.

"Or a derivative of it, yes. Your symptoms were more subtle than those induced by Nightshade."

"Elegant," said Monseigneur, unable to suppress a smile.

John frowned. Did he hear that correctly? Was Monseigneur still talking about John's diagnostic abilities, or the poison itself? Or both?

"So who do you think is capable of this kind of...subtlety?" Monseigneur asked next.

John shook his head, glancing at Lestrade a bit helplessly. Is this for real?

Lestrade merely looked back at him and said nothing.

"You...surely you have enemies," said John, turning back to the sick man.

"My arch-enemy, do you think, Lestrade?" said Monseigneur, throwing his general an amused glance.

John was not sure who the man was pertaining to, but it seemed Lestrade knew. He watched as Lestrade shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

"Now, Monseigneur..." Lestrade murmured, a reproving note gradually creeping into his voice.

"How do you suppose the poison got into me, John?" asked Monseigneur next, his attention back on John. It seemed that he was enjoying himself immensely at the expense of the two men.

"Poisons are usually slipped into food or drink—" John began.

"So you think the poisoner is here with us now, in this camp?"

"It's very possible—"

"If the poison got into my food or drink, do you not suppose I would have started vomiting first?"

John was starting to feel as though he were being quizzed. "Yes, that's...of course, that's—"

"But I didn't vomit."
"That doesn't rule out—"

"And Lestrade made sure to have my food and drink tested before I partook of any nourishment. I believe he did a thorough job," pointed out Monseigneur. "Nobody else succumbed to this. Except me."

"You think the poison was administered another way, then?" John asked, getting interested despite himself.

"What if I were to tell you that I think you might have done it?" asked Monseigneur, his entire demeanor coolly composed.

John realized his mouth had dropped open. He exhaled a breath of incredulous laughter. "Me?" he said. "You think it was me?"

"Why not?" Monseigneur's voice was suddenly very cold. Unamused.

John stared at the man in front of him as though he had suddenly morphed into an entirely different being altogether.

A demon, Sally Donovan had called him.

"We fought, just before I came down with this illness," continued Monseigneur, his words coming out in a rush. "There were moments when we came into contact with each other in the field. You were the last person to touch me. You could have introduced the poison anytime, then."

John began to shake his head. I can't believe I'm hearing this! He thought. Gradually, he felt the first stirrings of anger coiling inside his chest.

"You're a healer," Monseigneur pressed on relentlessly. "You possess the remedy, why not the actual poison?"

A brief silence as John continued to stare at his patient, his gaze hardening as each second slipped by.

Ungrateful son of a bitch! He thought in disbelief.

"That makes sense," John said at last, fighting to keep his voice under control. "Yeah. Of course, I could have done it. Why not? Except you overlooked one thing. One vital thing."

"And what is that?"

"Back when we were fighting, I didn't need poison to finish you off," said John, his voice quietly furious. "I disarmed you. I had you right there in front of me, defenseless. I could have just run my sword through you then and it would have been so much simpler, believe me."

For a moment, it seemed as though nobody were breathing. The tense silence was so thick that John could hear passersby talking just outside the tent.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Monseigneur smiled. "Well said," he said softly.

Bewildered and still angry, John felt the tense heaviness in the air dissipate. He saw Monseigneur give Lestrade a faint nod, heard Lestrade clear his throat behind him. "Thank you, John," he said. "You may go now."

John glanced at Lestrade as if he were about to say something more, something violent, but he finally
turned away and stalked out of the tent without another word or look at his patient.

Monseigneur watched him go, then settled back on the pillows as if the conversation had drained him completely of his energy. He turned to Lestrade to murmur in Gondalian: "Extraordinaire."

Lestrade let out a sigh as he crossed his arms over his chest. "That was rather harsh, don't you think, my lord?" he said, unable to help himself as he answered his master in the same language. "Especially after everything he's done."

Monseigneur was not listening to him. "I was right about him, wasn't I?" he said.

"Yes," Lestrade said. "My lord was right in everything concerning him, in fact."

"You had to wait until I ceased to be coherent to summon him, though. By then it might have been too late."

"I have to admit I had my reservations about him, at first," Lestrade replied firmly. "My lord cannot expect me to trust him right away. He is Angrian, after all, and a soldier."

"And now?"

"John is a good man. Of that, I am sure now. Enemy or not, he is honorable and will not seek to take advantage of us; otherwise he would have done so when given the first chance. And there were several chances already presented to him."

"Hmm. Enemy, yes," murmured Monseigneur thoughtfully as he mulled at Lestrade's words. "By the way, has there been any development, any word from the King regarding the situation with Angria?"

"We received a dispatch from the King yesterday. There are indications," said Lestrade carefully, "that a full-scale armed conflict may be averted after all. The King is close to an agreement with the Angrian queen."

A corner of Monseigneur's mouth twisted into a smirk. "You mean she's close to giving in to him," he said. "It probably helped a lot that reports have reached her that the Black Wolf has arrived at the front lines. Trust the King to know how to woo the lady."

Lestrade nodded. "That, among other things," he said. "We have heard reports, unconfirmed, that the queen's situation in her own country is precarious. She has remained a widow for too long, with no heir. Even so, she has steadfastly refused to pick a husband from within her realm or beyond. Her allies are, at the best of times, unreliable. She is increasingly having difficulty fending off some of her own nobles from taking on the job of being her consort. Some have been known to express the opinion that it would be so much simpler to overthrow her. There is a hint that an uprising within their ranks is imminent."

"Mycroft has smelled blood in the water then," said Monseigneur. "High time he moves in. The sooner he does so the sooner we can all be away from here."

He paused. "Speaking of the King," he said. "I trust you have not yet mentioned my present condition to him?"

"The sudden fever, yes. Poisoning, no," said Lestrade. "I don't think it would be safe to use that word in our daily dispatches. Until the situation becomes… absolutely necessary."
"With great tact, Lestrade let the fateful words remain unsaid: *Only until my lord is truly dying...*

"Agreed. Continue to hold your tongue regarding this incident, Lestrade."

"But sir, the culprit—"

"You need not be suspicious of the cook," cut in Monseigneur impatiently. "It had nothing to do with the cook, so you don't have to drag him out to be whipped. The culprit is not here among us."

"And John Watson?"

"Certainly not, though I was interested in seeing his reaction when I made my...accusations."

Lestrade frowned and shook his head in ill-concealed exasperation. If Monseigneur were just another man, or somebody under him, Lestrade would not have hesitated to box his ears and shout, "Just what in Hell's name are you up to?"

But he could not.

"Certainly my lord was jesting when you implied that the King has something to do with this," Lestrade muttered next. "The King is hardly your arch-enemy—"

"Was I, really? Jesting?" Monseigneur cut in, his tone taking on a dangerous softness.

Lestrade's shoulders sagged. "I don't understand, my lord," he said heavily.

"Too true," replied Monseigneur icily. "Which is why you are to do as you're told. Precisely as you're told. As of now, the King shall not be informed of my current state. Except for you, Billy, John Watson and myself, nobody else is to know what has transpired yesterday."

"You have my word that the secret will not part from my lips or Billy's, but what about John Watson?" Lestrade asked. "What is to be done with him? I don't think we can buy his silence. He's not the type who can be bought."

A brief pause, then Monseigneur asked, "What did he ask in return for his services to me?"

"His freedom, nothing more," said Lestrade. "I was expecting he'd throw in a few more requests. Money. Provisions. Horses for himself and his companion and safe passage across the border to Angria, at the very least. I would probably have agreed to all of that, and more. But he did not."

"Unfortunate," Monseigneur murmured.

Lestrade blinked, not sure he understood. "What is, sir?"

"His request to be freed," said Monseigneur, mouth stretching into a smile. "You were rather thoughtless to agree to it. It cannot be granted."

"Why not, my lord?" asked Lestrade, startled.

"It cannot be granted," drawled Monseigneur, his voice deepening a fraction, "because I mean to have him."

Author's Notes: The personal and political situation of the Angrian queen is patterned after that of **Mary, Queen of Scots**. The manner of the Gaaldinian King's "rough wooing" of her is reminiscent
of Henry VIII's tactics to get Mary's mother to acquiesce to a marriage agreement between the child Mary and Henry's son, the future Edward VI.

**Notes about medieval bathing**: Although they probably bathed less often compared to the Romans (probably because they lacked the sophisticated plumbing which made Roman baths so popular), people living in medieval times nevertheless liked taking baths (and taking their time with it). Sometimes they would convert the activity into an elaborate social occasion. Bathing parties were not uncommon, and men and women were known to bathe together. On the road, noblemen and affluent people were known to bring their great wooden tubs and bath men with them.

As depicted in period pictures, tubs generally were the size of Japanese soaking tubs or modern hot tubs, holding two or more persons. They are often depicted with canopies and/or drapes. Boards were sometimes placed across the width of the tub to form tables for serving food or playing games while soaking. Bath tools included scrubbers made of bundles of birch twigs or bunches of leaves tied together (Source: Bathing: A History, from gallowglass . org)

More details on medieval bathing practices in future chapters.
Chapter 7

Author's Notes: The development of this chapter is in line with comments made by Skeptic7 and Witchy12. They raised some good points about John's captivity and the way this issue is or can be handled during medieval times (Skeptic7 asked whether it would have been much simpler for Monseigneur and Lestrade to just propose an employment contract to John). I thought it necessary that this issue is addressed in the story before we get any further, and what follows will certainly shed light on Monseigneur's actions in subsequent chapters. Thank you for your views. I believe they will help strengthen this fic, and I greatly appreciate your feedback. This is my take on the conundrum that is John Watson's captivity. Please see more author's notes at the end.

"I mean to have him," drawled Monseigneur.

At those words, Lestrade let out a breath as though the wind had been abruptly knocked off his sails.

"My lord," he said, his tone suddenly quiet, cautious. "I am asking you to reconsider your tactics in...acquiring John Watson. Not this way. Not by curtailing his freedom when we do not have any reason to. This is a mistake. Please."

"Oh?" said Monseigneur, coldly. "And how do you propose to have him stay on? Have you got any ideas?"

"By asking him, as a courtesy," said Lestrade. "Should that not be the first thing we ought to do? He may not be an ally now, but he may not remain an enemy for long either. Of his own volition, he may want to stay. Besides, he has been nothing but honorable. We do not treat men of honor this way, as though he were a slave, when he is, in fact, not. We do not treat even our enemies this way. We shouldn't."

Monseigneur did not appear to have heard the rest of Lestrade's words.

"By asking him!" he scoffed, shaking his head as he stared at Lestrade in disbelief. "Have you gone mad? Have you seen the man, Lestrade? As in really seen him? Do you know what he is?"

Lestrade said nothing, but his jaw was set in a grim square.

"He's a Highlander, Lestrade," said Monseigneur, emphasizing the word. "He's not just Angrian, he's an Angrian Highlander. You, as a Gaaldinian general, ought to know the implications more than anyone else. Considering they are our closest neighbors, Angrians have had contact with us all throughout history. There are people originally from Angria who have lived in Gaaldine all their lives and even serve in our armies, but all of them, without exception, are from the Lowlands. Need you ask yourself why?"

Lestrade fell silent and looked down at his boots. He could feel a lecture coming on, and there was no stopping Monseigneur once he launched into one of his monologues.

"The Highlanders are almost a race set apart from Angrian Lowlanders. They don't usually mingle," the man continued. "Highlanders keep to themselves up in the northern mountains. They have their own customs, and as you have seen from John Watson, their own system of healing. If Mycroft should ever succeed in winning the Angrian queen over to his side, you ought to ask her what her biggest headache is in terms of governing her people, and without a doubt she will say it is the
Highlanders, so notorious for their disobedience.

"These people are not to be trifled with. They come from the poorest regions of Angria, but they are its best and fiercest fighters. That is why Angrian monarchs could not afford to antagonize them, because they are the country's chief defenders. You wonder why brother Mycroft would want to try negotiations with Angria first: it's because he knows we will get a handful of John Watson and his ilk if we go to war with them, and the blood spilled on both sides may not be something he will want staining his hands.

"These people are as proud as Lucifer and deeply attached to the sparse patch of land they call home. They are not easily uprooted. Dangle a bit of money or the promise of a little comfort in their lives, and you will be lucky if they merely spit on your face. These people are wolves, not dogs that you can tame by throwing them a bone or two. I'm deeply surprised that I have to tell you all of this, Lestrade. You ought to know better."

Lestrade was not easily deterred. "With all due respect, my lord, this is precisely the reason why I am recommending a different tactic when it comes to handling John Watson," he argued. "The man clearly values his honor and dignity, as he has every right to be. Take these away from him by forcing him to do anything he doesn't want to do, and no good can possibly come out of it."

"And how shall we make him say yes?" said Monseigneur. "I shall not be refused. Nobody says 'no' to me, not even the King, my brother. Not for long, anyway. And John Watson is not going to be the first man to do so. I have no interest in making any offer to the man when it is obviously going to be turned down."

"But you cannot force him to stay on as your doctor- or for whatever purpose- if he is unwilling," persisted Lestrade with exaggerated patience, as though he were talking to a petulant child denied a favorite toy. "My God, can you not see the danger this man presents? He knows his poisons as well as their remedies. He's the very man who can make life short and painful for you if you should want to proceed in forcing him to stay."

Monseigneur smiled. "Yes, he is capable of that, and probably so much more," he said. "But he won't do it. Not to me."

"Oh?" said Lestrade, eyebrows raised. "And how do we know so much of John Watson that we know what he is capable or incapable of doing?"

"I just...know him," said Monseigneur slowly, pensively. "He won't be able to do it. Otherwise, as he himself has pointed out, he would have plunged his sword into me already during our first encounter. A man of honor will find his hands tied by his high principles, even when facing against his enemy- just as yours are. And I have an idea about him that might further explain this restraint, but it needs to be tested. As of now, there is...insufficient data."

Lestrade's mouth was set into a grim line as he shook his head ominously. "This is folly, my lord," he said. "Dangerously folly."

"Let's make a game of it, shall we?" proposed Monseigneur, a glint of light entering his eyes. "Try to convince him. We can make him stay on for a few days more to handle my recovery. Let's see if you can work your particular charms on a Highlander. Tempt him, persuade him. I shall do the same, in my own way. Let us see who between us will emerge the better tempter."

"My lord--"

"The game is on, Lestrade," said Monseigneur with finality. "Now go find your nephew. I need to
While Monseigneur and Lestrade were deep in their discussion of John Watson, the man himself-accompanied by one of the armed guards outside Monseigneur's tent- was stomping across camp, looking for Billy.

People paused to stare at him and wonder at his heavy, burring accent as he asked whether they had seen the boy. Everyone seemed to know who Billy was, fortunately, and he was pointed to the direction where he had gone.

Billy was, in fact, engaged in his favorite pastime as John finally spotted him in a clearing almost outside the garrison walls. In one hand, he had on a gauntlet, and he was watching the skies. High up above, a bird of prey glided effortlessly in the clear air.

"Ah, John, sir," Billy said, catching sight of John as he approached. He nodded a dismissal at John's armed escort who trailed after him.

"I need my old clothes back," said John shortly, already shedding the coat of grey wool and handing it to Billy. "Where are they?"

"I brought them to the washers," said Billy, eyes wide as he looked at John. "Though to be honest, the washers all think they're better off used as rags. Are your new clothes somehow unsatisfactory, sir? If they are, I can get you-"

"It's not that," growled John. "They're simply not mine. I want mine back."

"You're upset," observed Billy, a note of distress entering his own voice as he took in John's glowering features.

John nodded and said curtly, "Good observation there, yeah."

"I wouldn't be too upset, if I were you," Billy advised earnestly. "Monseigneur always exerts that kind of effect on people whom he meets for the first time. The more important the person is to him, the worse it gets. He'll find a way to test people and get under their skin and see how they'll take it."

John stared at him.

"After his first week of service to Monseigneur, my lord uncle told me he was reduced to begging the King to take him back," Billy continued with a laugh. "And as for me, I cried my eyes out the entire first month when I started serving under him, and that was two years ago."

John looked away and shook his head in disbelief. "How...why would you even want to continue serving him then?" he asked, bewildered.

"He's our Prince, sir," said Billy, his tone carrying no trace of rancor. "Our lord and master. We do not--cannot-- take his actions into account the way we do ours. He is above all that."

"Well, thank God he's not my prince," muttered John under his breath.

"I know he may have been harsh. He may have said some things to anger you," Billy said serenely, "but he's also the one who commanded my lord uncle to summon you when he fell ill."

John turned to stare at Billy in surprise.
"Yes, he did," continued Billy. "I was there the entire time. He told my lord uncle, 'fetch our captive healer'--I'm sorry, but we didn't know your name then-- 'he will know what to do with me'. That was the reason why you were taken to his bedside. My lord uncle would not have done so, if the decision were his to make alone. So you see..."

John shook his head. *That doesn't mean a goddamned thing*, he told himself firmly. *All it means is that he's scared to death of Anderson's ineptitude, as who wouldn't?*

Before he could say anything else, Billy put two fingers to his mouth and emitted a high whistle.

"Ah, I still can't do it the way Monseigneur does it," said Billy, shaking his head. "She'll never be able to recognize it."

Nevertheless, the bird did descend from the bright blankness of the heavens after flying a graceful arc.

"Azrail," said Billy happily, extending his gauntleted hand up for the young hawk in a touchingly courtly gesture, the way he would offer his arm to a high-born lady. "Good girl."

Azrail descended with flapping wings and very daintily took her perch on Billy's gloved hand. He cooed softly as he tossed a morsel of raw meat for her to catch on her beak.

Despite his own recently ruffled feathers, John leaned in to get a better look at the hawk as Billy made his silly introductions: "John, meet Azrail. Azrail, John Watson."

She was a very pretty thing: the sleek, pale feathers of her breast were barred with black. Her folded wings were grey, tipped with black at the ends. White stripes adorned the sides of her eyes. John watched, charmed, as Azrail cocked her head an angle to give him a look as intensely curious as the one he was giving her through one bright, red-orange eye.

Billy continued, "She's a Northern Goshawk. Very recently just shed her juvenile brown feathers. You should have seen her while she was still a youngster-- all tawny and small, with her eyes sewn shut, the poor girl. She didn't have it easy as well from Monseigneur, when he was training her. Yet look at her now. Monseigneur got her as a gift from his uncle, the King of Gondal."


"It's the name of the Archangel of Death," supplied Billy helpfully.

"Oh." John raised his brows briefly before lowering them into a heavy frown. *Unsurprising,* he huffed to himself.

Trust the man to resort to drama at every turn: Wolf's Lair. Azrail. John briefly wondered what Monseigneur would call his demonic black horse, the one that had chased him down that green field. And then there was the matter of Monseigneur's name. What could it actually be?

Not, John told himself yet again, that it really meant anything to him.

"If you'd want to catch a glimpse of Monseigneur's soft side, you should be here to watch him hawking," said Billy.

"Oh. He's got a soft side, has he?" asked John offhandedly, watching Azrail reach into her wing to scratch with her beak.

Billy smiled as he eyed Azrail tenderly. "Sometimes he calls her 'mon couer', or 'my heart'," he said.
"Well," said John resentfully, unable to resist digging in once again. "It just goes to show he doesn't have one of those inside his own chest."

He really didn't realize he was so angry. Angry and upset.

And disappointed.

The strange mixture of emotions merely added fuel to the fire, because now he was furious and bewildered at himself for feeling them as well.

He had not really expected any thanks from the man for saving his life, although he had to admit he had felt some satisfaction when he got the diagnosis and treatment right. There was nothing odd about that-- It was what doctors and healers lived for. But to be accused of being the cause of the man's malady! The man was a bastard to even suggest it.

He would need to talk to Lestrade and remind him of their agreement. He wanted out-- the sooner the better.

Almost as if on cue, the man's voice sounded behind them a few minutes later: "Billy, go and attend to Monseigneur. He needs you."

"Yes, sir." Billy slipped a hood over Azrail's head and nodded politely at John before he moved away.

John turned to stare at Lestrade as the man stood a few feet away from him, hands on his hips, his face rueful.

"John, before anything else, let me just say Monseigneur was really grateful--"

John closed his eyes in irritation and shook his head. "Stop it," he grated. "Stop being his mouthpiece. He's not here anyway so there's no use in voicing this sort of sycophantic rubbish to me."

"You don't understand," said Lestrade patiently. "He's not an ordinary man, he's a Prince. He's--"

"Yes, I know, he's not accountable for his actions. How can a god on earth possibly be held into account by mere mortals?" John began, voice rising. He bit back the rest of his words with great difficulty. Lestrade did not deserve this verbal lashing. He ought to reserve it for the one who did, when they met up again.

"When can I and my companion leave, then?" he asked instead. "I've already done what you asked me to do, and more."

"We were hoping- and Monseigneur asked, specifically-- that you can stay on for a few more days, until he's back on his feet," said Lestrade.

John exhaled an explosive breath. "I don't see how I can be of further service to him," he said flatly.

"He trusts you," said Lestrade. "Don't get thrown off by his words. He says things like that but means them very differently deep down inside. He improves on acquaintance, I promise. Well, most times, anyway."

John was having none of it. "The moment he's able to stand," he repeated Lestrade's words, his tone final.
Lestrade nodded.

"John--" Lestrade was having difficulty framing his next words.

John waited, exasperation and impatience etched on his face.

Finally, Lestrade got the words out, "In the event that war is averted, would you consider it if we were to offer you the post of Monseigneur's private physician?"

John stared at Lestrade, not sure he had heard him right. The man's words had effectively robbed him of speech as he struggled to take in the idea. The very idea!

To look at Lestrade, he seemed completely serious. And grim. Say yes, said his eyes. Please.

John finally breathed out an incredulous laugh. "I can't believe this," he muttered.

"Will you?" pressed Lestrade, his voice urgent.

"No," said John, deliberately accentuating the "o" in the word. "War or no war, what I've done for the man may already be considered treason by some of my people. And after what has happened, I find it hard to believe that he would even think to ask me this. Did he put you up to it? Is he actually proposing--"

Lestrade closed his eyes briefly. "Monseigneur has nothing to do with it. The proposal came from me," he said, his voice dull.

Oh.

"Well, I hope he asks me," said John, very deliberately. "I wouldn't want to miss out on the opportunity of saying 'no' to his royal face."

"Even if it means a handsome, regular income?" said Lestrade. "Lifelong security? You need not be worried about material wants again."

"No."

"But I haven't mentioned a figure."

"Don't bother."

Lestrade sighed. "John, please," he said quietly. "I meant it when I said we would give a lot to have somebody like you in our ranks. If war can be averted, if we can somehow manage to go around this entire conundrum--"

"I'm touched," said John tersely. "I really am. But guess what? We're not actually friends, sir. With no war, our paths are not supposed to cross. If war can be averted, I see no reason why I shouldn't just walk away from here. You'd have no hold over me."

A brief silence as the two men regarded each other.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to hope that the current situation holds out, then," Lestrade said wearily, straightening himself.

Something of his former self threaded its way into his voice as he continued, "As things stand, you're still our captive. My master will do with you as he sees fit. I'd check my tongue in front of him, if I were you, John. You couldn't possibly win over Monseigneur when it comes to trading barbs."
"I'll give him a run for his money," promised John grimly.

Quite unexpectedly, Lestrade smiled. "I'm sure you will," he said. "I'll be sitting back to watch the fireworks, then. It's time I take you back to him. He'll be wondering where you've taken yourself off to."

To look at Lestrade, it would be hard to guess what his thoughts were just then. Nothing pleasant, to be sure, as he thought back on Monseigneur's words and the heaviness of heart that accompanied his realization that Monseigneur had been right about everything, as usual: right about Angrian Highlanders in general, and John Watson in particular.

Most unsettling, how Monseigneur seemed to understand the man perfectly so early into their acquaintance.

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**Author's Notes:** Medieval Scotland serves as the model for Angria. As a consequence of its geography, Scotland has two different societies. Mountains stretch from the center of Scotland to the north and west, marking the highlands; the lowlands are situated south and east of the country, rendering them more accessible to the influences of England, situated just down below. People living within these separate societies tended to stay tied to their own social groups. The Scottish kings were engaged in long struggles for power against their nobles, and control of the Highlands was especially difficult due to the forbidding and inaccessible terrain, and the fierce chieftains of local clans who maintained control over their own sections of land. (Source: An Illustrated History of Britain)

In medieval falconry, **Northern Goshawks** were the most prized of all hunting birds. Like most kinds of raptors (birds of prey), these hawks exhibit sexual dimorphism (in which the female is larger than the male), thus, most birds captured for falconry training are female. Most are captured while they are still juveniles, to facilitate ease of training. During medieval times, it was common practice to stitch the eyes of a hunting bird closed to lessen its panic around humans and to control its vision. All throughout its training and falconry career, a hood is slipped onto the bird's head while it is at rest to keep it calm and help acclimatize it to human surroundings.

Some very interesting expressions which originated from falconry terms:

- **Haggard:** looking exhausted and unwell, in poor condition; wild or untamed (in falconry, it pertains to a hawk, caught from the wild as an adult and very difficult to train)

- **Hawked it up:** Clearing phlegm from the throat (derived from the sound a hawk makes as it expels the indigestible parts of a meal)

- **To turn tail:** To turn and run away, as Lestrade did in an earlier chapter (a hawk flying away)

- **Wrapped around his/her finger:** to be held tightly under his/her control (derived from the leash of a hawk when secured to the falconer's fist)

Upon Lestrade and John's return, they found the atmosphere in Monseigneur's quarters to be a study in subdued tension. They had arrived at the very moment Monseigneur had finished speaking to Billy. They did not hear his words, just the inflection of his deep voice, edged with something like a reprimand, ebbing away. Then strained silence.

They entered to find Billy standing at the foot of Monseigneur's bed, hands slack on his sides, his face pale and dismayed. He looked frightened. Monseigneur was lying on his pillows, still wrapped in his lethargic weakness, looking up at him. One could not really see the expression on his face—the mask took care to cover that—but if John could make anything out of the sudden silence enveloping prince and page, he would imagine Monseigneur to be frowning.

Lestrade must have sensed the strain as well, for he cleared his throat and began, "Monseigneur—"

"That will be all, Billy," said Monseigneur, not even looking at Lestrade. "For now. You and your lord uncle may go. I shall summon you when I need you. Right now, I want to have a private word with John."

John watched with a sinking heart as uncle and nephew made their exit. He felt Lestrade's eyes on him for a moment, then he was gone. For the first time since those few, stolen minutes last night, he was left alone with his patient.
Monseigneur motioned to the chair by his bedside with a small flick of his wrist, languidly graceful.
"Sit," he said.

John approached the bed slowly and sank down on the offered chair with all the care of a snake charmer kneeling in front of a cobra.

Monseigneur took in his tight, shuttered expression and looked away with a roll of his eyes. "Obviously Lestrade has yet to teach you some proper manners," said Monseigneur. "You have yet to learn to arrange your face in front of me. Not that it really helps."

John dropped the shuttered look and glared openly at him instead.

"You're angry at my jab earlier," Monseigneur said, his voice bored.

John shrugged. "Hardly surprising," he pointed out. "It's not every day that I get accused of being a poisoner-- at least, not by one of my own patients."

"You're expecting me to be grateful, then." Monseigneur's cool gaze was back on John.

John shook his head. "No," he murmured, returning Monseigneur's gaze steadily. "I'm not foolish enough to hope for your gratitude."

Monseigneur's eyes narrowed. "But you were expecting something," he said, "and you're disappointed that it was not given to you."

John gave him a look, deceptively mild, even as he felt his heart begin to jump oddly in his chest. "You're putting far too much meaning into things," he said evenly. "The fact is, I don't really care one way or the other."

Monseigneur broke into a smile. "We both know that's not true," he said, his voice low, silky.

John fought to keep his features blank, forced himself to keep breathing normally.

"Why did you agree to heal me, John?" Monseigneur's voice was suddenly soft.

"Because Lestrade and I made a deal. That's all there is to it," said John. "My freedom in exchange for treating you. I believe I've fulfilled my end of the bargain."

"Stay for a few days more," said Monseigneur. "At least until I am fully recovered."

"Why?" asked John, a note of resentment creeping into his voice. "What's the point when we clearly do not trust each other?"

Monseigneur's next words came as a surprise: "Stay. For my pleasure, if nothing else."

He smiled as he watched the brief play of emotions on John's face: disbelief, wariness, incredulity. The man had an easy face to read: open, honest. Pure. He could read John's clean heart in its entirety from that expressive face. Monseigneur watched, amused, as wariness finally won out and John swept back the rest of his feelings to lock them carefully behind his eyes.

"I wanted to gauge your reaction when we spoke earlier," explained Monseigneur. "Anyway, it's immediately clear you're not the culprit."

John frowned. "Oh. So you like going around, raising a hue and cry by making outrageous declarations which are basically unfounded, is that it?" he asked.
"If you have been in my service longer, you will realize that I never do anything unfounded," answered Monseigneur. "And I do it to read people. It's always interesting to see how people react to certain situations. There are valuable things to be learned by looking at gestures— I always find them more eloquent than the spoken word."

John began to shake his head disapprovingly, but realized he could not find anything to say to the arrogant bastard.

Monseigneur gave John's figure a cursory flick. "The clothes become you," he said suddenly, a hint of surprise in his voice.

John looked down at his new attire, his frown deepening. "Well, I'm just waiting for the old ones to dry," he said curtly. "These aren't mine."

"Of course they're yours."

"No, they're not." John's quiet voice was edged with steel.

"You probably may not get your old clothes back," said Monseigneur, his tone unconcerned. "The washers have told Billy they're only fit to be used as rags, and they're probably on their way to being shredded. So, unless you don't mind going around naked, I would suggest you take care of the ones you have on your back right now."

John huffed out a sharp breath— part exasperation, part unwilling laughter— at the image Monseigneur's words had suddenly conveyed.

"At any rate, anyone attending to me as a healer cannot go around in those clothes." A pause. "Notice that I always pertain to you as a healer, never a doctor—"

Hackles immediately raised, John interjected, his tone rude, "I never said I was."

"—as Gaaldinian doctors are hopelessly mired in religion and astrology to render their bodily cures useless at best. I'm sure you have met a classic specimen in the form of our camp doctor, Anderson. I'm certain the title 'killer of princes' would have made a nice addition to the repertoire of titles he is so fond of stringing along after his name, if you were not here to attend to me last night."

"Oh."

John stared at Monseigneur, eyes round with surprise, mouth still pursed around the stinging retort he was prepared to let fly.

"Savor it," advised Monseigneur dryly. "That's the closest I will come to thanking you."

John continued to gape at the man before him, mystified. Why on earth can I not pin this man down? He wondered. *How does he manage it, his words flying off-tangent at every possible turn, so that one does not know what he's going to say next?*

Monseigneur stared back at him, a small smile tugging at a corner of his lips.

John shook his head as if to clear it. "That day we met in the field," he said. "How did you know I was a healer? I mean, you must have made it out that I was a soldier through my sword, but how —?"

Monseigneur shrugged nonchalantly. "It wasn't much of a mystery," he said. "Your bag. You dropped it when you started running from me. It fell open and the contents spilled out. Who else
would think to stuff his bag with tree bark and fungi? Certainly not an ordinary soldier."

The explanation was so simple that John could not suppress a smile. His first real one.

"That," continued Monseigneur, "and your hands."

"My hands?" repeated John dubiously.

Monseigneur stretched out an elegant white hand. "Show me?" he said. "Your dominant hand— the left one, which you used to grip your sword."

John stared at him for a moment more before he slowly, almost reluctantly, stretched out his left hand. He felt Monseigneur's fingers close around it lightly, pulling it closer to him. Mouth suddenly gone dry, he watched as Monseigneur bent down to stare hard at his palm, his fingers, turning his hand over before flipping it back.

"Your skills with the longsword are formidable. You favor it above all other weapons. But you've been a healer for well over ten years—probably starting in your early teens— before you decided to become a soldier," murmured Monseigneur, tracing the lines on John's palm with his thumb.

John could not resist laughing, amazed, all animosity temporarily pushed to the back of his mind. "You can see all of that in my hand?" he said, staring at his own palm quizzically.

"I felt it first before I saw it," said Monseigneur.

John brought his eyes back to Monseigneur. "You…felt it first?" he said. "How could you possibly have? We never really touched when we fought. At least, not with our hands."

Monseigneur shook his head. "Have you forgotten?" he asked softly.

John stiffened in sudden alarm as Monseigneur guided his hand into the open vee of his nightshirt and onto his chest.

What in bloody hell is he doing...?

John tried awkwardly to pull away as the alarm bells continued to sound away in his head, but Monseigneur was having none of it. John felt Monseigneur's fingers bite into his wrist, holding the flat of his palm down on the warm skin above the man's heart.

"Here, and here," murmured Monseigneur, his voice thoughtful, as though he were reliving the memory of John's hands on him. He was looking down at the clasped hands as well; if he noticed John's discomfort, he did not show it.

John could feel the texture of the fine, sparse hair on Monseigneur's chest against the rough skin of his hand, feel the warmth of the man's skin underneath his as Monseigneur slid his stiff hand across his chest. "Last night, when I was burning with fever, I felt your hands on me— all over— as you examined me."

John blinked. "Wait," he said, finding his voice at last. "Weren't you delirious then?"

"Not delirious enough to fail in noticing that there are two sets of calluses on your hands," said Monseigneur as he abruptly lifted John's hand back in the air. He pointed them out: "Obviously you don't care very much about wearing gloves most of the time. There is an older set of calluses that told me you spent years regularly pounding and grinding on a mortar. You've got a healer's thumb right here. And yet here—" Monseigneur's fingertips skimmed lightly across John's open hand—"are
signs of a more recent and different profession: the calluses of a swordsman as he grips the handle of his sword mainly with his thumb, index and middle fingers. A wide strip of callused skin on the palm here indicates where the handle of your sword comes into contact with your skin as you balance the sword in your hand- the braided cord that covers the handle needs to be replaced for quite some time now, or perhaps you prefer it that rough so as to be able to have a better grip on your weapon. The size and shape of your callouses are consistent with the grip length of a longsword."

John stared at Monseigneur, wide-eyed. He held his breath as he felt those long, white fingers glide over the pads of his index and middle fingers, feeling the hardened skin that was not present on his last two digits. The feel of those fingers was gentle, almost teasing, yet Monseigneur was so serious, absorbed in the task of reading John through his hand. His voice was detached, almost clinical, as he narrated to John the story of his work through his hand.

If John were to read him, what would he say about Monseigneur's hold on him? His grasp was knowing, almost erotic, like the touch of a lover. Yet not intentionally so. Or was it? John found to his growing unease that he could not really penetrate this man as easily as the man had penetrated him.

John swallowed around the sudden lump that had formed in his throat at the thought, and tried to keep the hand that Monseigneur had imprisoned in his from trembling. For some unaccountable reason, he felt his heart racing madly away inside his chest. He said in an attempt at levity, "I didn't know you can read so much in a hand. Perhaps you might want to tell me my fortune next."

Monseigneur answered him with cold hauteur, "I'm no fortune-teller. But I can deduce things about people that may give an indication of their fortunes."

John regarded him with raised eyebrows. "Deduce them?" he asked. "How?"

He had heard of these kinds of people— people who had the gift of second sight, but until now he had never really believed them to be real. Was Monseigneur one of these people? Blessed with a gift that others saw as heaven-sent, while others would brand as a mark of the devil?

"Your arm is breaking out into gooseflesh," Monseigneur noted, his smile widening into a grin.

Damn!

"No magic trick," said Monseigneur, letting go of John's hand at last and settling back on his pillows. "I simply observe."

John folded his arms across his chest, his burning hand curling into a tight fist, tucked away from sight. "You observe?" he said.

"Yes. People look but they very seldom see. Do you understand the difference, John?"

John opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Monseigneur continued, "You, for instance. A healer and a soldier, clearly adept in both fields— a rare combination of talent. Yet I think it is not lost on you that your talents also offer an uncomfortable paradox that taxes your conscience from time to time: the preserver of life is also the one capable of taking it away, by force if necessary. Something in your past must have made you turn away from being just a healer— something calamitous. Something that fed and grew from a nameless grief you have buried deep inside you— one that has made you turn to war, as though it is through violent conflict that you will be able to find the answer that still evades you. Something is broken deep inside you, John Watson, and you have yet to find the thing that is going to restore you and make you whole again. Your fortune has been undone by a past tragedy. Right now it remains uncertain. Unmade. You have yet
to find your quest and your holy grail."

It took a moment for John to realize that Monseigneur had finished speaking. He continued to sit there and stare at the man, his mouth slightly open in shock, his back rigid. The first thought to enter his numb mind was: Dear God, Sally Donovan was right. This man is a fucking demon...

When his lips could move again, he whispered a little breathlessly, "Bloody hell…"

Monseigneur smiled, tipped his head forward a little as though John had applauded him. "You might want to tell me now what it was that made you turn to soldiering, John," he said. And just as quickly, he reconsidered: "Never mind. I shall enjoy the challenge of working it out of you, sooner or later."

"How the bloody fuck…!" John felt nauseous, as though all of his emotions were lodged somewhere in his gut, broiling up his throat now and threatening to spill out and overwhelm him.

"No tricks, John," reminded Monseigneur.

"Then how…?" John shook his head helplessly.

"All will be explained in due time," murmured Monseigneur.

"Amazing," John muttered, more to himself than for Monseigneur's benefit. "Fucking amazing."

Monseigneur gave him a careful sidelong glance. "You think so?"

"Of course it was," said John, too flabbergasted to bother disguising his reaction.

Monseigneur gave a gentle huff. "That's not what people normally say," he said.

"Really? What do people normally say?"

"'Piss off'," said Monseigneur. "Though of course they dare not say it to my face, but one can tell, anyway."

Despite the nasty and unpleasant shock, John could not fully keep the grin back. From somewhere at the back of his mind, a little voice reminded him to back away and pull his animosity towards this man together, but the voice was drowned a second later by Monseigneur's voice, deep and smooth and rich—like red, red wine.

"Watson," murmured Monseigneur speculatively. "It translates as 'powerful warrior', does it not?"

John gave him a look that said he had not known that before about his own surname. In fact, in a single discourse, this man had shown him so many things he had not known before.

"Since you're still waiting for your grand quest in life, my powerful warrior, I thought we might have a little mission of our own to devote our current time and attention to," said Monseigneur.

A moment of speechless surprise. Again.

"What...what mission would this be?" John wanted to know at last.

"I would have thought it was obvious," said Monseigneur. There was no mistaking the gleam of excited interest and anticipation in those pale eyes now. "I just narrowly escaped an attempt on my life. It is imperative that we find out who would want to poison the Prince of Gaaldine."
Author's Notes: Thank you so much for your lovely reviews! I am so glad you guys like the end notes. There are so many interesting period details about the Middle Ages, and I will try to incorporate as much of them as I can in the story.

John's left-handedness is a trait based on Martin Freeman, and also ACD's John (thanks so much to Link at ff.net for the info!).

The sobriquet, "Killer of Princes", is originally ascribed to Dr. Fagon, court physician to France's Louis XIV, for obvious reasons.

The phrase "arrange your face" is from Hilary Mantel's wonderful book, "Wolf Hall".

I based John's sword preference on the websites listed below. Here is a description of his sword:

Longsword - a sword meant for use with either one or two hands. Most extant medieval and Renaissance fencing treatises deal with the use of the longsword. The earliest longswords appeared around 1150, and continued to see an increase in use throughout the Middle Ages. A longsword may have either a flat or diamond-cross section blade geometry. Its edges are generally parallel, as opposed to the sharply-tapering bastard swords. Sometimes referred to by the more modern name hand-and-a-half sword. The term "longsword" is sometimes mistakenly used to refer to an arming sword as a result of misuse by some fantasy novels and role-playing games.

References: (please remove all spaces in between dots)
http://sites.scran.ac.uk/weapon/Content/Weapons.html
http://www.mercwars.com/weapongloss.shtml

The meaning of the surname "Watson" is lifted from http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Watson
John watched as Monseigneur drank weak ale thirstily from a silver goblet. As with all things, Monseigneur could transform a mundane action such as drinking into an elegant spectacle. From those long, white fingers clasped lightly, precisely, around the finely made chalice to the long, graceful arch of his throat as Monseigneur downed the ale in long, deep pulls, John's mouth thinned without his being aware of it as he watched Monseigneur's tongue appear to lick at a drop of liquid that had gathered at the corner of his mouth. He glanced away at the last moment, aware that he was staring. Damn the man for not being easy on anything except, perhaps, the eyes.

Despite his raw, lacerated feelings after Monseigneur had read his entire person so thoroughly just minutes before, John could not help but feel a certain kind of fascination toward the man take root. "Am I supposed to be this thirsty?" Monseigneur asked, a frown in his voice, as he lowered the empty goblet to cradle in his hands. "I've been drinking like a fish since I woke up."

John shrugged. "You didn't drink much yesterday," he said. "All you really had was the medicine."

Monseigneur placed the goblet on a small table within reach and shifted onto his side languorously, the better to face John. He tilted his head towards John a little helplessly and asked, "How did you make me drink the medicine yesterday?"

John could not help the small snort of incredulous laughter. "You remember the feel of my hands," he said, his tone dubious, "but you don't remember how I gave you the medicine?"

To look at Monseigneur, one could almost believe that he really did not remember. "Pity," he murmured. "You must refresh my memory the next time I need to take it."

A sharp bark of laughter from John this time. The wry look he aimed at Monseigneur said it all: *You can keep on dreaming.*

God, was he getting this right? Could it actually be possible that this man was *flirting* with him?

Amusing as it was, John suddenly felt as though he were swimming in strange waters. Strange and unsafe.

He cleared his throat, moving the conversation back to dry, familiar land, putting it back on track before Monseigneur interrupted to say he was thirsty and wanted something to drink.

"How are you going to go about tracking down the poisoner?" asked John.

"There will be time to devise a strategy," said Monseigneur. "Right now, though, information regulation is vital. Nobody should know the nature of my illness, or how I got better."

"You said the poisoner is not here in the garrison," said John. "If he's not here, how did he get to you?"

"Ah, there lies the mystery, doesn't it?" asked Monseigneur, smiling. "So many questions, the answers to some of which elude me for the time being as well."

"You think the poison wasn't slipped into your food and drink," John pressed on. "How then?"

"Do you know, John," said Monseigneur conversationally, "that deadly Nightshade was used by
"Wait..." Monseigneur could almost hear the gears moving in John's brain. "You mean to tell me that you think you got it through that wound? You have a wound on your arm. I saw it yesterday when I examined you."

"That's one of many possibilities, don't you think?" said Monseigneur.

"But your wound is already several days old. Don't you think you should have come down with the symptoms much earlier?"

"There are things that do not fit the puzzle," admitted Monseigneur. "Which adds to the allure of the mystery greatly, wouldn't you agree? Just as you have said that the symptoms were not a complete match to the diagnosis of classic Nightshade poisoning. Which means...?"

He trailed off expectantly, and John was forced to concentrate on coming up with the correct answer. "You think the poison is a composite-made of several kinds of poisons, not just one."

"And the very real possibility that its effects can be delayed for a few days, making the job of tracing it back to the poisoner so much more difficult," finished Monseigneur. "Novel."

John frowned at the tone of admiration, almost reverent, that Monseigneur used to frame his last word.

He stared into Monseigneur's eyes. "You're not afraid?" he asked. "You almost died. I mean, somebody else in your place would have been horrified at the thought of being poisoned."

"But I didn't die, that's the point, surely," argued Monseigneur. "And if I did..."

He shrugged, as if to say if he had indeed died, then he was dead and there was nothing more to be said about it. For some reason, John was piqued at his nonchalance- the coldness of his precise logic, even his courage.

"And it did not occur to you that Lestrade and just about the entire garrison were worried and scared to death for you?" prodded John.

"They weren't afraid for me," Monseigneur corrected him gently. "They were worried about their own necks."

"That's hardly true," said John, some heat entering his words at last. "Lestrade and Billy were most concerned-"

"And you, as well," interjected Monseigneur.

"-about you. You can tell they weren't faking it, and it's not just because...what?"

"You," said Monseigneur. "You were concerned about me, too, weren't you?"

Monseigneur watched, amused, as John suddenly drew back into himself, like a snail into its shell. "You're my patient," he said cautiously. "Of course I have to be concerned. And anyway, I'm not sure if you were too delirious to overhear Lestrade yesterday, but he basically promised he'd kill me if you died. So you see just what sort of inducement I was under to ensure that you get well."

"And you liked it that I am. Getting well," said Monseigneur. "You loved the rush of adrenaline when you finally got the correct diagnosis and treatment in my case. You get off on it, don't you?"
"That's natural, I think," John answered. He might as well have added: *While your coldblooded reaction to your own possible demise isn't.*

"Would it help at all if I were to panic at the realization that I was poisoned?" asked Monseigneur quite reasonably.

"Well, no," said John. "But--"

Here, he broke off.

But what, exactly? Would it help a little for Monseigneur to show that he was, at least, human? If so, for whose benefit?

"I didn't ask to be poisoned, John, nor did I poison myself, if that's what you're thinking," replied Monseigneur quietly.

John shook his head. "Of course not," he said.

"At any rate, if the poison were indeed introduced into my body through that wound," said Monseigneur, his tone almost gleeful, "then my would-be murderer is within the royal court circles of Gaaldine."

John stared at him. "You think it's one of your own, then?" he said.

"Highly likely," said Monseigneur. "It wasn't very clear how I got that wound, John. I was in several jousting matches that day and I did not feel a thing until Billy and I noticed it later that night when I was preparing for my bath."

"Oh." John leaned back in his seat. This was most interesting indeed.

Monseigneur smiled at his rapt audience. "So John, have I gotten you interested in our quest yet?"

John paused, considering Monseigneur's words. "I don't know how I can really be of any help to you," he said at last, his tone suddenly careful. "I mean, I promised Lestrade I'd only stay until you recover."

The effect of those words was unfortunate. John watched as a shadow settled over Monseigneur's eyes.

"You'd choose to go back to Angria rather than pursue our quest?" the question was delivered in a flat, still voice.

"Well, technically it's not 'our' quest," said John, not backing down from the sudden change he detected in Monseigneur, "as I have not agreed to participate in it yet."

"And if I say you're in, regardless of your own considerations?" Monseigneur's voice was carefully devoid of all expression, as were his eyes.

"You can't make me," John said.

"Watch me," Monseigneur growled.

*Here at last,* thought John. *A glimpse of his true nature revealed under all that artificial sweet talk.*

Monseigneur's eyes, John noticed, had the color of the stormy sea in winter when he was angry. Fascinating.
The impasse was broken when Lestrade stepped in, murmuring his apologies. For a brief moment, John thought Monseigneur was going to shout at him.

“What is it?” snapped Monseigneur instead, his voice clipped.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, sir,” said Lestrade. "The daily dispatches. Most urgent. The King..."

He trailed off, his eloquent gaze on John.

"Well, off I go then," said John, bounding up, glad to be going. "I thought I might check in to see to my companion's wound. That is, of course..."

Monseigneur nodded curtly, not even looking at him.

Dismissed.

"I'll have Billy accompany you," Lestrade said to John.

As soon as John was gone, Lestrade turned back to Monseigneur.

"He is very stubborn," Monseigneur would only say.

"Yes."

No success with John, then.

Lestrade did not know whether he should be glad or be exasperated with the man's hardheadedness. At any rate, it boded no good to defy Monseigneur's wishes, because that only meant that he would give chase all the harder.

Lestrade gave a circumspect cough when the mulish silence threatened to stretch on, then handed over the King's communications.

Monseigneur swore softly when he read the messages enclosed.

"There isn't going to be a war then," said Lestrade, relieved, "but a wedding. A royal wedding."

"Just what we need right now," muttered Monseigneur, tossing the papers away. "John is not to know, at least for the time being."

"I doubt if we can keep the news, even from him, for long," said Lestrade dryly. "We no longer have any legitimate hold on him."

"Yes, we do," said Monseigneur. "We must exert more effort, Lestrade, to get him to stay, or I shall have to resort to drastic methods."

Lestrade crossed his arms over his chest, and said, "My lord was right: material incentives mean nothing to John Watson."

"Then we shall have to play on other...incentives," drawled Monseigneur. "I'm not done with John Watson yet. Not by a long shot."

Lestrade raised his brows at Monseigneur's words. Just what the hell is he up to now?

"I'll need to take a bath," said Monseigneur shortly.
John was led to Alec's tent by a morose and taciturn Billy.

_Clearly, Monseigneur has a way about him with people under his influence_, thought John as he regarded Billy's miserable countenance. _Best to be away, and soon._

Alec's face lit up with relief and gladness when he saw John framed by the opening of the tent, his medicine bag slung over one shoulder. A second later, Alec's face was filled with dismay as he took in John's appearance.

"Mother of God," he said, taking in John's cropped hair, the sudden absence of his beard stubble, his clothes. "What have they done to you?"

John shook his head, closing his eyes. "Long story, Alec," he said, laying down the medicine bag beside him and moving to untie Alec's bandages.

His wound was healing very well. John took his time in cleaning it and making new medicine to apply on the wound.

Alec tried again in a low voice, in Angrian this time: "What did they do to you?"

"Nothing that cannot be borne," muttered John in the same language. "But I expect they will be setting us free soon. They'll have to."

"Sir." Billy, a few feet away, must have heard their whispers.

"It's fine, Billy," said John. "We're not talking about running away."

He sifted through the contents of his bag and took out the ingredients he needed for Alec's wound. Tangled in the dark tree bark and ears of fungi was a single white flower. John gazed at the little white star for a moment, thinking it had strayed from the cluster he had used to make Monseigneur's medicine last night, and placed it on a piece of clean bandage linen which he tucked into his pocket.

After he had seen to Alec's wound, he stayed for a while, making desultory small talk understandable by Billy. Had Alec been treated well? Had he been given enough to eat? Was he warm enough at night? He was not permitted to tell Alec what he had been doing, and he thought it wise not to tell him. Alec would misunderstand. Already he was forming conclusions of his own. John could feel Alec's eyes on his clothes and wondered what he might be thinking, deep down inside.

In the end, Billy cleared his throat, signaling the end of their session.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," John said to Alec, packing up his things.

He found that he did not want to return to Monseigneur's side just then, and lingered for a few minutes in the open air with Billy.

"What is it?" said John, peering at Billy's face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, sir," said Billy.

"Of course there is, with a face like that," said John tersely.

Billy shook his head. "It's nothing, sir," he said heavily. "I was...it was my fault. I failed to obey his orders. Monseigneur was right to be angry with me."
"Was he severe with you?" John wanted to know. One could tell a lot about a man by the way he treated his servants.

Billy looked shocked. "Oh, no, sir," he said. "Monseigneur, he's...he doesn't shout when he's mad. Not really. Though sometimes you wish he would just do so."

"He's a bit of a puzzle, isn't he?" John asked.

_Yet despite everything, he has such loyal followers_, thought John. _Billy truly loves him, and so does Lestrade, in his own way. How does he do it?_

Billy opened his mouth, and said quite unexpectedly, "Must you really leave us after Monseigneur is better, sir?"

John regarded him with raised brows. _Where did that come from?_

Billy was gazing at him helplessly. "I mean, why can't you just stay?" he said unhappily. "Surely we can all be friends in due time. Who is to say you will not be happy among us? Just give us a chance."

"It's not as easy as that, Billy," said John softly. "This isn't my home, and I have no wish to be far from home. You will not understand it now, but you will when you're older."

Billy looked infinitely sad. "Sir..."

"Yes?"

Billy looked as though he were about to say something but changed his mind at the last minute. "Nothing," he said. "Sorry, sir."

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John was gone perhaps thirty minutes, certainly no more than that, but when he and Billy returned to Monseigneur's quarters, he was met with the surprising sight of a steaming bath being drawn for Monseigneur, in the middle of the tent.

The table and other furniture had been moved aside, and the huge wooden tub laid out at the center was being prepared by a bath man. The fragrant scent of sage and rosemary drifted from the steaming waters.

Monseigneur himself was sitting up on his bed, wrapped in a long, linen sheet and talking to Lestrade, standing a few feet away, in sober tones. He turned just as John entered.

"Ah, John," Monsiegneur said. "I meant to ask whether it's all right for me to take a bath? I positively _reek_ from all that sweating yesterday."

John turned his astonished face from the direction of the bath to Monseigneur. "I don't see how my view of things will change anything now," he said slowly.

"Exactly," said Monseigneur, his tone crisp. "And anyway, I thought a bath would help revitalize me faster than lying around in bed all day long."

"Sir," said the bath man.

"Ah, ready then, are we?" asked Monseigneur.

He stood up slowly, his movements still languid, and let the sheet fall from him as he carefully took
the few steps necessary to reach the tub.

All the while, he was talking to John, his gaze pinned disconcertingly on him: "Wouldn't you agree that bathing would be ideal in my situation, John? It comes highly recommended among Gaaldinians--a cure for almost any ailment, as many would claim."

But John was not listening. It seemed as though his brain had tuned out his sense of hearing to favor the use of his sense of sight, overloaded as it was just then with the image of a naked Monseigneur standing a few feet away from him.

Naked as the day he was born.

Except for that black mask, still shielding his face from view.

It was that damned mask, more than anything, that seemed to have made John's brain freeze up and refuse to function in any higher capacity other than sight.

The way he looked, Monseigneur may as well have been carved out of pale, high-grade marble. Beautiful beyond words, the way the muscles shifted under his skin when he moved. The long lines of his arms, his legs. His body was perfectly proportioned, right down to his cock, long and slender as the rest of him, nestled in its flaring, dark bush between his legs. Nothing lewd about it at all. John had one of those himself, and he had seen this man naked before, of course he had.

What was lewd was the mask (velvet, by the feel of it last night), shielding the man's face and making his thoughts and feelings impossible to read. Monseigneur had it on last night as well, when John was examining him, but at the time, John had been too preoccupied to form a comprehensive image of his patient. Last night had been all about separate body parts as he went over each minutely: Monseigneur's head, his neck. Chest. Arms. Back. Genitals. Legs. Feet.

Standing here in front of him now, John felt--oddly enough--that he was the one naked and exposed to the elements as he looked at Monseigneur in full for the first time. He took in everything about the man except the one thing that was usually offered up first--his face. The man had bared himself to John and yet kept the most important part of himself locked away from him. John did not know why it should be so, but to his mortification, he found this strange reversal of the usual order of things profoundly arousing and stirring.

All the while, Monseigneur carried on talking, talking, and all the while, his gaze was fixed on John, taking in every bit of John's reaction as John silently took him in. And there was a light there, behind those pale eyes, that told John that something very interesting had just occurred to Monseigneur.

*Look at me, John,* Monseigneur's gaze said.

Too late, John realized that Monseigneur had been able to read him again in those few, critical seconds before he could bring his guard up. Too late, he realized that Monseigneur had brought this all about by careful design just to test him.

*Arrange your face!*

It was all a few seconds too late, but John had to do it to preserve a measure of his dignity.

Luckily, Lestrade and Billy did not seem to have noticed anything awry. They stood a few feet away, their eyes on Monseigneur (and oh, how different John's gaze must have been compared to theirs!) as he lowered himself into the steaming, fragrant bath.

"Ah," sighed Monseigneur in sheer enjoyment as he sank into the sage and rosemary-flavored
waters. "I feel so much better already."

He continued his discussion from his comfortable position in the water, the back of his head pillowed by a sponge on the side of the tub: "I was just telling Lestrade about our potential list of suspects, which would encompass just about everyone he knows in our little society."

Lestrade looked slightly discomfited, but did not comment.

Monseigneur was asking Lestrade: "What does everyone in the camp think of my illness?"

"A fever, nothing else, my lord," answered Lestrade.

"Good. Let's keep the story that way," said Monseigneur. "I am feeling much better. I shall have supper with the soldiers later."

There was more talk, but it barely registered to John. He felt oddly light-headed, like a doomed thing caught in the invisible silk of an orb weaver-- disorientated, confused, realizing too late he had just landed on an intricately designed web of a carnivorous predator. Dazed, all John could think of, after seeing Monseigneur deliberately undressed in front of him, was this: Leave. I must leave as soon as possible. Stay a day longer and this demon will have me, body and soul.

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More author's notes: Bathing during medieval times made use of a variety of herbs as bath additives, such as hollyhock, St. John's wort, brown fennel, thyme, oregano (recommended for some skin ailments), sage, rosemary ('Seethe much Rosemary, and bathe therein to make thee lusty, lively, joyfull, likeing and youngly.'), among others. Modern favorites, such as lavender, have been in use since Roman times. (Reference: A Short History of Bathing Before 1601)
Chapter 10

Author's notes: Thank you so much for your lovely reviews, as always! They never fail to please and inspire. Please see more author's notes at the end.

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Monseigneur's long, leisurely bath gave John some time to recover his composure. After a while, he managed to successfully quell the irrational panic building deep inside him, and he found that it was quite possible to look at the man without cringing whenever he was addressed. Now, face carefully arranged into neutral lines, he watched as Billy helped Monseigneur into his clothes—his vestments, upon which he may proclaim to the world his rank and stature as Prince of a realm. His body armor of authority.

John watched with forced calm as Monseigneur's pale flesh was gradually swallowed up and encased in a luxurious carapace. If anything, this exerted a pull over John the same way as the sight of Monseigneur, standing naked in front of him, did.

Like the man himself, Monseigneur's clothes were anything but simple, yet they gave off an aura of subdued stylishness, beginning with the black undershirt made of sumptuous silk. Then, a form-fitting middle garment that accentuated the lean hardness of Monseigneur's torso— a gipon, deep aubergine in color, with long, tight sleeves. Over the gipon went the knee-length outer garment called a cote-hardie.

John was not familiar with this kind of extravagant fashion—layer after layer of such beautiful fabric, each covering the other so that one may only see a few, tantalizing inches of further riches that lay beneath. The ubiquitous woolen tunics with their loose folds worn over homespun and, occasionally, linen— which would already be quite a splurge on his part— had been part of John's daily attire for as long as he could remember, and he had never thought to give his clothes more consideration than they merited so long as they served their purpose of keeping him dry and warm. Thus, what he was seeing now seemed unreal, as remote from his ordinary life as the moon was from the earth.

There was nothing loose about Monseigneur's garments at all from the waist up— the cote-hardie had a low neck, and complex sleeves with edges embroidered in silver thread that extended to the elbow in front and hung in tapered and elongated flaps at the back, exposing the gipon's purple sleeves beneath them. The sober black of the cote-hardie was relieved by a row of tiny, silver buttons up front. It molded to Monseigneur's form and set it to perfection, highlighting his broad shoulders and trim waist, his long neck. Below the waist, Monseigneur's garment flared into a full skirt reaching to his knees, open at the front from which one could see black breeches so tight that they molded to his calves and legs like stockings, or a second skin. Dark leather boots on his feet and a black cape slung with artful carelessness over his shoulders and fastened in place with a silver brooch completed the picture of delectable elegance.

And of course, there was the mask.

That damned mask covering his face, looking slightly filthy with erotic mystery. As if Monseigneur wore it deliberately to mock John and expose his weakness for everything that it signified: an irresistible secret and a provocative tease, all wrapped around the person of this man.

Done with dressing up, Monseigneur turned his head to flick a glance at John's direction, as if to make sure he was watching. John sighed as something inside him grimly acknowledged that he was losing this fight. There was no denying it. He was deeply fascinated by the enigma that was this man.
With the sense of impending defeat came exasperated confusion.

Sweet Jesus, what was the matter with him, to be so affected by the sight of this man, dressed or undressed? It did not bear contemplation. It was just...he had never realized that dressing up could be such an absorbing task. A ritual far removed from the drab and mundane idea of clothes being only one of life's bare necessities. It was quite a revelation to see dressing as an art form in itself—the results could be lavish, supremely pleasing to the eye as well as being perfectly sound in function, if one had the right clothes. Gradually, John was awakening to the realization that Monseigneur could take a dull, everyday task and transform it into something interesting and new. Something more than usual. Special.

A disturbing realization, made all the more disturbing by John's suspicion that Monseigneur had planned it this way, just as he had planned that goddamned bath and his nakedness, with the idea of having John as witness, whether he liked it or not.

Monseigneur was showing off. Just for him.

John could feel goosebumps breaking out on his skin at the very idea.

Of course it's not for you, he snapped at himself, irritated. It was a stupid thought. Never in his life had he thought himself self-centered, that everything revolved around him. Certainly, that was Monseigneur's idea of himself, but not him. Not John Watson!

He's doing this for his soldiers, thought John, watching Monseigneur's every graceful move around the quarters as he continued to discuss some business with Lestrade. To let them know that everything's back to normal, that he's alright. He must stop the rumors before they get out of hand.

Monseigneur and Lestrade were having supper out. John was going to stay in with Billy.

The quarters were suddenly empty and strangely peaceful as soon as Monseigneur stepped out, and Billy was keeping his silence, not even so much as looking at John unless John was directly addressing him. John stared at him for a while, wondering yet again what could possibly be wrong with him, what Monseigneur might have said to him to upset him so. Did it have anything to do with him? Perhaps Monseigneur thought Billy was being too friendly with somebody he ought to regard as their captive? In the end though, John decided that Billy would impart the information himself when he was ready.

They had an early supper of mutton and onions cooked in beer, and afterwards, Billy brought out some books just to prolong their state of non-communication. The books were Monseigneur's, beautifully bound and ranging in subject from falconry to discourses that were entirely unfamiliar to John. Most of the volumes were also in Gondalian—that slippery, sliding language that John could barely make out by hearing, let alone by reading.

For a while, John contented himself with staring at the pictures in the books, very few and far in between, before giving up. He made a slow circuit about the quarters, taking in Monseigneur's things that had barely registered with him during the hectic hours of Monseigneur's illness.

There were more books and papers. Strange instruments of a kind John had never seen before. Monseigneur's swords and weapons. His armor. John stared at his sword and remembered the way it had gleamed in the rain, just the other day.

Just the other day, when he had barely known Monseigneur.

And now…
What was to become of him now, in the hands of this man? God help him.

He eyed the flap of the tent surreptitiously. He could make a run for it, if he really wanted, to hell with all the consequences.

But he couldn't, his primary reason being Alec.

He refused to consider the other, terrifying idea that perhaps now, it was quite possible that he wouldn't. With or without Alec.

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The supper with the soldiers did not take long— only two hours, at most.

Monseigneur returned with a swirl of dark silks, instantly setting off a flurry of activity inside the tent. Clearly, he was fatigued from his little excursion, his temper short and frayed at the edges. He was wearing Lestrade down with more instructions for an endless list of duties around the garrison.

A few minutes of this scene and John arrived at a decision. Quietly, he stood up and, slinging his medicine bag over his shoulder, asked leave to make more medicine.

"Whatever for?" snapped Monseigneur.

"You're still not fully well," said John, the very embodiment of reason. "Off to bed with you."

He departed with Billy at his heels, not bothering to take in Monseigneur's reaction.

For this particular draught, to be taken at bedtime, John decided that adding some of the mushrooms he had found in the forest with Sally should do the trick.

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Monseigneur had undressed and indeed crawled into bed by the time John and Billy returned. There was no stopping his mouth though, as he continued his verbal onslaught. Lestrade bore it all with resigned patience.

"What's this?" asked Monseigneur, breaking off from his tirade and eyeing the cup that John was holding out to him suspiciously.

"It's your medicine, what do you think?" murmured John. "I'm not waiting until you have a relapse, what with you getting out of bed so soon."

"I'm not taking it unless you do," said Monseigneur, casting John a sly look from the corner of his eye.

John sighed. "Fine," he said, raising the cup to his lips and taking a mouthful of the bitter fluid before handing the cup over to him.

Monseigneur's face screwed into a look of disgust as he took his first sip. "You've been feeding me this last night?" he asked John.


"No. Two more swallows and that's it," said Monseigneur shortly.

John shook his head but said nothing.
Lestrade, taking advantage of the momentary lull in Monseigneur's speech as he drank his medicine, launched into reports of his own, only to pause a few minutes later as Monseigneur yawned.

Lestrade cleared his throat, and continued, "We will need my lord's signature on the papers by tomorrow, and..."

"Fine." Monseigneur yawned again.

He turned abruptly to John, pale eyes alight with sudden and complete comprehension. "That was rather clever, John," he said, voice already slurring. "I didn't know you have it in you. Just wait until tomorrow, as soon as I...I..."

John raised his brows at Monseigneur's heavy-lidded glare, not at all daunted by the man's words. He watched as Monseigneur finally closed his eyes and breathed out a deep sigh.

He was asleep within minutes.

"What did you put in his medicine?" Lestrade demanded, coming over to look closely at Monseigneur as he lay on his pillows, mouth slightly parted as he breathed quietly, rhythmically in deep sleep.

"A few mushrooms to take away melancholia and aggressive behavior in some people," said John, shrugging, already yawning himself. "He'll feel all better tomorrow, and I thought we can all use some rest ourselves for tonight."

Lestrade could not hide his grin.

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John wasn't sure if it was the effect of the mushrooms, but that night he dreamt of Mary. His Mary.

They were walking along the edge of the woods near home, hand in hand. A slow, leisurely stroll that John never wanted to end. They didn't say anything, but then they didn't need to. The light from the afternoon sun caught in Mary's golden hair, on her smiling face.

Gladness suffused John's heart-- that incredulous joy unique in dreams when we see a loved one long lost suddenly restored to us.

But John should have known it was all too good to be true. By the end of the trail, John could feel Mary's hand slipping away from his grip.

"No. Don't go," John gasped, realizing what was happening. What always happened in the end when he dreamt of her. Reflexively, he tightened his hold over her, but her hand was suddenly like air, passing through the solid flesh of his closed fist and fading into nothing.

Because that was what Mary was.

A ghost.

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John woke up gasping, felt the familiar pain lashing at his heart. Five years-- an eternity, and the pain was still fresh--a living wound-- deep inside him.
A moment of disorientation before John finally remembered where he was. He bolted upright to sit up from his sleeping mattress on the floor, the blankets strewn about him.

Monseigneur's bed was empty.

"He said he's feeling so much better so he's gone to tend to Azrail. He says to let you sleep on, but you may go to him when you're ready. He says he wants to show you something," said Billy, who was preparing John's breakfast on the table. To answer the look on John's face, he continued, "Last night has been the longest I've seen Monseigneur asleep."

Curbing his curiosity, John silently got dressed and ate his breakfast. Stepping out with Billy, he found the open air crisp and bright with early morning sunlight. A welcome respite from the stifling confines of the tent.

The garrison hummed with activity all around them. John turned his head to stare as a tent was being dismantled as they passed. He glanced at Billy, but Billy was keeping his eyes resolutely on the path before them.

They found Monseigneur standing at a small clearing almost outside the garrison, the same location Billy had picked yesterday as he let Azrail out for some air. Today he had on a dark, fur-lined cloak, gauntlet covering his right hand and forearm. Like Billy yesterday, his face was turned toward the heavens, scanning it for a sign of Azrail.

Lestrade stood a few feet away. "John," he said, nodding, as John and Billy joined them.

"Well, well. Up at last, I see," drawled Monseigneur without turning his head, though John thought he heard a smile tucked into his voice. "Feeling very satisfied with yourself over that stunt you pulled last night, I suppose, John. Very clever, I must admit. Is that your way of telling me to shut up?"

"You're welcome," said John briefly.

This time, Monseigneur did turn around, a smirk on his lips. "Saucy, aren't we," he said. "I'm not taking any of your medicine ever again."

John was unperturbed by Monseigneur's words. He crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Admit it, you had a restful night, and you feel restored enough this morning to come out for some air. I will only repeat what I said: you're welcome. So, can I go back to my life now, please?"

"So, you've noticed," said Monseigneur.

"Yes."

John was a soldier, after all. He had noticed the garrison in the initial process of dismantling, and Monseigneur's instructions to Lestrade last night were suddenly making sense.

A moment more and something seemed to click in John's brain. "You...this is what you wanted me to see, by making me come here," he said.

"Yes," replied Monseigneur. "I thought we'd better have this conversation now. What possible use would it do us by delaying it?"

"What conversation?"

"Your fate, of course, John."
"Lestrade and I had a deal," John said, glancing at Lestrade as he stood, tense, a few feet away. "He gave me his word--"

"Most unfortunate," cut in Monseigneur. "His word is his, and his alone. It's not mine."

"You're not letting me go, then."

"Of course not."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because you're my antidote, John," said Monseigneur impatiently. "I can't have you going away when I need you here with me to solve an important case. My case."

"I've done all I can to help you," said John. "Any more and I shall--"

"Yes? You shall what?" said Monseigneur. "You shall be committing treason by helping the enemy? Look around you John, and think! Why are we decamping? We're not going to war, John, we're getting married!"

At John's open-mouthed look of incomprehension, Monseigneur clarified, "Well. At least, your queen is getting married. To my brother."

"What?"

"She finally gave in, John," said Lestrade from behind. "To avoid any bloodshed. She finally decided enough was enough."

"We received the happy news yesterday," said Billy. "We're going home."

"Right," said John, looking at them dubiously. "Farewell, then."

"You're coming with us," said Monseigneur, his voice flat. "I'm taking you home, John."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," said John, turning around and moving past Lestrade.

"Seize him," said Monseigneur, his voice cold.

John drew his arm roughly away from Lestrade's restraining hand and turned back to Monseigneur. "Give me one good reason why I should stay," he ground out.

"All right then," said Monseigneur, obligingly. "You can't leave, John, because you've seen my face."

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More author's notes: As with every period in history, a person's clothes during medieval times marked his status in society. In addition, the Sumptuary Laws during those times were implemented to "ensure that a specific class structure was maintained." These laws served to regulate the dress code of various classes by imposing rules on expenditures incurred for making clothes, depending on one's position in the social strata. Monseigneur's choice of clothes is lifted from fourteenth century (A.D. 1300-1400) fashions for Englishmen. (Sources: Wikipedia-English medieval clothing; and Gothic Review).

The mushrooms used by John in this fic are based on Psilocybin mushrooms, commonly called shrooms and magic mushrooms. Several genera of mushrooms fit this category, all of them
containing psychoactive indole alkaloids which can induce psychedelic and antidepressant effects, as well as a sense of spiritual well-being (the strong narcoleptic effects of the mushrooms as I have depicted in this chapter are mainly my invention, although there are claims that yawning and sleepiness are indeed an after effect of taking shrooms). They have been used since pre-historic times, and many cultures used them in religious rites. Currently, they are used as a recreational drug, and there are reports claiming their efficacy in treating obsessive compulsive disorders (OCDs).


The phrase, "slightly filthy with erotic mystery" is lifted from the poem "Dreamers" by Ted Hughes (from his collection of poems, Birthday Letters). I found the following lines also (very aptly) reflect John and Monseigneur's relationship at this stage:

\[
\text{She sat there} \\
\text{Slightly filthy with erotic mystery.} \\
\text{I saw the dreamer in her} \\
\text{Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.} \\
\text{That moment the dreamer in me} \\
\text{Fell in love with her, and I soon knew it.}
\]
"You can't leave, John," said Monseigneur, "because you've seen my face."

Lestrade turned sharply to look at John, eyes wide, startled.

A white, surprised silence as John stared at Monseigneur, dumbfounded. Of all the things he was expecting from the man, he had not expected this.

*But of course, John,* Monseigneur's gaze said.

Of course, John should have known that the man would know. At the time, he had been delirious, but then, if he had remembered the feel of John's hands on him, how on earth would he have missed this?

Still—

*Lie, goddammit!* A part of his mind yelled at him, but too late. Everything that needed knowing was written in volumes in those few, stark seconds of nothing. And on John's face.

Too late, John opened his mouth to deny it all, but Lestrade was already saying in a horrified voice, "No, no, John, no…!"

Lestrade was upon him instantly, hands closing like a vice on his shoulders, shaking him hard. "John, you bloody idiot! Didn't I say you can't look at Monseigneur's face? Didn't I tell you it's for your own sake? Why? Why did you do it?!!"

For another moment, John could only stare at Lestrade, mouth open and no words coming out. *Fucking hell, John, why can't you just fucking lie?*

Finally: "I...I only meant to wipe his face." Even as he said it, John could feel himself doing a mental eye roll. *Is that really the best you can do?*

Monseigneur voiced his thoughts for him: "Pathetic. The next thing he'll be saying is he doesn't know what he's done, exactly."

"Idiot!" repeated Lestrade, thrusting John away savagely. He turned to Billy and roared, "How is this possible? I *told* you not to let him out of your sight for a single moment!"

Billy was white as a sheet, and like John, his voice was quite gone.

"Too late now," murmured Monseigneur.

John watched, fury gradually taking hold of him, as a corner of Monsiegneur's mouth tilted up in a triumphant smirk.

"So I've seen your face," John said defiantly, shrugging. "So what? It's not the end of the world."
"Oh, but it is, in a way, John," said Monseigneur conversationally. "Lestrade, tell him what the penalty is for a commoner to peer into the masked faces of royalty, uninvited."

"Death." Lestrade's voice was a low, hoarse rasp.

John gave a scoffing laugh. "You can't be serious," he said scathingly. "That's utter bullshit, is what it is!"

"It's a royal decree in Gaaldine," Monseigneur said.

"Oh, yeah? Well, in case you need reminding, I'm not from Gaaldine, and I'm not your subject," argued John hotly.

"And a cat may look upon the King, or the Prince, is that it?" Monseigneur replied. "It matters very little, John. You're the King's subject now. And you're mine the moment you lifted this mask to look at my face."

John shook his head vehemently. "No."

"Yes."

"No!" John did not know what he had in mind, exactly—a menacing step or two towards Monseigneur with the intention of putting his fist into his smug face, perhaps. He did not get far. Between one breath and the next, he was on the ground, his arms held in a painful grip behind him as Lestrade leaned his weight onto his back to press him down.

"John, what the hell do you think you're doing!" hissed Lestrade in warning as John shouted a garbled, Angrian curse. He felt Lestrade digging his weight in further on his back, crushing him to the ground, and through his gathering rage he recognized the futility, the indignity of engaging in a scuffle with Lestrade in front of this bastard, and willed himself to stop struggling after a minute or so.

"Let him up," said Monseigneur impatiently.

John was hauled unceremoniously to his knees. Lestrade's hands were like steel, biting into his flesh, pinioning his hands securely behind his back. John watched Monseigneur approach him leisurely, stopping just in front of him to gaze down at his glowering features with cold imperiousness.

"Is this how you treat someone who saved your life?" John bit out.

"John, John, John," chanted Monseigneur, his voice a soft lullaby as he reached out with one dark-gloved hand to cup John's chin almost tenderly, tilting his face up the better to look at him. "That's the only reason why you're still alive right now."

John felt Monseigneur's eyes take in every bit of his features, finally resting on his mouth, his thin lips curled back in a feral sneer. He would have spat at the man's masked face if he could, but his mouth was suddenly too dry.

"Why fight me so hard, John?" asked Monseigneur softly. "Am I really so repulsive that you'd rather choose to go back to your empty life in Angria, soldiering for some worthless lord who can't even feed you properly and regularly? You've no family to hold you back, you're currently without a master and you're not accountable to anyone back in the mountains that you call home. You'd like to think you're in command of your life but in truth, you're nothing but a bit of leaf fallen off a tree to be blown this way and that by the wind. Such a waste of ability and talent when you can make better use of your time by serving me. At the very least, you'll never be bored."
Nothing from John, except for his harsh breathing.

"In olden days I might have considered maiming you just to make sure you'll never be able to run away from me, but these are more enlightened times. Nevertheless, a royal decree is a royal decree, and everyone stepping foot on Gaaldinian soil is bound to it," said Monseigneur. "I'd rather not kill you, but I shall have no choice if you continue to refuse my overtures. You may be good at what you do, John, but you're not irreplaceable. There will be other healers who will leap at the opportunity that's already in the palm of your hand and that you're so intent on throwing away. Throw it away then. Throw your life away, as well. Consider this the last time I am making an offer. You can choose death, or you can choose to serve me, but if you choose me you must swear on your life that you will devote yourself utterly to me. No lies, or I will know. I'll give you an hour to consider. If you should persist in stubbornly refusing me, then this is the last time we'll be seeing each other. Goodbye then, John, in case we don't see each other again."

Monseigneur let go of John's chin and turned away towards the heavens once more, a strange, shrill whistle emitting from his lips. "I've yet to consider Billy's punishment," he said to Lestrade while waiting for Azrail to descend. "Should anything else happen within the hour that it will take John to make his decision... should I find that he's somehow escaped your clutches, Lestrade—"

The threat behind his words could not be misunderstood.

"It won't happen, my lord." Lestrade's voice was firm.

"See to it that it does not," said Monseigneur, his voice cold.

Azrail finally descended with a grand flapping of wings. "Ah, mon couer," said Monseigneur, voice changing effortlessly into a liquid purr as he held out his gauntleted hand towards the hawk. "How I've missed you."

Lestrade swore heavily, shoving John roughly away from him the moment Monseigneur had gone. He made his way to Billy, who was now openly weeping, and decked him so hard that the boy fell to his knees.

"Imbecile!" snarled Lestrade. "It's just as well you were able to hold off the tears in front of Monseigneur, because God help me, if you let fall a single drop in front of him, I will kill you myself!"

John got to his feet, shaking his head violently as though to clear it. 'Leave the boy alone!' he said. "It's not his fault."

"Damn right it isn't," said Lestrade, rounding back on John, hands clenched into fists. "If it were left to me, I'd gladly murder you both right now. You're in a fine mess, John. So what's it to be? Shall I call on the camp executioner now to sharpen his axe?"

It happened so fast. It barely registered to John that he had lunged at Lestrade until they were both rolling on the ground. Fury was making it difficult for John to reason things out logically. He just needed to do this—hurt someone, kill someone if he could. He would prefer that it was Monseigneur, but if he could not get to him then Lestrade would have to do.

John managed to get a savage punch across Lestrade's jaw before Lestrade sent a fist smashing against his kidney.

"You're a good fighter, John. I'm sure you'll be quite lethal if you have a knife right now, but I'm. Not. A general. For nothing!" Lestrade growled, never relenting as he punctuated his words with
punches strategically aimed at John's kidneys, his ribs. His blows were quick, brutal, methodical: bang, bang, bang! "And right now, I have had it with all of you! Monseigneur included!"

He hauled John away to gasp and cough, clutching at his side. Lestrade sat up, and when he spoke again, his voice was weary, "What is the fucking matter with you, disobeying my command like that?"

"You're not…my superior officer," wheezed John. "I don't have to take orders from you."

"And I have no wish to be your superior officer. I have no use for a soldier who cannot even obey the simplest command," snapped Lestrade. "There is no other way to see this, John. No matter how you're going to turn it around, the fact is you've brought this down on yourself. Pleading ignorance of our customs has never stopped us from executing outsiders who dared to look at the faces of Gaaldinian royalty, unsanctioned. Whether you like it or not, you've lost your freedom, you stupid fool. Now it's only a matter of deciding whether you get to lose your life as well. I don't think you're the type to have a death wish, so why this stubborn refusal to submit to Monseigneur?"

John lay on his side for a moment longer, panting heavily. Then, incredibly, he began to laugh—a soft, giggling sound with a hint of hysteria somewhere in it—as a thought occurred to him, his honest answer: Because I like it. I like defying him, provoking him at every possible turn. I get off on it.

It was so twisted, so unlike him that he had to wonder for a moment where it came from.

Through the painful throbbing about his bruised ribs and kidney, he saw Lestrade raise incredulous eyebrows. "Oh, you think this is funny, do you?"

John did not answer. He badly needed to ask Lestrade about Monseigneur's… tastes, so evident by his disturbing actions towards him that John had to wonder whether Lestrade and Billy were being deliberately oblivious, but he could not frame such an explosive idea into words. Instead, he asked, "What's with the fucking mask, anyway?"

"It's an ancient tradition, John," said Lestrade. "Only those closest to them know what they really look like."

"But you've seen his face, haven't you?"

"Yes. And now so have you. That knowledge ties us all to him. We're in the same boat now, John."

John shook his head. "It's a stupid tradition," was all he could think to say as he slowly, painfully sat up.

"It's a useful one," corrected Lestrade. "It's meant to protect their identities and to shield them from the scrutiny of the public and from enemies."

"Oh, that tactic is working well, is it?" asked John with biting sarcasm. "It didn't stop him from getting poisoned, did it?"

"You were there to stop it," Lestrade said. "But Monseigneur is right. There will be others who will be more than willing to take your place if you persist in your pigheaded ways."

"Oh, I can just imagine them queuing for the slot," said John. "Must be a short queue though, if you're all pouncing to take me in on such short notice. Very discriminating of you. You hardly know a thing about me—I'm nothing but an unpolished soldier with a little knowledge of herbal medicine, yet you would allow me this kind of access to His Royal Pain-in-the-Arse—"
"Well, now I'm not sure if you're being truly or falsely modest, or if you're just really clueless as to your own worth," remarked Lestrade dryly. "And by the way, it was Monseigneur himself who allowed you near him. I wouldn't have taken this kind of risk with a stranger. I'm not mad, after all. But Monseigneur has yet to read people wrong. I don't think he read you wrong, John. You ought to be flattered."

Beats of silence as the two regarded each other warily from across the stretch of dusty ground.

"I can't serve someone I have no proper regard for," said John finally.

Lestrade regarded him oddly for a moment or so. "You're pulling my leg, is what you're doing right now," he finally said.

John could feel the hot color creeping up his face. "No, I'm not!" he lied, glaring at Lestrade.

Lestrade shook his head, as if to say John was not fooling anyone other than himself. "You will need some time, then," he said. "We did not have the luxury of starting off on a better footing. You barely know us, and what you have seen so far may have fed your prejudice against us, but I am imploring you, John, to make use of your head and not die for some hazy, misguided principle. We're no longer enemies here."

"And you think that serving him is a better alternative to dying?"

"Yes, of course, it is!" Lestrade burst out, patience wearing dangerously thin. "Is it not quite obvious?"

"I can't imagine how you can endure him after the way he's treated you and Billy," said John. "How can you possibly bring yourself to serve somebody like him?"

"Because Monseigneur is a great man," declared Lestrade, finally getting to his feet. "And I would like to hope that someday, if we're very, very lucky, he might even be a good one."

Silence for a moment, then John asked softly, "Is it worth it, serving him?"

"If you're strong enough," said Lestrade grimly.

He turned wearily to a sniffling Billy. "Well, that was a fine way to go, nephew," he said. "You've worked your arse off for two years and you just kissed your precious position goodbye in a few minutes of thoughtlessness. I am sure your lady mother, my sister, will be pleased to have you back in total disgrace, if Monseigneur is generous enough to simply let you go. So how did it happen?"

Billy managed to pull enough words together to narrate the brief interview yesterday, when Monseigneur had summoned him and grilled him relentlessly over the tiniest details involving the moments of his delirium. In no time at all, he had fished out the lapse in Billy's judgment when he left John unattended for less than five minutes to fetch Monseigneur's nightshirt.

John closed his eyes as he listened to Billy's account, couched in quivering, frightened tones. So Monseigneur had not really known of his transgression until he had deduced its possibility from Billy's account. He had thought that perhaps Monseigneur had been aware of his lifting that bloody mask off his face, when in fact, to Monseigneur it had all been speculation with hardly any concrete proof...until he had unwittingly provided it. Christ, he should have just stuck to lying his head off.

Well, too late now.

This isn't real, a part of his mind whispered. None of this can possibly be real...
John opened his eyes and stared off into the distance, at the green hills beyond the garrison, gently rolling away as far as the eye could see. They looked real enough. The throbbing pain in his side where Lestrade had punched him felt very real right now. He was going to die unless he agreed to Monseigneur's proposal. That must be real, too.

John continued to sit there on the ground, feeling the day getting warmer as the sun climbed higher in the heavens. Barely mid-morning on a fine spring day. Hardly an appropriate day to die when everything around him was fresh and green, new and alive…

Lestrade gave John a few more minutes to collect himself, then walked over to him and extended his hand. "I know that Monseigneur has made a liar out of me, but I swear to you, John, that you shall have my full support if you should choose to stay with us," he said. "You may count on me to do everything that I can for you. Just say that you will stay and look at things differently from another angle. You will be surprised to realize that it's really not the end of the world. Perhaps it might even be accurate to say that it's the beginning of a new one."

John looked at Lestrade's outstretched hand vaguely, as though everything were a dream. "I think it's safe to say your word accounts for very little when it comes to anything concerning your master," he said softly, without heat.

Lestrade flushed a dull, angry red. "You will find that it has its uses elsewhere," he said, his voice clipped.

John finally shook himself out of his reverie. He took Lestrade's hand, let the man haul him to his feet.

"So, what's it to be, then?" Lestrade asked.

John gave a heavy, extinguished sigh. He nodded as he made up his mind at last. "Take me to him," he said.

They found Monseigneur in his quarters, sitting by the table cluttered with glass instruments, a book held up before him with the fingers of one hand.

He looked up just as the trio entered, his gaze instantly fixing on John, who seemed to be looking everywhere except at him.

"So it's not goodbye then," he drawled, lowering his book.

Lestrade cleared his throat and whispered, "Kneel, John."

"That won't be necessary," cut in Monseigneur, shutting the book in his hands with a snap. "Not when he's obviously reluctant. There will be enough time to arrange a formal ceremony where John can take the Oath when we get back to the Lair. By then perhaps he will be willing enough to go down on his knees in front of me without coercion."

He stood up in one fluid motion and approached John with the slow, leisurely prowl of a panther. "I'm rather curious as to how Lestrade finally managed to convince you, John," Monsiegnieur said, glancing at the dirt on John's clothes. "The usual way, Lestrade?"

"Quite, sir," said Lestrade laconically.

"Hmm," murmured Monseigneur, gaze fixed on his general's bruised jaw for a second, "and I'm sure
those bruises were meant for me. Extraordinary that he managed to get a punch in."

"And he packs a powerful punch, my lord," added Lestrade with rueful amusement.

A twitch of Monseigneur's lips before he brought his full attention back on John.

"Well, now, John," said Monseigneur, his voice soft. "How shall we go about this?"

John finally brought his eyes to meet Monseigneur's. "Before anything else, I've got two conditions," he said, his voice surprisingly steady.

Monseigneur's eyes widened fractionally as he exhaled a soft, disbelieving laugh. Even with the mask on, John could almost see his raised eyebrows. "Cheeky as ever, aren't you? You think you're in a position to negotiate for conditions?"

"First, let my companion go," said John, speaking as though he had not heard Monseigneur. "I don't think there is any need for you to detain him any longer."

Monseigneur stared at him for a few seconds before he said, "And the second condition?"

"There's no need to punish Billy for my actions," said John. "I take full responsibility for all of this."

A soft gasp behind him. Billy.

John watched as Monseigneur flicked a look at the two men behind John. Nobody seemed to be breathing.

"I shall...consider it," said Monseigneur at last.

John could almost hear a collective breath being let out.

"Now then, John," said Monseigneur, hands linked behind him as he made a slow circuit around John, taking him in from every angle. John could feel the hairs on his nape stand on end as he endured Monseigneur's scrutiny. "Your pledge. It may not be anything formal but it is no less binding. Lie about your intentions and I shall know. There will be no false promises, no instant 'yesses' with your fingers crossed behind your back. Once you pledge yourself to me there is no going back, do you understand?"

Silence from John, the conflict inside him still raging in the shadows that chased each other in his eyes. But he lowered his gaze and finally said, "All right."

Monseigneur stopped in front of him again. "Look me in the eye when you say it, John," he said, his voice a command.

John pinned him with a look so intense it was almost a glare. "Yes," he said, his voice firm.

"Swear on your life and to God that you shall serve me and be faithful to me. Only me. For as long as I deem it necessary."

"I swear."

"Your loyalty is mine," declared Monseigneur. "You will never find it in your means to harm me. You shall serve my interests to the best of your abilities, always. You will never betray me."

"Yes. I swear it."
"Very well then, John."

John watched, throat suddenly constricting, making swallowing difficult, as Monseigneur slowly lifted his hands towards his masked face.

*Oh, hell. He's taking off his mask…*

John felt his gaze slide away at the last minute, his heart in his throat, suddenly not sure that he was ready for this, ready to look at Monseigneur's unmasked face. He was right in thinking that this was the one act that would ultimately seal his fate and link it forever with this man's.

"Look at me, John."

He would really prefer not to look right now, but there was nothing to be done. He had already gone this far, had sworn an oath of allegiance to this man. He had given himself over to him. No turning back now.

After a moment, John lifted his head, peering from under his brows almost shyly at Monseigneur's unshielded face.

He looked just as John remembered him from the other night: the thick dark brows, the slanting, pale eyes that were a darker shade of blue right now, dancing with cool amusement and satisfaction as Monseigneur returned his gaze. Those high, chiseled cheekbones, the straight nose, that unique mouth, stretched ever so slightly in a smile. A face not easily accessible to others and to whose owner he was now bound.

Silently, John looked back and took his fill of those extraordinary features, and found, to his amazement, that he had not turned to stone. He was still the same John, not struck dead, or blinded by Monseigneur's visage as he had half-expected. The same John, yet forever changed.

Monseigneur tossed the velvet mask carelessly on the table and said quite casually, "I thought I was never going to be rid of that blasted thing."

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**Author's Notes:** The informal oath that Monseigneur made John take is based on a Medieval Knight's Oath of Fealty to his lord and master. Normally, a vassal will swear allegiance and pay homage to his lord in a commendation ceremony, which was designed to create a lasting bond between a vassal and his lord. To take an oath was a very solemn proceeding; it was an appeal to God, by which a man called down on himself divine punishment if he swore falsely. More on the ceremony in future chapters. (Source: Medieval Life and Times)

Hepzibah asked about the tradition of wearing masks by royalty as depicted in this fic and whether it has any historical basis. There is none, as far as I am aware. It's actually based on a scene in a favorite film of mine whose title I cannot reveal at present because I will be lifting some more details from it. It will be revealed in the end, though. Thanks for your patience! ^_^
Chapter 12

Author's notes: Happy New Year! Thank you so much for all your fantastic feedback and for making 2012 such a great year for me in terms of writing Sherlock fanfics. Wishing everyone a wonderful 2013!

Link, you've read my mind regarding Alec's possible reaction to John's new situation! Many thanks, dear!

Please see more author's notes at the end.

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La volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal.

(The unique and supreme pleasure of love is the certainty that one is doing evil.)

-- Charles Baudelaire

~~~~~@~~~~~

Monseigneur tossed the velvet mask carelessly on the table and said quite casually, "I thought I was never going to be rid of that blasted thing. Billy, some water to wash my face, please."

John tore his gaze briefly away from the man's face to look at Lestrade standing behind him. Lestrade stared back at him grimly, lips compressed in a thin line.

No going back now, John.

Monseigneur was already moving away. "Lestrade will be responsible for you, John," he said, leafing through a book on the table. "He and Billy will see to your every need. You will try not to make their task of looking after you more difficult than it already is, won't you?"

John frowned at Monseigneur's implications, but before he could reply, Billy came in with a bowl of rosewater.

He watched as Monseigneur washed his face, his movements precise, fastidious. He dried his face with a clean towel slung over Billy's arm. All the while, he gave instructions: "Lestrade, arrange to have John introduced to the knights and your corps of special soldiers. Let them know John is directly under my command. Observe closely how they will react to him. They will accord him the same regard as they would one of their own and they will answer to me personally should word ever reach me that John has been ill-treated in any way."

"Yes, of course, my lord," Lestrade said. "In this case, may I suggest that John have dinner with us in the mess hall later?"

Monseigneur sighed in resignation. "I shall have to preside over dinner then," he said, "to make the necessary introductions."

"Just this first dinner, sir."

"Fine. John will need a change of clothes," said Monseigneur. "Dismissed."
"Not you," he told John as he made to follow Lestrade and Billy out of the tent. Monseigneur swept an elegant hand over the direction of a chair that stood close to the table. "Sit."

John hesitated briefly, then approached the indicated chair and sat down gingerly, his heart thumping away in his chest. It occurred to him that their dynamics were constantly changing whenever they found themselves to be alone with each other—first as battling opponents, then doctor and patient, and now...now what? Master and servant? John felt something twist sharply, unhappily, inside him at the thought. Yet what choice did he have in the matter?

John eyed Monseigneur warily, almost resentfully, his gaze never leaving his face, as the man bent down to inspect various glass slides filled with fluid, transparent and colored, on the table.

"How is it, then, John?" asked Monseigneur quite gently after a moment.

Startled, John said, "How is what?"

"My face," said Monseigneur, his attention not deviating from the slides laid out before him. He took out a small bottle of fluid from a tray and proceeded to add a few drops onto the slides. "I can practically feel your gaze boring a hole into its side. Everything in place, I trust? No extra eyes or ears, or misplaced features, I hope, to elicit such an intensity of regard that you're according it right now?"

John tore his gaze away, embarrassed and feeling an ungainly urge to laugh before he remembered that everything about this man was to be resisted. He had pledged his allegiance to Monseigneur, but there was no reason to make it easy for the man to take anything from him, beginning with laughter.

"What are you doing?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Analyzing water samples from two villages," Monseigneur said, putting his hands together under his chin as though in prayer.

"Two villages...you mean, those plague villages," said John.

Monseigneur finally lifted his gaze to look at John, his expression veiled. "Somebody has been talking," he said.

John shrugged. "Sally Donovan and I got to talking, when she accompanied me to the forest to gather more medicine," he said.

"I see," said Monseigneur. "And what other tales has the loquacious Sally been regaling you with?"

"Oh, nothing much," thought John. "Unless we're to believe her accounts of your many perversities practiced with your male lovers in the privacy of your dungeons."

He briefly wondered whether he could get Lestrade or Billy to confirm or deny Sally's wild tale. "She thought you caught the plague from one of the villages," he answered Monseigneur.

"But you know otherwise. Those villages did not suffer a visitation of the plague," said Monseigneur, pushing a glass slide towards John. "It's something much more sinister."

John stared at the slide, then back at Monseigneur. "What am I looking at?" he said.

"This is a detection kit of my own making," said Monseigneur, motioning to a set of chemicals standing ready in a small tray beside him. "Uncontaminated water will remain colorless when I add a few drops of my special solution into it. Indeed, all the water samples I've collected from the various..."
water sources surrounding these villages all turned out to be all right—all except the samples from the wells."

"What are you looking for, exactly?" asked John, picking up a slide and squinting at it, as though by doing so it would divulge its secrets.

"People were fine one day and started vomiting the next. There was bleeding through the mouth and nose, a violent ache in the bones. People started dying before the sun went down," said Monseigneur, arching his brows meaningfully at John.

"Poison," said John softly as his meaning hit home. "You think it's poison."

"I don't just think it," said Monseigneur. "I know it. Two remote villages struck within a span of four months. Very similar symptoms, except it took a much shorter time for the villagers in the second hamlet to die."

"You think some sort of poisoner was behind it—"

"—And honing his or her craft with tremendous skill," finished Monseigneur. "Between one village and the next, the poisoner got better, the execution of his or her plans became more efficient, systematic. These villages were a part of an experiment, John."

"You think this is related to your own poisoning?" John said.

"Don't you think it unusual that I myself should be poisoned when I came here to investigate two cases of mass poisoning?"

"But how can you be sure?" argued John. "I mean, it's possible that you could have come down with it by visiting those villages and accidentally coming into contact with the well water when you were collecting your samples."

"Except I didn't come into contact with the water. I made sure I didn't," said Monseigneur. "Whoever planned my poisoning managed to get to me days ago. Everything had been done with deliberate care."

"Why do you think this is connected with your case?"

"I did mention the subject before I left court days ago," said Monseigneur. "Somebody who had a special interest in these events may have thought it imperative to remove me from my investigation."

John's eyes were suddenly keen. "Has anyone died suspiciously at court lately?" he asked.

Monseigneur smiled. "No," he said, "Not yet anyway."

"You'll have to tell your brother, then," John said. "Alert him that there's a would-be murderer moving around at his court."

"No."

John was surprised. "Why not? Supposing the murderer targets him?"

"That would be one less nuisance off my list, I can assure you," said Monseigneur dryly. Seeing John's incredulity, he added: "But as I have no wish to succeed him as ruler of this side of the world, my brother will have to stay put. On the other hand, I do not wish to alarm the poisoner prematurely, and informing the King will definitely raise alarm bells all throughout Gaaldine. The King shall be
informed, in due time, but not yet when a great deal of data is still lacking and we haven't consolidated a plan."

John stared at him, then said carefully, "You don't like him very much, do you? Your brother?"

Monseigneur affected surprise. "That obvious, is it?" he asked.

A thought formed in John's mind. "Do you think, perhaps your brother might be the one who...I mean, considering the state of your relations."

"The thought has occurred, but no," said Monseigneur. He looked at John, his gaze sharp. "A word to the wise, John. Always curb your tongue before it unthinkingly commits treason."

"Why?" John asked. "I mean, you've thought of it, too."

"We can't both think of it, much less say it out loud," said Monseigneur. "Although it is an intriguing possibility, is it not? He is one of the people I came in contact with regularly during the past week. And you are right. Our brotherly relations are not at fever pitch. However, knowing my brother, he wouldn't have resorted to this kind of meretricious tactic, no matter his fondness for drama. Besides, I rather think he wouldn't quite dare or else he would have done it years ago. Still, one of his subordinates might have decided to take matters into his hands and believe he's doing it for King and country."

"Why wouldn't he dare?" John asked curiously.

Monseigneur said, straight-faced, "Because of Mummy."

John blinked. "Mummy?" he repeated uncertainly.

"Our mother," clarified Monseigneur. "My brother would rather die than break her heart."

"Oh." John found that he could not say anything to that.

"It's not my brother, but it can be somebody close to him. I already have five possible suspects, all of whom I've had contact with in one form or the other days ago. I won't be back at court to see these people until just before the wedding between your queen and my brother, which shall take place in three months' time. It's not much, but I am hoping it will be enough time for us to get ready."

John straightened slightly in his seat. "You want me to prepare an antidote in case the poisoner strikes again," he said.

"No, I want to bring you to the Gaaldinian royal court and show you off as my latest conquest," said Monseigneur, his voice sharpening ever so slightly with a flash of impatience. At John's wide-eyed countenance, he sighed and said, "Of course I want you to prepare an antidote, John. That's what you're here for, after all."

John said nothing, merely returned Monseigneur's gaze as he continued to feel the shock reverberating throughout his entire person at the man's abrupt words. Whether he would admit it or not, the idea that he would be exhibited as Monseigneur's trophy had been part of his fears and suspicions that for a moment, it had seemed as though Monseigneur had managed to read his mind and seen his thoughts for what they were.

The man was clearly dangerous—something that made John even more uneasy, considering how he responded to danger.
Billy's timely arrival saved him from having to form a reply to Monseigneur's unexpected outburst.

"A change of clothes for Sir John, my lord," the boy said, a new outfit hanging at the crook of his arm.

John began to protest: "I'm sure there's no need for that. I mean, I can just brush the dust off this shirt —"

"Change." Monseigneur's tone did not invite opposition.

John gaped at him, then stood up diffidently after a longish pause. "Well, then, I'll just—"

"No. Here. You can change here," said Monseigneur. "There's hardly any reason for modesty, John. We're all men, after all. You've seen me bathe."

John could feel his cheeks burning. You'd like that, wouldn't you? he thought.

"I'd much rather change in private," he ground out.

"And I'd much rather you do so in front of me," said Monseigneur in a reasonable tone, "so that settles the matter, doesn't it?"

With great effort, John bit back the violent oath that threatened to leave his lips and turned away brusquely from Monseigneur. "Make this quick," he muttered to Billy.

It was all done within seconds. He quickly stripped off his outer coat and shirt, soiled and stained with grass from his earlier encounter with Lestrade, and pulled the new outfit that Billy handed him over his head. All the while, he could feel the hairs on his arms standing on end with the acute awareness that Monseigneur was paying close attention to his every move. He kept his back to him as much as possible. He refused point-blank to change his trousers.

"I want to see my companion," John announced shortly, not turning around to look at Monseigneur and thinking that a fight would very likely erupt if the bastard insisted he changed his trousers in front of him. "I'll need to change his wound dressing."

Luckily, Monseigneur did not press it. "You may say your farewells to him when you're done with his bandages," John heard him say from behind.

Immediately outside the tent and away from Monseigneur's gaze, Billy seemed to melt into a puddle at John's feet.

"What is this?" John asked as Billy took his hand and kissed it. For a moment, it seemed as though the boy was going to dissolve in a wave of fresh tears.

"Sir, I do not know how to begin to express how grateful I…I—" Billy said in a trembling voice.

"Enough of that," interrupted John kindly. "Up you get. Don't speak of it to anyone, lest word reaches your master that you've been talking about things that concern him. I do believe he's got an extra set of eyes and ears somewhere about his person. At the back of his head, perhaps."

Billy gave a watery laugh as he rose to his feet. "I just want you to know, sir, that I shall not forget your kindness," he said with a curiously touching, earnest self-confidence seen only in the very
young. "Nor will my uncle."

John cleared his throat in discomfort. "Yes, well," he said. "I just wish my companion will feel the same way over all this."

True to John's expectations, Alec burst into tears when he heard of the queen's decision to marry the Gaaldinian king.

"Why?" Alec asked John in their native Angrian. "Why would she give in so easily just because he gave a little nudge?"

John shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't just a little nudge," he said.

He glanced at Billy, who only nodded, as if he understood the need of the two men to converse in their own tongue as they made to part ways.

"She should have just given the orders for us to start marching," continued Alec fiercely. "We'd give these Gaaldinians a sight they won't be forgetting for quite some time."

"I'd hate to point this out, Alec," said John equably. "But if war were to start while we're held captive by a group of Gaaldinians, I doubt if we'd see the kind of action we're hoping for."

Alec shook his head as he continued to weep. "The queen has betrayed us all. She is nothing but a puppet," he said. "Worse: a whore."

"No, she's not," John said, his tone hardening more than he intended. He knew this was how Alec would see things. Wait until he heard of John's deal with Monseigneur. What would he be called then? "She managed to prevent blood from being spilled on both sides. Can't you see that, Alec?"

"We're soldiers, John Watson," said Alec vehemently. "Spilling the enemy's blood is what we do."

John stared at Billy for a moment and said slowly, deliberately, "That's not all we do."

Alec shook his head defiantly. "What are they going to do to us now?" he asked.

"We're not enemies now, so you're free to go back to Angria," said John keeping his eyes on the task at hand as he finished tending to Alec's wound.

The meaning of his words was not lost on Alec. He stared at John, stricken. "And you?" he whispered.

"You will just have to regard me as dead, Alec," John said, and he was proud that his voice remained steady as he said it.

"No!"

"The man you've known as John Watson no longer exists," said John. This time he could not help the slight trembling of his fingers as he started to pack his medicine bag. "Your wound is healing well. I shall leave you a pack of medicine so that your wound will continue to mend. You will need a horse, some money. I am sure they will provide all of that and an escort to see that you get safely back to the border—"
Alec roughly fisted his hands on John's shirt, entreating, "Listen to me, John! If you've made a deal with them just so I can go free, you don't have to go through with it!"

John shook off his hands. "Of course I have to go through with it," he snapped. "And this isn't just about you."

"Then what is this about? Who is this about?" Alec wanted to know.

John shook his head. You wouldn't understand, he thought. I don't understand it in its entirety, either.

"It's your responsibility to find a way to escape, John," said Alec urgently. "It's your duty. You don't owe these people anything, least of all your loyalty. Unless…"

Alec's meaning was clear as he stared at John's clothes with disgust.

John looked away, refusing to be drawn into an argument that could turn violent in seconds. And to Billy, John's next words, accented in a heavy, Angrian brogue, sounded like this: "Fare thee weel, Alec. Na h-uile la gu math duit."

So now he had cut his links with Angria. He was dead to his people. As far as they would see it, he was a traitor for giving in.

John accompanied Billy back to Monseigneur's tent, his heart as heavy as lead. His conversation with Alec had shaken him more than he cared to admit. More than anything else, Alec had thrown light into his situation and the motivations underpinning his actions.

What is this about? Who is this about?

John's reply had been weak, his reasons hollow even to his own ears. He had been deliberately vague when he said his reasons for staying were not all about Alec. Obviously, he would have meant it had something to do with rescuing Billy, which was true anyway. But then again, if he were to be really honest with himself, it was not just about Billy either.

It was about him.

If John were to be completely honest, it was all about him. Always. Right from the very start.

That was the very moment when John realized that he was quite damned.

Monseigneur, upon hearing him enter the tent with Billy, turned immediately from Lestrade to say lightly, "Ah, there's John. What say you, John? Are you ready for dinner with the soldiers?"

The slightest pause as John stared at him, that diabolical mask back on his face. "I'm as ready as I ever will be," he finally said.

"No, you're not," said Monseigneur as he approached John.

Before John could think to move, Monseigneur had lifted his hands to adjust his rumpled clothing. "Your companion did not take kindly to the idea of a royal wedding, then," he said, his gaze amused.

John swallowed and did not say anything, feeling Monseigneur's fingers tug his collar into place and smooth the creases of his shirt from his shoulders.
The man was seductive wickedness personified, but John had the unpleasant, sneaking suspicion that a part of him was willing to be in full collusion with Monsiegneur. In that sense, he was actively conniving with him. He was participating in a sin, doing evil. And through it all, he had never felt more alive than when he was in the presence of this demonic man.

He was damned, damned, damned.

"Billy, see to it that you teach John how to take care of his appearance," said Monseigneur even as he continued to look at John. And to John himself: "You're my man now, John. See to it that you learn to act like one."

More author's notes: "Fare thee weel. Na h-uile la gu math duit" is a Gaelic farewell blessing which means "Fare thee well. May all your days be good." (Source: eHow.com)
Chapter 13

Author's Notes: Happy New Year! Thank you so much for your lovely reviews! Please do keep them coming!

Please note that "dinner" during medieval times was equivalent to our lunch, served usually around 12 noon to 2 pm. Please see more author's notes at the end.

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John stood at the center of the expanding crowd, the spectators gathered in a rough circle around him and his opponent, thinking how on earth had a simple dinner brought on a confrontation such as this. But then again, given the level of curiosity and interest (not necessarily friendly) in his person, how could it not?

He was dressed in a chainmail shirt and a borrowed black and silver surcoat— Monseigneur's colors. It was Billy's, who was almost Monseigneur's height. John could feel the fabric trailing down to his shins and fervently hoped that he wouldn't trip on it. Vambraces covered his arms and greaves were on his legs, even though it was the agreement that there would be no striking below the waist.

In his gauntleted hands was a waster— a wooden training sword, two and a half feet long. Monseigneur and Lestrade had refused to let them use real swords. This was, after all, only a demonstration. A mini-behourd.

John regarded his opponent before him, a Sir Athelney Jones, who had a politely doubtful smile on his face, and for a moment, his mind raced back to the events at dinner that had brought this joust on.

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John could remember the sudden hush in the tent that served as the mess hall as Monseigneur entered, followed by Lestrade. He trailed just behind Lestrade, with Billy bringing up the rear.

John kept his gaze fixed on Monseigneur's back and refused to let it stray as he marched into the tent. Even so, he could feel the weight of everyone's eyes on him. He had been given the seat to Monseigneur's left. Lestrade sat on Monseigneur's right. Behind Monseigneur stood Billy who, at the same time as attending to his master, was attempting very kindly and ineffectually to lend some support to John as well.

A low murmuring broke out immediately among the ranks, pausing briefly only for the short prayer that marked the start of the meal. John stared at the trencher laid out before him— a large, round piece of dry bread that would serve as his plate— as Monseigneur began his introductions in Gondalian.

It was the first time John had ever heard him speak at length in the language and as always, one could not hear the liquid purr of his voice without feeling a little bit ravished.

John resolutely bore the collective stare screwing into his entire being as Monseigneur described very briefly how John had come into his service by getting rid of his fever. He very conveniently left off his methods in securing John's allegiance. A few minutes later, Monseigneur words were suddenly
comprehensible to John as he fluidly switched languages.

"I trust that you will all accord John Watson every courtesy as if he were one of our own," said Monseigneur, "as he is, indeed, from here on."

Bows of water for hand washing were presented to them as the murmurs got louder. Dinner was served: roasted beef and salted venison served in a rich, spicy sauce. Dishes of chicken and pigeon. A variety of breads. Cheeses. Fruit stewed in milk and honey. They ate heartily and with their hands.

There was a lot of talk, partially in Gondalian which John could not understand at all. But from their facial expressions, ranging from mild interest to outright incredulity, he could imagine what was being communicated between the carefully polite lines of inquiry: *What? This person— this foreigner — of low and uncertain birth, taken in by the Prince just because he showed some aptitude in healing a little fever? Is that really all there is to it?*

At that very moment, John could perfectly understand what a pig must feel like, skewered and gradually roasted over an open fire. And although he was sitting with Monseigneur and Lestrade at the front table, it was impossible not to have a neighbor to his left. In this case, Sally Donovan.

"Well, well. So you're still here, John Watson," she said in a low voice, her gaze coolly appraising as she eyed him from head to foot. "And to be accorded every courtesy! What a difference a few days make in Monseigneur's company."

John turned to her. "Hello again," he said briefly.

An upward twitch of Sally's lips. "I told you that you won't have any choice in serving him," she said, her voice smug. "You won't be able to leave. Not when he doesn't want you to."

John looked at her, his blue eyes guileless. He surprised himself with his next words: "Why do you suppose I'd want to leave?"

He savored the flare of surprise in Sally's dark eyes. Recklessly, he added, "You've got any more stories about him to tell me? Because, you know, we may be able to put your theory about the contents of his dungeons to the test very soon."

Sally gave him a cold look, aware that he was making fun of her, quite possibly even threatening her a little with his knowledge of her careless words, then turned away to talk to Anderson beside her.

John gave himself a mental shake as he realized the outrageous implications of his own words. *What the hell did you mean by all that?* He asked himself, stunned.

John watched as Anderson looked past Sally to give him a lizard glare. Anderson brought a consoling hand up to Donovan's shoulder, but its mission was abruptly aborted midway. John frowned, watching Anderson's gaze dropping and his hand falling suddenly away from Sally.

"Of course, they're sleeping together," remarked Monseigneur, not bothering to lower his voice as he leaned over towards John. John forced himself not to jump at his sudden proximity.

"Probably for three months now. Anderson's wife has removed herself to the country," Monseigneur continued, a cool smile playing at his lips as he watched Donovan and Anderson looking pointedly away. "It's stirred up quite a bit of talk at court lately."

John stared at Monseigneur for a moment and did not quite know what to say.

"Your Highness, we have heard many stories about the fighting prowess of Highlanders," said one
of the knights, drawing Monseigneur's attention from the hapless couple. "May we venture to inquire as to whether John Watson is capable of combat?"

"Why? Do you wish to try him out?" Monseigneur drawled.

"We'd be delighted, Your Highness," replied Sir Athelney Jones from a few seats down. "This will be an excellent opportunity to know our would-be opponents, now that war has been averted by His Majesty."

The knight ran an assessing eye over John as he continued, "Though he's not very tall, is he?"

A sudden silence. John could feel the temperature drop by several degrees in Monseigneur's voice when he finally asked, "Do you think you can judge his fighting prowess by his height?"

Sir Athelney drew back a little at Monseigneur's tone but he stubbornly held his ground. "That…is one of the usual ways of assessing an opponent, after all, Your Highness," he murmured. "Height does contribute to one's strength when swinging a sword."

Monseigneur smiled unpleasantly. "Are you issuing a challenge then, Sir Athelney?" he asked.

Sir Athelney suddenly began fidgeting. "Of course I wouldn't presume to do so, unless Your Highness—"

But Monseigneur was already turning to John. "What say you, John? You've just been challenged," he said. "Would you care to accept?"

John stared, then opened his mouth to say, "I…"

But Monseigneur was already laying down the terms: "Let's arrange for a small behourd at 3 o'clock, then. Chain mail and partial armor will do, and wooden wasters, as we have no wish to see you lose an arm or a leg, Sir Athelney. Twelve points accumulated first should see the winner."

Sir Athelney stared at Monseigneur as he dictated his conditions, fired so rapidly from his mouth as to render any form of dissent impossible. Then he smiled and said, "As you wish, Your Highness. But wooden wasters…?"

"No real swords," said Lestrade flatly. "There's no need to court any injuries heavier than what a wooden sword is capable of delivering."

Sir Athelney turned to Lestrade in surprise. "And such is your faith in the fighting abilities of this man, my lord?"

"See for yourself, sir," said Lestrade, smiling.

John watched as Sir Athelney opened his mouth as if to make a retort, then stopped as his eyes alighted on the bruises along Lestrade's jaw.

"Well, that settles it, then." Monseigneur turned to John. "Do you agree to the conditions, John?"

Monseigneur sounded serious, as though John had any real say in the matter.

"All right," John said simply.
Billy was fitting John with a gambeson and a chain mail shirt when Monseigneur stormed into his quarters.

"Do not tarry, John," he said abruptly. "I want you to take him down as soon as possible. Disarming or immobilizing him will earn you three points. Likewise any effective thrust to the head, shoulder or face. Four successful blows in the right places are all you will need to end it."

"Sir Athelney is little more than a posturing fool, my lord," said Lestrade easily. "He's young and inexperienced enough to say the first thing that enters his mind. There is no need to be so affected by his words."

"I don't care," snapped Monseigneur. "He needs to be put in his place."

John was staring at Monseigneur, wondering at his black rage. "He's your knight," he said.

Monseigneur stopped in front of him. "He doesn't have the nerve to say it more explicitly, but this is his way of voicing his doubts, not just about my choices, but about the King's pact with your queen. Evidently they're as unhappy with it as your companion was," he said. "They all want war, the idiots!"

John opened his mouth, then shut it again. *He's angry. He's upset that people— his own people— would question him for taking me in,* he thought.

He was not sure how he should feel about that.

Monseigneur ran an eye over his outfit, then said to Billy, "Have him fitted with a surcoat of my colors. He's fighting this bout on my behalf."

"I'm afraid we don't have any his size, my lord," said Billy.

"You'll have to lend him one of yours then."

Monseigneur's attention was back on John. "Listen to me, John," he said. "Athelney Jones may be an imbecile, but he is tenacious as a lobster. Spare him no room to cling to any hope of winning. Take him down as soon as you can."

This time, John's smile held no ambivalence. "If you say so," he said.

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So now here he was.

Billy approached to give him his helmet just as Lestrade laid down the rules for the benefit of the assembled crowd. The excited din of the crowd was getting louder, stronger, as was the surge of John's blood deep within him.

Certainly, nothing felt sweeter to John than the certainty that he was in his element here. This was what he was good at. This was what he lived for after everything else had been taken from him.

Nobody could take this from him.

Slowly, he fitted the helmet over his head. It was light and comfortable, covering his features and leaving a narrow, T-shaped opening for his eyes, nose and mouth. He watched as his opponent also put on his helmet, his armor gleaming in the afternoon sun.

"Places, gentlemen!" Lestrade called.

The two combatants got into position. John shifted the wooden sword in his hands and held it at the ready just as Lestrade yelled, "Start!"

As with his fight with Monseigneur, the first, savage meeting of their swords was all it took for John to know everything he needed to know about his opponent. There was no doubt that the knight was strong, and there was considerable skill behind his movements, but the height which he claimed to be all-important was making him slower as well.
Thrust and parry and swerve. It took John less than fifteen seconds to knock Sir Altheney's sword from his hands.

The gasp and roar of the crowd, Lestrade shouting off his points—all sounds faded to nothing against the blood singing in John's ears.

Amid the noise, Sir Athelney's voice rose in protest, "But he's left-handed!"

Lestrade's abrasive laughter rang loudly from the edge of the crowd. "What of it, sir?" he asked rudely. "Do you have the luxury to say that to your opponent moments before he cuts off your head?"

John felt his lips stretch into a grin as he heard Lestrade's muffled words through his helmet. Without another word, the opponents got into position again. John's grip on his sword was tight as he tilted it in place. Then he let go of all the tightness as he swung the sword toward Sir Athelney. He let it all go—his anger, his many frustrations with Monseigneur. The muscles of his hands and arms were completely relaxed as his sword made a short, perfect arc through the air. Then the tight grip, with all his fury condensed into it, returned again just before the moment of impact.

Sir Athelney met his blow with his sword but the force behind John's savage swing made sure the knight would not be able to withstand a second hammering. And a third. All delivered with lightning speed. A sharp crack at the man's gauntleted hands finally sent his sword flying yet again.

Incredibly enough, there was applause in the crowd. Sir Athelney shook his head as he got up from the ground to retrieve his sword.

A brief moment for John to catch his breath and wait for his opponent to recover. His gaze scanned the crowd and rested for a brief second on the tall, still figure in black standing beside Lestrade. Monseigneur was watching silently, his thoughts and the expression on his face carefully locked away behind his mask. His arms were crossed over his chest, his gaze burning on John.

Something dark and treacherous stirred inside John upon meeting that gaze. Yes, that thing newly awakened inside him whispered. *Look at me, just like that. Look at me, just as I am now.*

John tore his gaze away as Lestrade yelled for them to get into position again. *Dammit, John, focus!*

Sir Athelney managed a small rally this time around, managing a hit on John's shoulder, another just below his waist.

John exhaled a slow breath, allowed the tingling sensation of pain to register briefly before he turned away from it.

*Focus.*

Sir Athelney lunged at him, attempting to throw his weight onto his sword. John swerved away at the last minute and saw an opportunity to bring his sword crashing onto the knight's side.

Nine points.

John looked up just in time to see Monseigneur give him an almost imperceptible nod.

*Finish it now.*

John made the last blow as a strike through the shoulder as Sir Athelney charged at him. He received
a hit as well across the chest, but the game was over.

A jubilant cheer and the sound of clapping hands rose through the crowd, and John could not help grinning as he removed his helmet and moved to help his opponent to his feet. He let his gaze roam the crowd as Lestrade came forward to offer his congratulations.

But he was not there.

He was gone.

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Afterwards, Lestrade brought John to see to Sir Athelney's wounds.

"It's nothing," protested Sir Athelney, as he sat hunched over a stool in his tent, attempting to wave them away. "Just a few bruises. Nothing that I cannot handle."

John said nothing as he soaked a small towel in the warm water sloshing within the basin he had carried in. He felt Sir Athelney's ribs contract and heard a brief hiss of pain as he pressed the moist towel on his bruises.

"What is that?" asked Sir Athelney as John proceeded to cover his bruises with a fragrant, green paste after the warm compresses.

"A mixture of herbs," answered John. "Comfrey, goatweed and a little bit of macerated cabbage to hasten the healing and remove the blood from under the skin. It should start to improve by tomorrow."

"Well, it does feel very nice," muttered Sir Athelney as he watched John coat the stuff thinly on his ribs, his waist. John plastered it all into place by linen wrappings. All throughout, he could feel Sir Athelney's gaze on him, slightly bewildered, still suspicious and trying to work him out. Finally, the man seemed to come to a decision.

He extended a hand towards John after he had finished applying the poultice. "Thank you. And the game was excellent, John Watson," he said solemnly. "It seems I was wrong about you. Very wrong."

John stared at the hand held out to him for a moment before he took it and gave it a brief shake. "It was well played," he said.

"You see now, Sir Athelney," said Lestrade, "how much better off we all are to be friends with John Watson rather than to face him in the battlefield. He is but one man. Think of having to fight hundreds, thousands like him."

"Agreed," said Sir Athelney ruefully.

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Monseigneur was nowhere to be found immediately after the game was over, but John should have known he would show up when he was least expected to do so.

When John was most vulnerable.
He had just finished his bath and Billy had given him a towel to wrap around his waist when Monseigneur came striding into the bathing tent.

John felt himself freeze, his fingers digging into the fleecy towel, as Monseigneur said from behind, "Billy, go fetch a fresh shirt for John and feel free to take your time about it."

"Yes, sir." Billy turned away from the pack of fresh clothes he had been preparing for John and left the tent.

John turned slowly around to find Monseigneur standing a few feet away, his face masked, his hands on his hips. He surveyed him with a slight smile on his lips. John found himself clutching tightly at the towel covering his nether parts as though it might fall away at any moment.

"You know that order hardly makes any sense," was all he could think to say as he felt his brain seize up. "There's a fresh change of clothes for me right here."

Monseigneur shrugged. "They're not fresh enough," he said.

John swallowed, did his best to frown disapprovingly. The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself, "I didn't see you after the joust."

Oh, God. That wasn't what he meant. That came out all wrong.

"Not that it's any concern of mine where you took yourself off to, of course," John hastened to say. "I was busy," said Monseigneur laconically. "Besides, I knew you would win. Well done, John."

"Yes, well…" John licked his suddenly dry lips. "I hope you're pleased."

"I am," said Monseigneur as he took a step towards him. "Very pleased, indeed. They think I've made a colossal mistake with you, John, but they're wrong."

John involuntarily took a step back and turned away, suddenly unable to bear the man's proximity and his gaze which seemed capable of burning a hole through any fabric. "Well. You're welcome, I suppose."

"You're hurt." A sudden change in Monseigneur's tone.

John looked down at the bruises on his flanks. "Oh, that," he said. "That was Lestrade."

And how long ago it seemed, when Lestrade had punched him on the kidneys; yet it had happened only that morning.

"It's…it's nothing. I mean, it doesn't even hurt that much anymore," said John, aware that he was starting to babble just to break the thick silence that hung between them. "I've got some herbs for it. It should…oh, Jesus Christ whatthefuckareyoudoing-!"

The last words, uttered in a raw voice, in pure panic.

John flinched as he felt Monseigneur's hand settle on his bruises. His touch was light, the feel of his palm warm. His fingers were gentle on John's skin as they swept fleetingly over the ugly, mottled reds and dark violets that bloomed across John's flank.

The touch was so tender that it was almost not there.

Almost.
It was just a touch, yet it sent a violent jolt through John. Astonished disbelief washed through him as he felt his body immediately responding, hardening beneath the towel. He felt he would die of shame, of arousal, of a thousand feelings he had long held at bay.

Monseigneur smiled. "From your reaction, it's not what you think," he murmured.

John glared at him. "Let go, John," Monseigneur said softly. He meant John's hand, clamping down hard like a vice on his fingers.

"I don't care to be touched," hissed John. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I need to know the injuries I've inflicted upon you, knowingly and unknowingly. Let me, John."

"But you didn't inflict—"

"Yes, I did. Through Lestrade."

John gaped at him for a moment longer before he slowly let his hand fall away from Monseigneur's fingers. He choked back his protests and forced himself to stillness as Monseigneur continued his gentle exploration of John's bruises until he was satisfied. And then slowly and very deliberately, he withdrew his fingers from John's skin.

"Four punches," Monseigneur said, the sound of his voice thicker, deeper than usual. "Delivered in quick succession. A hard twist of his knuckles upward and inward into your flesh as each of the punches landed in."

John stared at him, his breathing quick, erratic, almost panting. He fought to keep from shivering. "Yes," he said at last.

"See to it that it doesn't happen again, John," said Monseigneur, his gaze ice-blue, glittering, hard. "Kindly make sure you will give me no reason to hurt you in future."

John's nostrils flared as he exhaled a gusty breath, his gaze darkening and turning to flint. The silence between them dragged on for a heartbeat longer. Two.

A rustle of canvas as Billy suddenly reentered the tent. "I've got Sir John's shirt, sir," he said, sounding unsure as he glanced from one man to the other.

"Good," said Monseigneur as he finally turned away. "See to it that John gets dressed before he catches his death of cold."

More author's notes: Whoa! Going to be very, very long!

The practice of eating on trenchers— plate-sized pieces of stale bread with an indentation at the center to hold food — dates back to the early medieval ages. After the meal, these were either given to the poor or fed to dogs. It was such an interesting feature of medieval eating practices that I had to put it into the fic, even though it may not be an accurate picture of how knights and higher soldiers actually ate with their lord, especially during the late medieval ages. (Source: Medieval Life and
Medieval armor comprised several garments, starting with the gambeson, a padded defensive jacket worn beneath chain mail or plates of armour. Chain mail was a flexible armor which was made from interlinked metal rings. It was used prior to the development of suits of armor and then worn in conjunction with these suits. It was designed as either as a garment covering the entire body, or a shirt to protect only the upper body. Partial plate armor was first introduced during the late 13th century and full plate armor covering the entire body was introduced during the 15th century and may weigh up to 50 lbs. There was a wide variety of partial plate armor, such as breast plates for the chest and back plates for the back. There were also vambraces fitted over the arms and greaves to protect the legs.

A surcoat is a sleeveless dress or outer garment extending to the knees, usually adorned with heraldic devices such as crosses and the colors are usually lifted from the banners of a knight's lord and master.

Medieval man-to-man combat is a brutal science. It uses techniques which are efficient and ruthless. The goal is to put the opponent down quickly. A medieval swordfight would be brief. Combat between individuals would last no more than 20 to 30 seconds, and only if both were equally skilled fighters. A fight between a trained man and a semi-skilled one would rarely last ten seconds, and would likely be over in five.

Medieval fighters strive for powerful attacks. They do not use light techniques. Every strike is made to do damage. The power is needed for two reasons. First, power puts a man down fast. Light techniques may hurt, but they also waste time. Second, a soldier would often have to attack an armored opponent. Whether the armor was a leather jack, chain mail or plate armor, it took added strength to cause harm to the man inside the suit.

Wasters are wooden training swords, usually measuring two and a half feet long. A behourd is a limited form of a mounted or foot tournament, fought as a training exercise or an informal celebration-at-arms by squires and nobles. Behourds using wooden swords were settled by either a set number of counted blows, or until one or both combatants had been "satisfied" (i.e. had enough). Certain blows or manoeuvres using wooden swords were allocated set numbers of points.

-- Thrusts to the body, shoulder and face counted as three points

-- An immobilization or disarming was counted as three points

-- Thrusts to the rest of the body or wrists counted for one point

-- Strikes made with the use of the pommel or quillon also counted for one point

(Sources: Medieval Life and Times; Milhihistriot Quarterly; Wikipedia)

Athelney Jones was a Scotland Yard inspector in ACD's "The Sign of Four". Holmes called him an imbecile but acknowledged that he was "tenacious as a lobster." Billy is Holmes' page and appeared in stories such as "The Valley of Fear" and "The Problem of Thor Bridge", as well as in plays and films. (Source: Wikipedia-Sherlock Holmes Minor Characters)

John's remedy for bruises is lifted from organicnutrition.co.uk. Comfrey, rich in allantoin, promotes wound healing and reduces swelling. Goatweed or St. John's Wort, is known for its antibacterial and astringent properties and was used to dress sword cuts during the medieval ages. Cabbage is also known to have anti-inflammatory properties.
Aaannnddd...heads up, dears! The next chapter is going to be really mature (maybe even explicit)!
Until then!
Chapter 14

Author's notes: As promised, the story's rating has been changed to explicit, beginning with this chapter. Please be advised.

Please see more author's notes at the end. Enjoy!

After supper, Monseigneur sat down to go through his letters and missives for the day.

He said, reading from a letter, "The wedding will take place three months from now, at the main cathedral in Glasstown. It has been decided by parliament that a mere three days later, the queen-consort shall be crowned in a separate ceremony. Ten days of public revelry and masques will follow. Then, a procession will make its way to Angria for the King to be crowned in Dùn Èideann. The bride is scheduled to arrive in Gaaldine three weeks before the wedding. Already, she must make haste with her preparations if she doesn't want to fall behind schedule. As for His Majesty…"

His eyes scrolled down the lengthy letter the King, his brother, had sent him. His lips twitched into a smirk as he said, "The King wishes to pay me a private visit as soon as possible. Panicking already, I see."

"His Majesty is most concerned with your fever, my lord," corrected Lestrade. "He has yet to hear of your recovery."

"I doubt if that's the actual reason why he is insisting on paying me a visit, no matter what he puts down on paper," remarked Monseigneur sardonically, tossing the parchment away after he was finished with it. "Remember, it was not exactly his idea to acquire Angria this way."

"Act of parliament." Lestrade nodded.

"In fact, there was an insane moment when he had volunteered me for the post of bridegroom, if you recall," continued Monseigneur in distaste. "Two weeks ago the negotiations had been in danger of foundering had the Angrian Queen not put her foot down and refuse to negotiate peace if my brother did not make himself available as the bridegroom. Come to think of it, he has shirked his responsibility long enough."

Silence for a time.

"Why such haste?" John finally asked from his corner of Monseigneur's quarters. "The wedding, I mean?"

To be sure, John was still angry and upset with the man. He had sworn he was not going to speak to the bastard again after what had happened at the bathing tent, but he had found himself slowly cooling down over supper, and the present conversation had gradually stoked his interest.

Supper had been a long and pleasant affair—a remarkable contrast to the atmosphere during dinner. After John's bout with Sir Athelney, a great change had wrought itself among the Gaaldinian knights and soldiers. Much of the earlier tension and animosity had dissipated, and John had been regarded with great curiosity and grudging admiration. Furthermore, Monseigneur had been disposed to be agreeable throughout the entire evening—a rare occurrence, indeed.

John would like to think that he didn't need the approval or friendship of these people; on the other
hand, it had also been quite pleasant not to be regarded with such cold and stony stares by everyone around him.

Afterwards, Sir Athelney had pulled John aside to introduce him to the other knights. Names had been given, of which John could only remember a few—Gregson, Baynes, Moran, Jeavons. They had clamored for a chance to have a round or two with him with the sword, but this time, Monseigneur had refused.

Monseigneur had surprised John by saying in apparent jest, "What use is it to call off the war if each and every one of you would get to have your turn in being beaten to a bloody pulp by John Watson?"

Apparently, the knights had not known what to make of Monseigneur's jesting, either, and thinking their request still had a chance of being granted, had persisted in their petition until Monseigneur had told them quite flatly that he needed John for other, more important work.

Of course, John thought sourly. He should have known the man would refuse. It would be expecting too much of Monseigneur if he very kindly just gave in to other people's wishes.

So that had been that and now they were back at Monseigneur's quarters, with Monseigneur and Lestrade at the table littered with official documents and papers, with Billy off to one side of the tent preparing Monseigneur's night clothes, and John in another corner doing his best not to brood.

In reply to his question, Monseigneur said without looking up, "I would imagine the wedding has to be set as soon as possible, before either party has a sudden change of heart."

It was the first time Monseigneur had spoken to him throughout the entire evening. His tone sounded all right. Normal. As though what he had done to John in the bathing tent had been of little consequence.

John gave a soft snort and shook his head. The familiar feelings of anger and resentment were gradually returning, along with confusion and alarm over his own innate reactions.

He desperately needed to understand Monseigneur's motivations. Thus, during supper, in as much as John had been under observation, he had managed to do a little bit of observing on his own. He had watched these Gaaldinian men closely and had been astonished by the level of flippancy he had seen in their ways towards each other. There had been much friendly elbowing and slapping of shoulders and backs as the men had delved deeper into their cups. These gestures were familiar and all right, John supposed, but what to make of arms draped around each other, even hands lingering on friends' waists? Surely those gestures must be suspect? The rumors had not been exaggerated, then. Truly, these men seemed to indulge in a lot of untoward physical contact with each other— a trait that had earned these creatures much sniggering and talk among John's people.

This was what John had been suspicious of from the very start. Morality-wise, it was known far and wide that Gaaldinian men were very loose and permissive, and Monseigneur seemed the very epitome of their special kind of wickedness.

But what did that make of John's reaction to Monseigneur himself? Hadn't he reacted unusually and wickedly as well?

John could feel the heat slowly creeping over his face as he recalled the touch of Monseigneur's fingers on his bruised skin, as he remembered fighting the shudder that was not from revulsion or disgust at all. The memory of his treacherous body hardening at Monseigneur's touch.
The way it was hardening now at the mere thought of remembering it.

"Where are you going?" Monseigneur asked as John abruptly stood up and made for the doorway of the tent.

"Out," he replied curtly. "I need some air."

Lestrade stood up hastily, made his excuses and accompanied him out.

"All right, John?" he asked as soon as they were out in the open and away from prying eyes and ears.

"No!" snapped John.

He stopped for a bit and breathed deeply in the cool night air, striving for calm.

"It's been a long day for you, I know," said Lestrade. "It would be best to call it an early night and —"

"Look, just tell me straight up. Is he...is he..." John bit back on his words, knowing he would not be able to take them back once he had uttered them. They were nothing short of scandalous. Besides, he wasn't sure how to translate *co-sheòrsach* effectively for Lestrade to understand.

Lestrade regarded him quizzically. "Is who what?" he asked.

John ran a hand through his hair.

Fuck!

Clearly, Lestrade was messing with him. The man could not have missed noticing Monseigneur's treatment of him. He could not be this daft.

"He touched me," John finally said. "After my bath."

Lestrade went very still. "Who—?" he began.

"You know damn well who!" John exploded. "Don't make me say his name out loud!"

Lestrade held up a hesitant hand to hover uncertainly in the air between them. "Where, exactly, did he touch you?" His tone was careful, wary.

"My flank," answered John. "He touched the bruises from our fight."

"Oh." Lestrade gave a sigh of relief as he let his hand drop. "Jesus, John, you can kill a man from all that suspense. And there I was thinking he may have touched you somewhere really serious."

John opened his mouth, shut it. Opened it again to ask, "Why? Why would he think to touch me at all?"

"Listen, John, I know how it must look like, but really, it's not," said Lestrade tersely. "We have a curious practice of taking responsibility for certain actions— owning them, actually."

"Owning them?"

"Like what Monseigneur did to the bruises I inflicted on you," explained Lestrade. "He owned them, took them over from you. It's the equivalent of kissing a child's wound to take the hurt away. Some
old wives' tales will have it that it takes away the malice from the wound and helps hasten the healing process. Not that I meant any malice when I punched you, of course. And you'll mend without incident, I'm sure.

"And he believes in that sort of thing?" asked John in disbelief.

"Probably not," agreed Lestrade, "but it's a gesture, John. We military people do it all the time to our subordinates. It's his way of—not apologizing—but recognizing your wounds."

"He said he wanted to 'know' them," muttered John.

"Recognizing, knowing—it's just like I said. Look, I know we must seem very strange to you," Lestrade said. "I am sure you will need time to get accustomed to our ways, just as we will need time to get used to yours. Give us a chance, John."

"So this means that he's not...into men?" said John at last, making his tone as neutral as he could.

"I don't think Monseigneur would see the issue the way we do. Come to think of it, and this will probably make him seem even stranger to you, but I don't think he's into either men or women," said Lestrade slowly. "But perhaps that's not the question at all here. Perhaps the real question is, do you like men, or else why be so affected?"

"God, no!" That was rather blunt of Lestrade. John briefly considered telling him about Mary, but decided against it. It would be a defilement of sorts to have to drag Mary into this lurid discussion. A pause before he asked, "What about you? Do you like men?"

"I'm married, John," said Lestrade dryly, "to my lady wife of fourteen years. I have two young daughters whom I do not get to see as often as I want to, and no sons. Which is why I've chosen my nephew to be my heir. Next question."

John said hesitantly, "What do you mean he's not into men or women? What's he into, then?"

Lestrade shrugged. "God only knows what goes on in that funny little brain of his," he muttered.

"You mean to say you don't know? You've been with him for years."

"I've been with him since he was seventeen, and no, I don't know what's going on inside his mind most of the time." Lestrade let out a heavy sigh. "He was betrothed once—a match made when he was a child—but the princess to whom he was promised to swore she'd rather become a nun after being in his presence for five minutes."

John gaped at him. "Are you telling me that after all this time, he's never had anyone?"

"Not to my knowledge, no."

"Good Lord," said John softly. Now that was news, indeed.

"And you don't have to give his words too much import if he says things like you're his man," said Lestrade. "He does that all the time. That's just one of his family's many eccentricities. If you're uncomfortable with his laying a claim on you, you have but to wait and realize it for what it is—a passing fancy. He'll be moving on to somebody or something else soon enough."

John merely stared at him.

Sensing that their interview was at an end, Lestrade reached out to give him an encouraging slap on
the back. "No worries, John," he said. "Nobody's going to be at you unless you're willing."

John regarded him wryly, sensing that Lestrade was somehow laughing at his country bumpkin sensibilities. "See, that's the thing about you people that we don't understand," he said rather testily.

"Oh?"

"You say things like that and we imagine all sorts of things about you," John said.

"Such as?"

"Such as Gaaldinian men preferring men over women," said John baldly.

Lestrade considered his words for a moment. Unruffled he replied, "I suppose that would make us even," he said.

John raised his eyebrows. "How so?"

"We Gaaldinians have always thought that Angrians do it with their animals," said Lestrade with a wink before turning away. "Go to bed, John. You've just finished your first, full day of service to Monseigneur. I daresay you deserve your rest."

When John thought about it, Lestrade's explanations had not helped clear the situation in the slightest. John had emerged from their conversation as unenlightened about Gaaldinian men as when he first started talking to Lestrade. As for Lestrade's explanation about Monseigneur's preferences or lack thereof, John was not convinced. Worse, his body did not believe it.

That night he slept fitfully, his subconscious taking over what he could not bring himself to examine while awake, presenting him with a myriad selection of images and sceneries of pure fantasy that were best kept sealed away in his sleeping mind.

He dreamt that he was in Glasstown for the royal wedding, but it seemed everybody had the same idea— the Gaaldinian capital was brimming with people by the time he arrived that there was not a single bed to be had in any tavern or inn that he happened across.

After an entire day of scouring for a place to stay, John had no choice but to follow the examples of several men and crash in the back alleys in between some buildings. Hardly a fitting thing to do, considering that this was his first time in Glasstown, but given how much money he had with him, John figured he could probably only afford to sleep a night or two in a bed offered by the most humble hovel in the great city. It came as a shock that everything could be so expensive here. He had not been prepared for it. Thus, with very little option available to him, John settled down in the shadows of the building walls, amid the smell of cool earth faintly intermingling with the sharper tang of sweating, unwashed bodies pressed close together.

He was not going to reason out why he had chosen to come here, to begin with. Such questions were not asked in dreams. All that mattered was he was here, in a strange but exciting city he had heard of all his life but had never thought it possible to visit.

Everyone had come for the nuptial celebrations, to see the King in his scarlet and gold finery and the Queen in her shining robes encrusted with precious stones, set to unite Gaaldine and Angria into one undivided nation. Ten days of revelry and jousts and masques, with fireworks being set off to much music and dancing in the streets alongside great bonfires lit in the night. Everybody had come for the royal largesse of free food and drink and money sprinkled to crowds of outstretched hands along the
nuptial procession, scheduled several days away. This was the setting where destinies were fulfilled and opportunities seized. Who knew what kind of people one could meet in the crowds? A prospective employer. A friend. A lover.

The current crowd that John was in was a rough one, though— men, young and old thrown in together, alone or clustered in small groups, sitting against or leaning on the walls, chatting, gambling, drinking. Some were shabbily dressed, others not quite so, but all of them were homeless in the great city and seeking shelter amidst these walls as twilight encroached. It suited a man who had brought almost nothing with him except a small bundle of possessions. He really did not have anything much to lose.

And it was here, in this most incongruous of places, that he came sweeping in.

John was hungry. He was contemplating getting up and finding a place to buy some bread when a faint din of noise sounded down the alley.

A man, in richly tailored dark clothes, was striding down the narrow alley, looking at the men slouched or huddled against the walls as though he were searching for someone. Some of the ragamuffin men stared back at him, but left him alone upon seeing that he was armed with a sword. And he was not alone: another man was close behind him, guarding him from possible attack.

He was a tall man, obviously a rich gentleman at the very least, with dark, curling hair. The features of his narrow, pale face were hidden behind a black mask. John saw the mask and felt a familiar feeling starting at the pit of his stomach: a slow, dark coil of desire. He had a feeling that he knew this man.

And the man, passing by him, slowed down to rake his pale eyes over John's form as though he, too, recognized him. Their gaze met, held. John did not know how long they stared at each other— a few seconds, an eternity.

Finally, the man said in a voice plush as black velvet, "You. Come with me."

"Where?"

"Anywhere of my choosing."

John found himself standing up, feeling a strange exhilaration coursing through him, untainted by doubt or fear. As things happened in dreams where the dreamer was granted a special sort of omniscience, it instantly occurred to John what the man was doing here: he was choosing a lover, to please and satisfy him for a single night.

And of all the people here, this man had chosen him.

As dreams went, the rule of logic did not apply to anything. John followed the man down the alley that branched out into smaller side alleys like a maze and felt none of the conflict he thought he ought to feel- the sense of strangeness, of the unfamiliarity of being with another man, the outrage that he would be propositioned like this. It did not occur to him to question or doubt, or even think that he had never done this before.

It did not occur to him to think that this was wrong. Not when it felt so right.

He wanted this man, and the man had chosen him.

That was all there was to it.
"Cover me," said the man to his companion, and John turned to see the grey-haired bodyguard behind them, also masked, give a slight nod of his head and turn his back on them.

He knew this man as well, but before John could stop to really think about it, the man in black had pulled him into a dark, quiet side alley. John felt his breathing quicken as the man put up a gloved finger against his lips.

"Silence is the name of the game," said the familiar stranger.

John stared back at him then nodded to show that he understood. He heard a soft sigh escape his mouth as the man's fingers caress the side of his face gently.

For all that he wanted silence, the man was far from silent himself. "You're not from around here, are you?" he asked, his voice a mere whisper, one finger trailing down to trace the line of John's jaw.

John swallowed, shook his head.

A brief smile etched itself on those distinctly chiseled lips. The man's eyes were hungry, intense, never leaving John's face for a second as he continued his whispers: "You've come in search of something. Or someone. As I have. And now I've found you. I wish to know you, John. Let me."

"Ho-hold on," John said as he finally broke his vow of silence. "You... know my name?"

"As you know mine," replied the stranger. "Go ahead and say it."

John shook his head, a vestige of memory telling him he ought to refuse.

The fingers on his face tightened an increment. "Say it," repeated the masked man whose face was only inches from John's. "I know you want to, John. I want to hear you say it. Say my name."

"My lord," John said at last, his voice a half groan.

There. It did not feel so bad after all, giving in.

"Yes," breathed Monseigneur.

_Monseigneur. Yes, that's it--that's his name_, a voice inside John's head whispered irrelevantly.

John watched, fascinated, as Monseigneur angled his head, bringing it closer towards him.

At the last moment, John felt that vestigial instinct deep inside him once again, telling him to resist, pushing him to make some sort of protest--a last front-- at what was about to happen.

"Wait," he said, pulling his head back. "But, you...I— I'm a man."

It wasn't the most eloquent of protests. Certainly, it did very little to make the man in front of him see sense. "So am I," murmured Monseigneur before he swooped in to claim John's mouth.

At first touch, the kiss was warm and wet, given by an open mouth, effectively drowning out whatever puny resistance that still resided within John. From the very start, there was nothing tentative about that kiss. Monseigneur did not waste time— he tilted his head to secure John's mouth more fully with his own and, with gentle but absolute certainty, his tongue snaked out to trace John's lips before delving deeper to lick them open.

A sound— hungry, needy— escaped John's throat as he lifted hands to plunge into the man's hair (Soft. Oh, so soft). He felt the man's tongue inside his mouth, tasting him so thoroughly, tangling
roughly with his own. He had never been kissed like this before—it was a heady experience. John felt dizzy, winded, wanted. He wanted more.

He gasped as he felt a hand slide down to touch him through his woolen trousers. All the while Monseigneur was ravishing his mouth with such gentle savagery, John felt the palm of his hand sliding slowly, enticingly, over his hardening length.

Tearing his mouth away at last, John looked down as Monseigneur roughly took hold of his trousers, yanking them down to his thighs, exposing his undergarments. Impatiently, Monseigneur worked the front flap of his brasiers open—the work of a moment—and then John could feel Monseigneur's hand on his aching cock at last.

"You may give yourself all sorts of excuses, but we both know this is what you've wanted the very first time we met," Monseigneur whispered into his ear. "You can lie to yourself all you want, John, but you can never lie to me."

An incoherent sound escaped John's lips as Monseigneur's hand began to move. Ah, but wait. A surprise that had John crying out—Monseigneur's hand was still gloved, and the velvety feel of the fabric sliding over his length was almost too much.

"Good?" whispered Monseigneur against John's throat. "Does it feel good?"

John could not bring himself to utter a word, merely gave out a groan as he felt Monseigneur caress him to full hardness.

"Look at you," said Monseigneur, his voice hoarse, not in full control of himself as well. "Just look at you, John."

But John could not stop looking at Monseigneur. The mask could not hide the way his pale eyes were now heavy lidded with lust and desire, the way his mouth had gone soft, slightly parted. At that moment, John wanted to know what lay behind the mask—he needed his lover's face naked. Instinctively, he reached up to touch the mask, only to have Monseigneur jerk his head away as though burned.

"No," he growled.

"But I want to see you," whispered John. "Why won't you let me?"

"You don't have to see," murmured Monseigneur. "You have but to feel me."

With that, he brought John full against the wall, crushing him in place with his fully-clothed body, allowing no movement except his own.

"Feel me, John," growled Monseigneur, gloved hands on either side of John's face.

And John did. Every inch of Monseigneur's arousal, exquisitely trapped in linen and silk, straining against every inch of John's own naked flesh, his hips moving in a slow, delicious grind that had both of them panting against each other's mouths, their foreheads touching.

Yes. Oh God, yes, thought John as he felt Monseigneur beginning to thrust against him. He moved his head forward slightly to take Monseigneur's mouth with his own. Just like that. Yes. Just—

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He wasn't sure what it was that woke him. All he knew was that he had abruptly come awake to find
that he was grinding himself into his pallet, his blankets strewn all around him.

The tent was dark and quiet. A tense moment as John lay suddenly still, listening… listening to see if anyone else was awake. Off to his side came the reassuring sound of Billy's soft snores as he lay on his own pallet a few feet away, arms thrown out about him. Across the tent, the dim figure swaddled in blankets on Monseigneur's bed was still and unmoving.

Breathing deeply, John relaxed back slowly onto his pallet.

A dream, he told himself as his heart continued its mad gallop inside his chest. Nothing but a dream...

The erection between his legs did not agree. Dream or no dream, it stood stiff and raging, begging silently to be put out of its misery. John put his trembling hands to rub at his burning face, waiting impatiently for several, long minutes for his arousal to subside, but damn it to hell, it would not.

John finally decided enough was enough and, taking himself in hand, worked himself quickly and efficiently into an urgent rhythm, spilling into the cup of his hand after just five strokes in a shuddering, wet ecstasy, his mouth open against his pillow in a silent scream. John finally subsided as the last of the spasms left him. Exhausted, he fished out the small piece of linen handkerchief that Billy always placed in the pockets of his trousers to wipe at his hand.

In the unbroken silence of early morning, John lay on his side, quivering, spent, feeling strangely whole. For the time being, he was surprisingly unable to feel guilt or remorse at his dream, or at the discovery that a part of himself that he had long regarded as dead had suddenly come alive again. He knew it was very, very wrong to feel this way, but there it was.

The realization that perhaps the fault lay more with him rather than with Monseigneur made him want to weep. But John's tired mind could not even cling on to this scrap of insight, sudden and unwelcome. Not when it was barely three o'clock in the morning.

John closed his eyes and did not resist the pull of sleep as it gathered him back into its deep, dark depths. There would be plenty of time to feel the guilt and outrage in their entirety in the full light of morning.

Author's notes: Dùn Èideann is Scottish Gaelic for Edinburgh, while co-sheòrsach pertains to a gay person, whether a man or a woman. Glasstown or Glass Town is the capital of the federation of countries in the imaginary worlds of the Bronte children, and part of their juvenile writings has been collected under the title The Glasstown Confederacy. Glasstown is also a play of words around "Glaston", a rural village in the East Midlands of England, with strong connections to the Duke of Wellington and his family.

The setting of John's dream is lifted from a French film whose title must be withheld for the time being.

An interesting point about men's trousers that were worn during the medieval ages: zippers did not exist, and almost at the last minute while writing the last part of the chapter, it occurred to me to check whether flies had already been designed for these garments during those times (for how else would Monseigneur go about undressing John?). True enough, there were no flies (as we know them) on medieval trousers! This feature had yet to make its debut during the Regency period. I swear, this little detail made the tryst scene a great deal more difficult to write. (LOL)
The male undergarments of those times were also very interesting. By then, the loincloth had been replaced by loose, trouser-like clothing called braies, which the wearer stepped into and then laced or tied around the waist and legs at about mid-calf. By the time of the Renaissance, braies had become shorter and were usually fitted with a front flap that was buttoned or tied closed. This codpiece allowed men to urinate without having to remove the braies completely. As time went by, codpieces became larger and more ornate. In this chapter, I chose to keep things as simple as possible so as not to hinder Monseigneur and John's encounter. ^__~ (Source: Trousers and Undergarments- Wikipedia)

Jan 13, 2013: Hi everyone! Just a teeny note. I can't believe I just did it, after years and years of not drawing anything. I finally got to draw Monseigneur! If you'd like to see him, please do drop by my tumblr (Nana_41175.tumblr.com). I hope you like him! Finally learned how to embed pictures! Please see him at the start of chapter 8 here.

Jan 14, 2012: Finished a drawing of John (in partial armor and Monseigneur's colors and heraldic device) as well today. Do check him out at my tumblr acct or at the start of chapter 13! Thanks a lot!
Chapter 15

Author's notes: Thank you so much for your lovely reviews! BTW, in case you haven't come across the mini-updates posted late into the last chapter, I have drawn some pictures of Monseigneur and John. If you'd like to see them, they are embedded at the beginning of chapters 8 and 13. More author's notes at the end of the chapter. Enjoy!

Jan 18, 2013: significant adjustments have been made to the details on hawking in the story and in the notes. Thanks so much, Soror Noctis!

John gradually awoke to the sound of low murmuring.

Lestrade: "Are you sure, my lord?"
"Quite. You don't need to worry. I've already written a missive to Lady Hudson, informing her of my return as soon as possible. Make sure to inform His Majesty immediately so that he will be able to adjust his plans accordingly; otherwise, you shall find yourself saddled with him here without me," said Monseigneur.

"Yes, my lord," said Lestrade.

John was not sure what time it was. It couldn't be that late—perhaps only six o'clock in the morning. Billy was already up and about, pouring out some water into a porcelain basin for Monseigneur.

For a while longer he kept still, eyes closed, his back to Lestrade and Monseigneur, listening to the murmur of that voice. Just listening and refusing to think and to remember what he had dreamed of only a few hours earlier.

"I will need you to keep your eyes and ears open, Lestrade," continued Monseigneur. "Needless to say, whatever transpires between the four of us shall remain within the confines of this tent and must not reach other ears. Especially when it comes to anything concerning John."

John felt his ears prick up at the mention of his name. He opened his eyes, suddenly alert.

"Of course, my lord."

"Pay close attention to the knights," instructed Monseigneur. John could hear him getting up from the bed and moving about. The sound of water splashing as he washed his face. "Are you sure you can answer to all the soldiers under you?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Even Sally Donovan?"

"Sally is not going to be a problem."

"Make sure she doesn't," said Monseigneur darkly, and John felt something like dread brush at him with cold fingertips. "You've instructed her not to tell a soul about her excursion with John in the forest?"

"Of course, sir. She did not know the exact nature of her errand. She still doesn't."

"What about that fool, Anderson? Doesn't he know anything?"

"Even if he does, I will make sure the knowledge will go no farther from him," said Lestrade. "I can handle my men, sir. And women. I will answer for them."

"Good."

A pause, then: "What are our plans for today, my lord?"

"I thought I might do some hawking while I'm here," said Monseigneur. "With John."

John frowned, felt the dread sink its icy claws deeper into him.

"As soon as he's finished lounging about, pretending to be still asleep," continued Monseigneur with a hint of sly amusement in his voice.

John sighed and slowly turned himself around to face them with bleary eyes.
"Good morning!" called Monseigneur cheerily. "Slept well last night?"

The sense of dread suddenly fistei itself tightly around John's heart.

Fuck it, he knows! How could he know…?!

"I wasn't pretending to be asleep," he grumbled, sitting up. He kept a tight lid on his sudden panic and ignored Monseigneur's question.

Mercifully, the man opted not to pursue the matter.

"Well, do get up or the best part of the day will be gone before you know it," said Monseigneur. "We'll have breakfast here before we go. Billy can pack us some lunch to take away with us."

"We'll...be gone a long time?" asked John, glancing at Lestrade before bringing his gaze back to Monseigneur. "Just us?"

"Lestrade's too busy with affairs around the garrison, and Billy has his own set of chores that will keep him occupied for the rest of the day," said Monseigneur. "It would be a deadly bore hanging about camp and not doing anything, wouldn't you agree?"

Lestrade was as reluctant about the idea as John. "Really, my lord? Just the two of you?" he said doubtfully. "After everything we've just discussed."

Monseigneur smiled. "Let them try to get to me while John Watson is by my side," he said, turning away to change his clothes.

John frowned in puzzlement. He was sure he was not quite following the conversation.

John stared at Lestrade, who only nodded in resignation. "Bring along a sword, just to be sure, John," was all he said.

John was missing something here, he was sure of it. There was a frisson of tension in the air, and an added edge in the way Monseigneur was moving about and talking. His cheerfulness had a determined quality about it that rang false.

What could it all mean?

Without another word, John got up.

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After breakfast, they saddled their horses and rode out just as day was breaking over the horizon.

Azrail, freed from her hood, was perched on Monseigneur's gauntleted hand. She did not need any inducement to take to the air as soon as Monseigneur tossed her up. John watched her go: her dark-tipped wings going flap, flap and then she was sailing up in a smooth arc, soaring away into the mauve and pink and pale orange-yellow of the dawn sky.

John felt the cool, cleansing air whip at his hair and sting his cheeks as they rode out, following Azrail, and he felt the burden that he carried in his heart lighten considerably.

Lestrade was right. This was just what he needed— open air and lots of ground to separate him physically from Monseigneur instead of being trapped in the claustrophobic interiors of garrison tents.
where his presence loomed continually, stalking John at every turn.

The ride across the flat plains was largely a silent one. For a while, John was drunk on the heady freedom of being out in the open, and Monseigneur was keeping his own counsel. When his mind was sufficiently clear, John glanced across him at the man astride that big, black brute of a horse known only as the Beast, and finally allowed himself to look at the dream he had had the previous night in the calm, clear perspective of the day's first light.

Of course, the dream was pure madness no matter which way one looked at it.

John had heard people referring to dreams as a window into the most secret and inaccessible corners of one's thoughts, and what dominated his dream was an entity that lived in the shadows of his mind—his dark half, an utter stranger that he could barely recognize, filled with strange and wanton desires, heedless of any good sense. Someone whom John did not understand, and thus, feared.

Someone who would find it acceptable to capitulate so easily to Monseigneur. A base creature that craved what was forbidden and who must be restrained at all cost, who must be locked safely away inside John's mind.

It was, of course, extremely disturbing to realize that he had the capacity to feel this way towards Monseigneur, deep down inside. At this point, it was easy to give in and let himself be overwhelmed with repulsion and self-loathing. Instead, he quelled those feelings and concentrated on making sense of why he had the dream instead.

Doubtless, the dream had been fueled by the hectic goings-on of the last few days and emotions both fevered and unbalanced that could only be brought about by Monseigneur. For now, it was enough that John had been able to keep a tight leash on his emotions during waking moments; after all, he could not be held responsible for what he dreamt of, night after night. And certainly, he could not be held responsible for Monseigneur's actions that had brought about all the malarkey in the first place.

The man was a walking calamity. He had the power to draw people to him and cause wide-scale confusion and havoc. Worst of all, Monseigneur knew it—he knew the effect he had over people and he knew how to wield this power like a weapon.

But John knew that just because he had a sexual dream about this man, however disturbing it was, did not mean he ought to run for the hills, screaming his head off in a panic over his manhood like an outraged virgin. A virgin he most definitely wasn't. More than anything, he needed to keep his wits about him. Admittedly, it was something that he had not been good at doing in the past few days. He had been too close to the man, had been overwhelmed by him.

He knew (why bother denying it when it was so painfully obvious?) that at the very core of this problem lay an unnatural attraction that had manifested itself almost at the very beginning of their acquaintance. But John was a soldier. He knew the ways and the various kinds of attachments that men—cooped up together for so long with no women to alleviate their urges—were capable of forming amongst themselves.

But that was just lust mostly, and lust could be dealt with properly. Knowing and acknowledging Monseigneur's effect on his person was actually vital, as John could move past it now and start to contemplate various means by which he could protect himself from the man. There was no mistaking the signs: they were at war with each other, still. Right here, right now.

Everything John was feeling towards him was a bodily reaction—a physical need that could be quenched periodically with physical means, but the dream had served a purpose—it was a warning to John by letting him know what he was capable of feeling for Monseigneur. It was useless to shirk
away from it, but it had to be acted on, guarded from any possibility of actually being carried out.

Clever, John realized now, the way Monseigneur had steadily crept past his defenses by throwing things along his path to tempt him away from his resolve: the privileges only royalty could bestow, the behourd, the acceptance and friendship of the people around him—Lestrade, Billy.

And finally, there was the man himself. Useless to hold back the admission that he was drawn to Monseigneur, but while the man may have resurrected his libido, John's heart was a different thing altogether.

That part of him was dead, and in a way, he was glad. It was safe from Monseigneur because it had died and was buried along with Mary. It could not be resurrected only to die a second time. It was broken in all places and could break no further. If he really wanted it, Monseigneur was welcome to a thing damaged beyond repair.

After nearly two hours, Monseigneur finally broke the silence to ask, "What do you need to find in the forest to make your medicines?"

They had slowly cantered to a halt along a meadow, green and fragrant with new grass and dotted with small white and yellow flowers.

The question was so unexpected that it took a moment for John to think it through. "I…there are a lot of ingredients we can make use of, depending on the situation that presents itself. I can't really just name them all right now and—"

"Name the most essential ones that you will need to formulate your poison antidote."

John shook his head incredulously at Monseigneur's words, as though he had just been commanded to name all the stars in the heavens then and there. "The antidotes will differ for different poisons," he said. "Everybody knows that. I mean, for example, the White Star will work for Nightshade poisoning but I doubt if it can—"

"What if I were to tell you that I am working on a universal antidote?" interrupted Monseigneur.

John began to scoff, then peered into Monseigneur's masked visage more closely. "You're serious," he murmured.

A flash of annoyance: "Of course I'm perfectly serious, John! I'd let you know if I'm in the mood for anything otherwise."

"You really think you can do that? Develop an actual panacea for poison? How far along are you into it?"

Monseigneur blew out a breath. "It's not working properly yet," he admitted, "but I believe the White Star will add considerably to its efficacy. Tell me you haven't used it all up just to make this."

He produced John's small bottle of antidote. "I will need more than this to conduct my experiments into its efficacy," Monseigneur continued.

"Yes, actually…well, no." John suddenly remembered the single flower he had found in his bag the other day and tucked away in his pocket. Instinctively, he thrust his hand into his pocket now, only
to encounter the soggy handkerchief that he had used last night.

"I must have left it in my other trousers," he said, quickly withdrawing his hand from his pocket. "But it's just a single flower. I doubt if it will come to any good use."

"Lestrade can use it to show to his soldiers. I've asked him to form a search team made up of people he can absolutely trust. They will be combing the forest for it, along with anything else you may care to mention."

"It would be a lot quicker if I were to go to the forest with them," offered John. "It would also help lessen any mistakes they might make in obtaining specimens."

Monseigneur shook his head. "We don't have time, John," he said. "We're leaving tomorrow."

John frowned. "Leaving?" he repeated.

"We're going home," said Monseigneur. "To Wolf's Lair."

"Why so soon?" John wanted to know.

The man was silent for a moment. Then he finally said, "It can't come soon enough. There is a spy tucked away in the garrison. I have reason to believe it's one of the knights."

John stared at Monseigneur in astonishment as he felt everything begin to fall in place at last. "That was why you arranged for the behourd yesterday, wasn't it?" he said carefully. "You wanted to flush him out."

"Yes."

That explained Monseigneur's sudden disappearance from the crowd at the end of the joust, then. He had wondered about it.

"So what did you find out?"

"Nothing much." There was frustration in Monseigneur's voice. "I couldn't narrow it down to a single person. I thought the fight would help expose an unguarded moment when all attention was diverted to you, but I couldn't make out who it was in the crowd, and in the process I exposed you to undue harm."

More astonishment as the meaning of Monseigneur's words sank in.

"You think he'll come after me?" said John.

"Why not? You're the one who healed me. You're in their way now, too," said Monseigneur.

"So that was the reason why you wouldn't allow further jousting matches," said John. He felt a bit foolish now, thinking Monseigneur had refused on the grounds of proprietary interest and sheer, perverse meanness, like a brat unwilling to share a new toy.

He thought for a moment. "You don't suppose it may be Sir Athelney Jones?"

Monseigneur shook his head. "He would have been too obvious," he said thoughtfully, in a rush, as though he were talking to himself, "not to mention too stupid. No, it's somebody else, somebody who is cunning and stealthy enough to escape my attention, and all it will take for him to do his job is to nick a little bit of your skin and God only knows what kind of poison he will use this time around, perhaps something that may not even have an antidote..."
John stared in speechless surprise as Monseigneur abruptly stopped speaking and looked away. He could not believe what he was hearing. "You're... concerned about me," he said.

"You're my man, John. Why should I not be concerned about you?" replied Monseigneur a bit defensively.

Stunned silence from John.

Monseigneur continued, "If you know me well enough, you will understand that I am not a nervous man. I don't jump at shadows. At the same time, it is stupidity rather than courage to refuse to recognize danger when it is close upon you. And it is indeed close. Too close for comfort. Now tell me what you will need for your antidotes."

John told him, ticking off the ingredients as they came to mind, anything that he thought would be of use.

Monseigneur nodded. "I know most of the items you've mentioned, and the rest can be obtained within Gaaldine and Gondal, if necessary. Arrangements can be made easily enough to get them," he said. "Everything except the White Star."

"And some mushrooms, I would expect," said John.

"How deep in the forest were you when you found the flowers?"

"Very deep. Around two days before I emerged onto these parts," said John. "That would mean they're to be found closer to the Angrian border, and well away from light."

"I will tell Lestrade."

Silence once again as Monseigneur lifted his head to scan the early morning sky for a sign of Azrail. John did not know what his feelings were about going away from these parts, perhaps forever. He was torn between anxiety and a strong curiosity about Monseigneur's country, his home.

More than that, a strange sense of wonder and adventure was gradually taking hold of him. Treacherous, treacherous wonder.

At last, a speck in the clear, early morning sky. The strange, piercing whistle sounded from Monseigneur's lips as they spotted Azrail gliding above them. The very same whistle that John had heard for the first time yesterday, when he was down on his knees in front of this man. He could not believe it had only been yesterday.

The sharp whistle startled a rabbit out of hiding amongst the tall grasses a few feet away. It bounded across the grassy plain just as Azrail started her descent towards them.

A different whistle issued from Monseigneur's lips and Azrail instantly changed course, homing in on the rabbit instead.

"There she goes," Monseigneur murmured, pride clearly evident in his soft voice.

John watched, fascinated, as Azrail swooped down, talons extended in front of her, intercepting the rabbit perfectly in its path. A brief and violent little scuffle in the grass, and it was over very quickly.

They dismounted from their horses and made their way to where Azrail was still struggling with the rabbit, her talons caught in its flesh.
"Doucement, mon coeur," Monseigneur said in a voice smooth as honey as he extracted the rabbit from the excited bird's clutches. "Doucement."

He gave the rabbit to John and coaxed Azrail onto his gauntleted hand, tossing strips of ready meat to feed her from a pouch strapped to his waist.


"Isn't she?" agreed Monseigneur as he tenderly smoothed down the bird's ruffled feathers with a gloved hand.

John stared at those long fingers and felt something twist sharply in his chest as he suddenly remembered his dream. Of the same long, gloved fingers stroking the side of his face tenderly. Stroking, feeling him.

The memory—sudden, sharp, erotic—came almost simultaneously with a realization that took his breath away.

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself: "You know, I'm not Azrail."

Monseigneur turned to him. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"I'm not a hawk," said John, frowning at him. "I'm a man."

"I can see that," said Monseigneur, the tone of his voice turning ever so slightly into a drawl. "Your point, John?"

"I know what you're doing. You don't have to break me into my role," said John. "You don't have to wrap me around your finger so tightly just to get me to serve you."

"Don't I?" said Monseigneur, his voice soft. "From the way you were responding to me in the past few days, I do beg to differ."

"Well, that's because you've been so…so…!"

Alarming. Dangerous. Disturbing. Exciting...

Any of these descriptions would have sufficed but none of them could be said out loud.

Before he could say anything further, Monseigneur continued, "And you're right, John. You're lucky you're not a hawk. I won't have to resort to sewing your eyes shut, or do any of the brutal things Azrail had to go through before she learned proper obedience. In fact, you're luckier than most captives because we share a common language. Imagine if you were somebody like Sally Donovan, separated from her mother and brought to Gondal as a little girl, knowing not a word of the languages spoken around her. But that does not mean you will have it easier, with me. In fact, I shall expect more from you. A great deal more. Make it easy on yourself or make it hard, the choices are up to you. That is your one prerogative as a man."

John shook in a breath. "You're really very arrogant, aren't you?" he said.

Monseigneur nodded. "Very," he agreed. "I'd suggest you stop fighting me as the outcome is inevitably the same. But I don't think you'd heed my suggestion."

John merely shook his head in agreement.

Quite unexpectedly, Monseigneur smiled. "That's what I like about you, John," he said. "Since we
met, I've not been bored by you. That's quite an achievement right there."

He gazed thoughtfully into John's eyes, clear and bright blue and defiant under blond brows while his own features were shielded away by his mask. "You're so proud, John," he murmured. "So pure and steadfast in your belief that you should never give in to me. Not a single inch. But then you haven't been to the Lair yet. I shall look forward to the time when I can make you obey me in everything. Unquestioningly. Best of all, you will find yourself most willing to do so."

John did not care to think of the effect of Monseigneur's words on his person-- the feeling, almost, of anticipation that it elicited. He said, his voice quite cool, controlled, "Don't hold your breath."

Monseigneur's smile merely widened.

They returned to the garrison late in the afternoon, tired and hungry and dusty.

Luckily, Billy had not yet brought John's trousers from the previous day to the washers, and John was able to extract the single white flower from its linen casing inside one of the pockets. He gave this to Monseigneur, who mounted it on a piece of parchment paper and gave it, in turn, to Lestrade, with instructions.

A hot bath and some supper. Then to bed early.

They were back in the saddle at first light the next day, a long journey ahead of them. A few parting words with Lestrade, who would have to remain behind to tend to the camp as it dismantled, then Monseigneur was turning the Beast around, heading out of the garrison in full gallop, with John and Billy close behind him.

Heading for the Lair.

Heading for home.

More author's notes: The search for a universal remedy or panacea is one of the defining objectives in the practice of Alchemy, an influential philosophical tradition whose early practitioners' claims to profound powers were known since times of antiquity. The objectives of alchemy are varied, ranging from the transmutation of common metals into gold to the discovery of a universal solvent, among other things. Western alchemy is recognized as a protoscience that contributed to the development of modern chemistry and medicine. Alchemists developed a framework of theory, terminology, experimental process and basic laboratory techniques that are still recognizable today. During the Middle Ages when science and chemistry as we know them today hardly existed, I chose to have Monseigneur dabbling in a bit of alchemy instead. And although we know that a universal cure for all poisons is impossible to develop in real life, let us make it possible in this story. (Source: Wikipedia)

Monseigneur's phrase "It is stupidity rather than courage to refuse to recognize danger when it is close upon you" is lifted from ACD's The Final Problem.

I lifted some details on hawking from Medieval Hunting History and at The Modern Apprentice,
which gave a summary of how to train a falcon or hawk to hunt: The falcon or hawk was first acclimatized to the presence of men, horses, and dogs (this is the stage where their eyes were sewn shut). After it had gotten accustomed to people, it was fastened to a string by one leg, and, being allowed to fly a short distance, was repeatedly recalled to the lure by whistles and other signals—usually in the form of a mock bird, where it always found food. In falconry, as in venery, great care was taken to make sure that the falcon or hawk will focus on the prey and not leave the game it was after in order to pursue another which might come its way. Normally the birds do not bring the prey back to the falconer. The bird is trained to follow the falconer while he tries to flush game. Much of what will be caught is larger than the bird can carry. It is the falconer's job to go find where the bird caught the quarry. Sometimes the bird needs help controlling or dispatching it and the falconer will assist here, too.--Special thanks to Soror Noctis for calling my attention to this detail!

_Doucement:_ gently, or slowly.
Chapter 16

Author's notes: Thank you so much for your lovely reviews! Your messages always make my day. I hope you will enjoy John's little homecoming! More authors' notes at the end.

And here is how Wolf's Lair will look like when illuminated at night...

(Source of picture: Medieval Archives. The castle is actually situated in Italy and is on sale for 58 million USD, in case anyone is interested...^_^)

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It took them three days to reach the Lair: three days and two nights of almost non-stop travel that had them alternating between riding on horseback and in covered carriages, depending on the weather and terrain. By the end of the first day, there was even a stint on a royal barge that carried them down a long stretch of river, the waters turning black as the sun sank steadily in the horizon and finally died. This, Monseigneur said, was the quickest and safest route as they left the border country behind them. The choice was either the river or a patch of rough mountains, crawling with bandits and highwaymen. It was hardly a decision that required much thought.

The nights were spent in the manor houses of trusted local lords, carefully handpicked by Monseigneur and Lestrade—short, fleeting night stays when they arrived late and left very early the next day to proceed with the next phase of their journey. Their small party gradually swelled in number as their hosts assigned them guards to escort them from one place to the next. It was clearly
no laughing matter to arrange such an enterprise. John could only imagine the level of organization that had gone into the planning of this trip. Lestrade was a very capable man, indeed, if he could bring all of this about in the time John suspected was given to him. Of course, there were minor hiccups along the way— Billy's horse had to cast a shoe at a most inconvenient time, which had grounded them in a small town and delayed their journey; minor accidents when horses and riders slipped and fell from steep and stony paths.

Yet through it all, what John would always remember of that first trip was the way Gaaldine seemed to unfold before him in all her spring glory like a lady’s elaborate fan being slowly opened, one blade at a time. The stretches of vast forests filled with dark, melancholy pine in the north, seen at a distance as they rode past, gradually gave way to greener, leafier trees as they progressed south. The weather, too, changed and grew warmer as they descended farther into the Gaaldinian plains and valleys. Soon they had to remove their thick cloaks and roll up their heavy sleeves. John watched as picturesque little villages beside the river gave way to bustling towns before breaking out into fields bursting with color— flower and vegetable farms, innumerable orchards— before thinning out once again into flat, green plains where flocks of sheep grazed. They passed all of these and more on their way to Elderidge— the coastal town abutting Wolf's Lair.

And so it was that the sun was setting on the third day when they finally caught sight of the town from a hill some distance away. The small town, nestled in the valley formed by these low hills on one side and the sea on the other, was just beginning to light up slowly against the encroaching night, and John thought he had never seen such a pretty sight. He had lived far too long in the solitude of quiet forests, landlocked on all sides. For him, the sea, especially, was a thing imagined— an abstract idea— for most of his life.

Turning his attention away from the town, he caught his first glimpse of the Lair, at last. It was set farther away, up an impressingly craggy promontory that was the last bit of land before the sea swept in. It was a huge fortress of a castle, its rambling silhouette dark against the day’s fading light. From their vantage point, it seemed to John that it did, indeed, resemble something of a prowling animal crouched over the town of Elderidge— like a wolf about to spring upon its prey, or hovering protectively over its young, depending on how one looked at things.

Beside John, Monseigneur reined in the ever-impatient Beast, his eyes cast in the same direction as John’s. He remarked with the smallest suggestion of a sigh in his deep voice, “Ah, the final stretch of the journey. I daresay it’s about time.”

He brought his crop down sharply on the Beast, who needed no further urging. They rode into Elderidge, slowing down as they passed the main streets where people gathered by the side to see and gape at the spectacle of their Lord returning from his journeys. Throughout that short trip, John could see the effort it took for Monseigneur to hold back the fatigue, his impatience at having to slow down and parade himself and his men in front of the townsfolk— a necessary evil. All throughout their voyage, Monseigneur had to show himself to the people around him, and John had the distinct impression that he disliked being stared at by strangers.

Monseigneur spurred the Beast on as soon as they left the town behind. They broke out into a gallop once again, up over the craggy hill where the Lair loomed ever larger as they drew near.

Until this moment, John had not really known what to expect of Wolf's Lair. He had imagined an abode black and bleak, set upon some lonely mountain encased in a miasma of treacherous mist and barbed vegetation to trap the unwary traveler— something dramatically desolate as befitting the dwelling place of a demon prince in a fairy tale. After all, there were old castles, intact and ruined, all over Angria which would have met John’s particular set of expectations. What he had not expected
was *this*, although in retrospect, he would wonder how he could imagine anything otherwise.

They had to ride through an avenue of silver birch, tall enough on either side for the trees to interlock branches high above their heads, before they could reach the main gateway of the castle, open in readiness for the master's return.

Directly inside was a vast outer court with the royal stables on one end and an outbuilding—possibly the mews—on the other. Servants with torches were already waiting there, yet they proceeded on horseback towards the moat and the narrowed passageway of the barbican, lit with flaming torches, and on into the inner gate, which led to the main stone courtyard in front of the castle's huge metal doors.

A flurry of servants attended to their steeds as they finally dismounted. John handed over the reins of his horse to a waiting groom and turned to stare at the castle's facade of grey stone, illuminated by torchlight, and at the huge doors open to reveal the golden glow of firelight inside—warm and inviting in contrast to the cold and dark of the world outside the castle walls.

John felt a hand land heavily on his shoulder. Monseigneur.

"Breathe, John," he said, suddenly leaning close so that he was almost saying the words next to John's ear. "Just remember to breathe."

John caught a glimpse of Monseigneur's smile and suddenly realized how he must have looked like just then, gaping at the castle as though he had never seen one properly before. Before he could think to arrange his face, though, the figure of a woman materialized at the doors. Monseigneur drew away from John as he started up the steps, arms held out to the elderly lady as she greeted his arrival in delighted tones.

"My Lady Hudson," John heard Monseigneur's murmuring voice, warm as heated brandy, as he bent down to kiss her hand formally. "I trust everything was in order while I was away."

"Aye, my lord," said the lady. She let out a small, delighted laugh and impulsively took Monseigneur into her arms for a brief hug just as he was about to straighten up. "You've been away for so long, Sherlock—first at court and then over at Lord Lestrade's garrison, that we have all begun to wonder when we shall ever see you again."

John felt surprise slam through him at the lady's words, could not help the little jerk of his head as he turned sharply to look at Monseigneur.

Monseigneur allowed Lady Hudson to embrace him for a brief three seconds before detaching himself from her arms. He murmured his excuses, his words not quite registering to John as he repeated to himself the one word he had heard fall from Lady Hudson's lips.

Sherlock.

At long last, Monseigneur was nameless no longer.

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On that boat ride down the river during the end of their first day of travel, when evening had settled in and rendered any sightseeing outside the barge pointless, John had tried to make Billy cough out Monseigneur's name by initiating a guessing game.

They had all been tired and strung out from a long day on the saddle, and John had not known why he had felt the sudden urge for conversation. He had been too keyed up to remain sitting still,
listening to the oars dipping into the dark waters. So he had done it on a lark while he had been high on a strange, heady mixture of nerves and excitement which he had been unwilling to look closely into.

"Henry. It must be Henry," John had whispered to Billy as Monseigneur, growing increasingly bored and restless as they sailed downriver, had started harassing the boat crew as to their estimated time of arrival back on land and whether they could make the boat go any faster. A dangerous request—one that had met with a lot of noncommittal murmurings and very little action from the crew, well used to their lord's impatience. Instead, the captain had brought out some musicians to soothe Monseigneur's ruffled feathers.

Billy had smilingly shaken his head at John as music from a lute drifted softly in the cool evening air. "William?"

"Well, that's my name, sir, but not Monseigneur's."

"Richard."

"No."

Edward had met with a similar answer from Billy.

John had sighed. "He can't be a Stephen. Can he?"

Billy had asked, suddenly and earnestly, "Why not just call him Monseigneur, sir, like everybody else? There's no shame or embarrassment to it. I mean, he's your lord now, too, after all. Sooner or later you'll have to call him something in front of other people, and most definitely you can't go around calling him 'he', or his actual name."

Of course, Billy had been right. It would only be a matter of time before the noose got tighter around the issue. It would be just like Monseigneur to enjoy wringing titles-as-names out of John, if only to drive the point home as to who was the master and who was the servant between them. What John could not explain to Billy was the fact that it had become a point of honor for him never to call the man his lord, no matter the practical dictates of reality.

Luckily, Monseigneur had chosen that moment to interrupt their little conversation (carried out sotto voce all throughout) to start harassing them over some inane detail of their journey, making it unnecessary for John to reply to Billy's very logical query.

But now, standing at the threshold of the man's home, John had suddenly come upon his name. Sherlock.

John was not sure what it meant for him to know Monseigneur's name, but he felt that it was something like seeing his face. The man had so many aspects of his person hidden from scrutiny that John had to wonder what it was that he took such pains to hide.

Sherlock, thought John, sounding the name out again in his mind. But what kind of a name was Sherlock? John had to admit that it was quite fitting though. It was an impossible name, well-suited for an impossible man. Somehow he knew Monseigneur would have an unusual name, and true enough, he was not disappointed.

John quietly followed the rest of the weary entourage into the welcoming warmth and light of the great hall, watching Monseigneur receive his due welcome from his people. They were surprisingly
few— the chief servants, mostly. There was his secretary, a dour looking young man named Dimmock. And another lady, younger than Lady Hudson, with long, wavy chestnut hair swept neatly back her head. She blushed prettily as Monseigneur bent over her hand, lips not quite touching her pale skin.

When Monseigneur straightened back, he said, "Well, Mary the Younger. Look at you."

The girl turned bright pink. "Welcome back, Monseigneur," she murmured shyly, smiling. "Je suis contente de te revoir."

But Monseigneur was hardly listening to her. He stared at the girl for a second and said in a flat, rapid murmur, "Lip rouge. You're wearing lip rouge. Why on earth are you wearing lip rouge?"

The girl's smile faded as her eyes widened in dismay. It was almost comic, had it not been that her mortification was entirely genuine. "I…I—" she stuttered.

"Do take it off as soon as possible," said Monseigneur in a low voice, audible only to John and Billy as they flanked his side. "We wouldn't want to ruin your chances of finding a suitable husband now, would we?"

John frowned heavily at Monseigneur's back, but Monseigneur was already moving past the Lady Mary and addressing the general audience: "Everyone, I would like you to meet John Watson, from the Angrian Highlands. He will be staying with us indefinitely. Do try to extend him every courtesy."

And that was the extent of John's introduction to the inhabitants of Wolf's Lair.

Monseigneur turned to him and said briefly, "We're home, John."

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It took a few more hours for them to settle down. Monseigneur had to preside over supper and the serious business of feeding the soldiers who had escorted them safely through their voyage. Tomorrow they would be starting back home. John felt so tired that he could barely feel his legs, let alone taste what he was putting into his mouth automatically. At one point, he could see Billy nodding over his food a few heads down the long table.

At last, supper was done and the guests were given their sleeping arrangements for the night.

The day was not yet done for the lord of the manor, however, and Monseigneur had Billy take John into his custody while he sat down to confer with Lady Hudson, receiving her endorsements and taking back the responsibilities that he had left into her care while he was away. Through a haze of fatigue, John patiently and quite mindlessly followed Billy, who was himself about ready to drop as he carried out the last of Monseigneur's instructions for the day. He let himself be drawn into a quick bath in a distant wing of the castle and got into some clean clothes, allowed himself to be ushered into the room where he was going to sleep in—

John took one look at his assigned sleeping quarters and felt a portion of the fatigue abruptly dispelling from his mind. He drew back from the doorstep, unwilling to take another step inside the room allocated to him.

"This...this can't be right," he said, shaking his head at Billy.

"Oh, it's quite right, I can assure you, sir," said Billy, moving into the vast, grand room. "This is Monseigneur's bedroom. You're to take over my bed, here."
Billy showed him where he slept, a comfortable looking divan at the foot of Monseigneur's bed. Of course, John's attention was instantly drawn to the room's main bed just a few feet away—a wooden four-poster practically a mile wide, complete with canopies and dark curtains on the sides. It was heaped with pillows, with thick fur coverlets in addition to blankets on the crisp sheets, already turned down.

Fatigue was making speech difficult, but John tried anyway: "I...I can't...stay here. This is too much—"

Billy was already turning down the sheets of the divan bed for him. "Yes, you can, sir. You must," he said. "It's Monseigneur's wish. You see, he says my eviction will serve as my punishment for letting you see his face back in the garrison."

John stared in stunned incomprehension at Billy, whose expression was anything but regretful for having been evicted from Monseigneur's bedroom. From the way he was moving about, collecting his things, it seemed he could hardly wait to leave. "Whose punishment is this again?" asked John slowly. "Yours or mine?"

Billy's laughter was vivid with relief. "Monseigneur has been very generous, considering," was all he would say.

"To you," finished John dryly.

"Oh, you will find he won't be much of a bother. I will just be a few floors down. He will ring me if he needs anything during the night, which he very hardly does. You don't need to get up. He doesn't sleep all that much, anyway, so you won't really see much of him here. And once he does fall sleep it would be difficult to wake him," said Billy. "He keeps odd hours, and he won't be back for a few more hours tonight. He says not to wait up. He won't be much of a bother, I promise."

"You know you can't promise that." John's mind was clouding over again as the fatigue finally settled down to stay.

Billy shifted around on his feet. "Well, I will leave you now, sir. Good night and sleep well."

Unbelievable, thought John as he sat stiffly on the edge of his new bed and watched Billy make his departure, shutting the thick wooden doors quietly behind him. He swallowed nervously and looked around him.

Who would have thought that a week ago, he had slept in a bank of leaves and moss in the deep bowels of the forest? He felt like pinching himself just to make sure he was not dreaming.

For a while, he let his gaze roam around the spacious room, paneled in dark wood and the high walls set in precious tapestries depicting a hunting scene. A huge fireplace, with smoldering embers, took up one side. A large table stacked with papers and other debris, with some chairs strewn about on its side, was on the other side of the room next to the tall, narrow latticed windows. There were bookshelves occupying an entire wall, crammed with volumes. Candles glowed a soft light from silver candlesticks all over the room.

Inadvertently, John's gaze returned to the giant four-poster bed just behind him. The thing made him uneasy, yet at the same time it beckoned to him.

He brought his gaze back to his new bed, assessing its position in relation to the great bed just behind it. It was just absurd that he should sleep at the foot of Monseigneur's bed. He was not some sort of pet to be given such an arrangement. He would have to ask for the bed to be moved, preferably
backing one of the walls.

But in the morning. As soon as he got some sleep.

Right now though...

He yawned widely, but instead of falling unconscious immediately and face-first into his new bed, John felt himself getting up, his wretched curiosity very much awake and insistent inside a mind already shutting down bit by bit from weariness.

He ought to be fighting this. He really ought to. He really should be sitting stiffly upright at the edge of his bed and not move a muscle until Monseigneur came back just to show him he was not at all impressed with his surroundings, or the very dubious honor of being made to sleep at his feet.

He ought to be resisting.

Because what would Monseigneur say if he were to suddenly come upon John like this, approaching his bed with all the stealthy, guilty movements of a thief?

But John was too tired to resist. At least for tonight.

*It won't take a minute. And anyway, he won't be back. Not for a very long time,* whispered a voice inside him. *He won't know what you've been up to. Just make it quick.*

He just needed to inspect this monstrously beautiful bed to see that it was actually real and not a product of his imagination. It looked unreal, like a figment of a dream. Perhaps he was already asleep at this point and dreaming all of this.

Tentatively, he reached out a hand to touch the wood paneling that decorated the headboard of the bed. Again it was intricately and masterfully carved, with the shapes of birds and animals tucked into wooden foliage. Were these scenes the last things Monseigneur saw each night as he closed his eyes?

But no, he would have to be lying down, staring up at the canopied ceiling of the bed...

*Bloody hell, John, what are you doing?* A voice inside his head— the sane one, the only rational one still awake— screeched at him as he suddenly made up his mind. *Whatever it is you're planning to do, don't do it!*

But it was a small voice, easily pushed away and ignored as John slowly sat himself down on the edge of Monseigneur's bed. The mattress felt heavenly. Smiling slightly, he let himself bounce a little on the bed, feeling its springy resilience. Drowsiness was making him reckless, but the bed really did feel as good as it looked. Besides, he thought it had been a very, very long time since he had given in to such a careless impulse— something silly and happily inconsequential. Playful.

The covers had been turned down, leaving a nest of furs that looked oh, so inviting. Slowly, he allowed himself to lie back and down on the furs that covered the bed as he stared at the canopied ceiling overhead. There was nothing much to be seen up there, but goodness gracious, the shocking delight of the furs underneath him!

He turned his head so that his cheek grazed against the lush sumptuousness of sable and mink. It felt so impossibly lovely against his skin. He stayed that way for a while, cheek nuzzling against the furs, one hand sliding and stroking absentely over them. A faint, spicy scent from their folds reached out to lull him comfortably away and farther away from himself.

*A second longer and I'll get up,* he thought. *There's still a bit of time. He'll never know I've been*
Luxuriously, he burrowed deeper into the soft furs and closed his eyes for what was supposedly just a moment.

Just one tiny moment…

John’s stroking hand slowed to a gentle halt on top of the furs, his fingers gradually relaxing, uncurling against them as he finally drifted deeply, sweetly, into sleep.

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**Author's Notes:** Just a little note concerning medieval castle bedrooms: In the earliest days of the European castle, the lord and his family slept in the great hall, along with all their servants. The noble family's sleeping area was usually at one end of the hall and was separated from the rest by simple curtains. In time, castle builders constructed separate chambers for the nobility, but although lords and ladies had their bed(s) to themselves, attendants might share the room for convenience and security. For the sake of warmth as well as privacy, the lord's bed was curtained, and his attendants slept on simple pallets on the floor, on trundle beds, or on benches. John's divan bed is a concession on my part. ^_~

A knight or lady's bed was large and wood-framed, and its "springs" were interlaced ropes or leather strips upon which a feather mattress would rest. It had sheets, fur coverlets, quilts and pillows, and it could be fairly easily dismantled and transported to other castles when the lord made a tour of his holdings. Originally, curtains were hung from the ceiling, but as the bed evolved, a frame was added to support a canopy, or "tester," from which the curtains hung.

(Source: Canopy Beds— the Bad Old Days)

More details concerning the layout of Wolf's Lair and medieval castles in the next chapter, when John decides to go exploring.

*Sotto voce:* in an undertone; said under the breath

*Je suis contente de te revoir:* I'm glad to see you

And here are some pictures of medieval bedrooms for your viewing pleasure (not necessarily authentic):
Chapter 17

Author's notes: Zelide, thanks so much for your lovely review. I couldn’t leave you a PM, but I just want to say you and I share the same guilty pleasure in gobbling up romance novels! As you will find in this chapter, I have employed the most clichéd romance-novel situation of all: the protagonist landing in the royal’s/ lord’s/ boss’s/ insert-other-names-for-superior-here’s bed. Hehehe.

Kat, yes, you’re right! Monseigneur cannot shirk his responsibilities to his people, and that is one of the main themes of captivity in the story.

Thanks so much for your messages, my dears! I really appreciate them. Please do keep them coming as I’d love to hear from all of you. I added some visual aids in the middle of the chapter to facilitate John’s tour of the Lair. More authors' notes at the end.

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He was drunk with fatigue by the time he emerged from the dungeons.

It was never a good state to be in. He hated the limitations his physical body always exacted from him— eating, drinking, sleeping. All of these activities were such a waste of precious time and energy; all of them clamoring for his attention when there were so many other interesting things to attend to.

Take now, for instance. There was nothing he would like to do more than to start his work in the dungeons, but weariness was getting to him, fast. Lady Hudson had taken her time with the lengthy endorsements until they had finished sometime after midnight. He had not been able to do anything but chafe all throughout; but the endorsements were necessary, impossible to put off as some decisions needed his approval as soon as possible. He hated being captive to his royal obligations but he had learned over the years that there were grave consequences attached when the many problems of handling his vast estates were not resolved as soon as possible: disputes among the tenants of his lands; the imposition of royal decrees; the daily tribulations of setting things right over the multitudes under him. Of course, there were overseers and courtiers to take care of these things in detail, but they needed his decisions and his approval. He was forever shackled to the mundane and the inane, yet he needed these people and the fruits of their labor as much as they needed him. Besides, any hint of negligence on his part and his dear brother would not hesitate to take away the sources of his revenues. He was shackled in more ways than one.

But now, finally, after a hot bath, there was some time left for himself, yet he had not counted on the long journey finally taking its toll on his body. Much to his disgust, he had found himself nodding off as soon as he had got to the dungeons to lay out the materials he would be needing in the coming days for his experiments. The cold and damp nether parts of the Lair were never the best place to fall asleep in, so he had grudgingly swung the iron doors shut behind him and, lighted candlestick in hand, made his way up the long, circular flights of uneven stone stairs to his rooms.

He entered his rooms not through the main doors but through the passageway concealed by the bookcases. As soon as he swung the revolving bookcase back to it proper place, he glanced around his rooms expectantly.

And frowned when his eyes failed to alight on John.

He should be asleep by now, tucked away in Billy’s divan at the foot of his bed. Yet he could see the divan with its coverlets neatly turned down and there was no sign of John anywhere on it.
Strange…

Had John decided to leave the rooms and gone wandering about the Lair at this time of night? Good God, could he have gotten lost somewhere in the castle?

He strode quickly over to inspect the closed doors but then his eyes alighted on his bed.

What on earth…!

He checked the doors and made sure they were securely locked before he went over to his bed, approaching it slowly as he took in the curious sight of John fast asleep on his bed.

There he lay, his body sprawled in an impossible position— half on and half off the other side of the massive bed, his legs dangling down the sides while his upper body was ensconced in the nest of furs. One hand rested on his stomach, the other was near his head, nestled in the furs. A whole range of possible reasons for the scenario ran through his mind, quick as lightning, yet only one seemed plausible: apparently, John had fallen asleep halfway through an inspection of his bed.

A smile rose slowly to his lips as he blew out his candle and set it aside. In the fading light of the setting moon, he moved around the bed slowly, gathering the curtains together, shutting his bed from outside view, until he reached John’s side.

He let his gaze roam over John’s still form, felt that now-familiar tug somewhere at the center of his chest at the sight of the man, open and defenseless in front of him in sleep as he never would be during waking moments. John was wearing a nightshirt that ran to below his knees, but it was hitched up a bit now as he lay in deep slumber across the bed so that his well-shaped, muscled legs and a part of his thigh could be seen.

He gazed at John at his leisure— something he could not afford to do when the man was awake. He remembered the very first time he had seen John by the hillside, in the rain: a fierce, little man with long, dirty, matted hair that he knew would gleam golden with just a bit of washing up, and wide eyes— deep blue and desperate— that belonged to some wild creature in need of taming.

He had felt something potent flare between them during that first swordfight, setting fire to the rain. He had known as soon as John had knocked his sword from his hands in that field that he had to have him. And his instinct had not been proven wrong. How fortuitous that he would find his would-be savior in such circumstances. It was such a perfect stroke of good luck— almost as though it were predestined, if he could believe in such things.

John looked so different now as he lay fast asleep, and it wasn’t just because he had had a shave and a haircut. Gone was the perennial frown that almost always attended his brow when he looked at him. The lines about his eyes and mouth were also relaxed and unguarded, rendering him more youthful, almost boyish; the expression of his face was impossibly peaceful.

He lifted his hands now and moved to touch John on those compact, powerful legs, lightly dusted with coarse golden hairs, and swung them easily up on the bed. John slept on. Carefully, he adjusted John’s position, settling a soft pillow under his head and tucking him neatly, almost tenderly, into the fur coverlets.

This task finished, he stood up and began to undress beside the bed, removing his boots, shucking his shirt and trousers and slipping into a linen nightshift before he climbed in. He turned to pull the last of the curtains closed behind him, plunging the interiors of this little room within a room into darkness and a soft, silent, nameless intimacy. Lifting the fur coverlets briefly aside, he settled down beside John on the bed.
John was feeling the most delicious sense of warmth all around him. For a while, there were dreams — fleeting, never to be remembered upon waking. Slowly though, like a swimmer emerging from deep waters, he began to surface from the dark fog of sleep to the twilight state between sleeping and waking.

He opened his eyes, blinking, briefly disoriented. He could see nothing: everything was pitch-black. Yet, the happy warmth lingered like a pair of arms around him, holding him safe and secure. Strange, this warmth. It had a sinuous, mobile quality about it. It shifted around his person as he tried to move, to turn around. A part of him wanted to give in to that cozy warmth and go back to sleep, so that for a moment he fought the urge — the need — to wake up.

Then he came awake abruptly as he remembered those last, few moments before sleep claimed him. His eyes snapped open, body stiffening into alertness as it registered its surroundings: he was in near-total darkness, on Monseigneur’s giant bed. He was swaddled in furs but the warmth was not just coming from there — he was being held! There were actually arms, long and lean, wrapped around him! There was also a body, emanating that incredible warmth, immediately behind his, spooned along the entire length of his spine!

He tried to rise in sudden alarm and the strong arms merely tightened around him, preventing him from getting up. He began to struggle in earnest, but the furs around him were a hindrance and the arms around him only tightened their hold until they turned forceful, cruel, in their grip. Now a leg was thrown over his thrashing ones and John could feel that long body behind him sliding over his back, taking advantage of his position and momentary disorientation to wrestle him into the bed on his stomach. A soft grunt of pain as he managed to elbow his faceless, formless opponent, but then his arms were caught, held onto his back with one unyielding hand while another reached over to clamp above his mouth as he finally drew in a breath to shout.

“Hush now, John,” commanded that deep voice softly, lips hovering unseen but very near his ear. John could feel himself breaking out into gooseflesh as Monseigneur’s hot breath tickled the sensitive skin just beneath that particular ear. “There will be no hysterics on your first night here. Not when you chose to be in my bed, to begin with.”

John said nothing, merely breathed harshly against the hardness of that hand over his mouth. From behind came that deep voice again, whispering, “I will remove my hand only if you promise not to shout.”

Breathing heavily, almost panting, John finally gave a nod. He felt the hand withdraw from his mouth and he gasped more air into his lungs.

“Get off me,” he said, his voice a harsh rasp as he felt Monseigneur’s full weight still pinning him down on the bed. Good lord, the man felt like a firebrand. He could feel the warmth emanating from him through their thin nightshirts, feel those long, muscled legs trapping his in an appallingly intimate way.

“Not unless you promise not to leave,” came Monseigneur’s silky whisper.

“I have to go!” John said, voice raised in an almost-wail of panic. “I can’t be here!”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to fall asleep in the middle of my bed, then,” retorted Monseigneur, but his voice was as warm as his body, and filled with languid amusement.

“I—it was a mistake,” stammered John. “I didn’t mean—”
“Save your excuses,” drawled Monseigneur as he tightened his grip on John’s pinioned arms. John gave a hiss of pain.

“Watch it!” snapped John. Then: “All right! Just... let go of me. I won’t leave.”

“Good.”

John snatched his hands away as soon as he felt Monseigneur release his grip on them. He froze as he felt Monseigneur’s long-fingered hands glide over his back, winding around his body again to envelop him in a snug embrace as he shifted them back to lie on their sides.

“John,” said Monseigneur softly, slurring ever so slightly in drowsiness. A frisson of awareness passed through John as he heard his name on the man's lips. “Insolent, impertinent John. What were you thinking, falling asleep right here? Is Billy’s divan not comfortable enough that you have to come and try out your lord’s bed?”

John snorted in annoyance and said quite shortly, “I was simply curious, all right?”

“Curious, yes,” said Monseigneur in that same languid voice. “You know what it did to the cat.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” cried John, hoping to sound exasperated and only partially succeeding. “You’re going to have me killed simply because you caught me lying down on your bed?”

“Hmm. Not killed, no,” murmured Monseigneur, and John flinched as he felt the man bury his face against his nape, brushing his nose against his skin and taking in his scent. “But punished, yes.”

“Bloody hell, that’s it. I’m leaving now!” cried John, having had enough of Monseigneur’s teasing. Once again, the arms and legs clamped down hard around him like a vice before he could effectively squirm free, bringing him savagely against that long, hard body even more fully than before.

“Stay,” growled Monseigneur. “Consider it your punishment.”

“You like doing this, don’t you?” John ground out, aghast to find himself stirring as he felt Monseigneur’s body behind him, felt that distinctive bulge of flesh against the small of his back. “You enjoy torturing people like this?”

Monseigneur’s tone turned inquisitive, interested. “Why, John,” he said, his tone quite conversational, “are you actually telling me that you’re quite affected by me, after all?”

“I’m telling you that I’m not interested in whatever game you’re playing,” John said through gritted teeth. “Whatever outcome you have in mind is going to be achieved only by force, and... and—”

Monseigneur actually laughed aloud as he heard John’s words, laced with rage and something close to virginal terror. His laughter was rich and dark, disembodied and smoky in the close confines of the space they shared. “I doubt if anyone can force you into anything against your will, John Watson,” he said. “In fact, I’d like to see anyone foolish enough to try. Oh no, no, no. Rest assured that I will take nothing from you against your wishes. You will give everything to me gladly and of your own choice. Soon.”

John thought about punching the man, then. He really did, though he decided not to in the end because he was not worth the hue and cry that would most certainly follow afterwards. John was, after all, staying in the man’s castle, for crying out loud. “And now?” asked John. “What happens now?”

“Now I want you to stay,” said Monseigneur.
John waited for a moment more, waited for some punch line to be delivered because staying for some cuddling—intensely weird enough in its own right—certainly could not be Monseigneur’s sole agenda. When nothing else seemed forthcoming, John said, “That’s it? Just stay?”

He felt Monseigneur’s lips stretch into a smile against the skin of his nape. “Stay until I fall asleep, at least. I wouldn’t be able to care even if I want to, after that. Unless you have something else in mind that you’re willing to share now,” he said, voice already growing wispy, trailing away at the end of his words.

Unseen in the dark, John shook his head incredulously. Unbelievable, this. All of this!

He let several minutes pass, face burning hot, keeping his body absolutely still and willing his racing heart to slow down. He felt Monseigneur’s fingers brush a slow pattern across his clothed chest.

“Your heart,” Monseigneur whispered. “It feels like a bird trapped in a cage, panicking to get out.”

John lifted a hand to wrench Monseigneur’s fingers away from his chest. “You didn’t say anything about touching,” he said curtly.

“I think that would have been too obvious to warrant mentioning,” drawled Monseigneur, defiantly snaking his arms around John once again.

John suppressed a shiver and, searching for a change of topic, reached out with a hand to tweak the bed curtains open a little.

“It’s getting light outside,” he said resignedly. “It must be nearly dawn. You should get some sleep.”

“Mmm…” Monseigneur snuggled closer against his back. “Tell them not to wake me.”

Over long, long minutes, John gradually felt Monseigneur’s hold relax on his body as his breathing evened out. Finally, John let out a shuddering breath and allowed himself to turn over to look at the man.

In the day’s faint first light, tricky and unreliable, Sherlock looked almost unreal, beautiful like some mythical beast as he lay on his side, curled against John’s back. With his tousled curls and those chiseled features set at rest, John could almost see the child he had been before he turned into the being that was Monseigneur—hard and cold, brilliant and polished like a diamond.

Just then he looked vulnerable, arms still wound—quite gently, this time—as though the embrace were the most natural thing in the world.

John tore his gaze away after a while, completely bowled over as always by Monseigneur’s effect on him, and of his own highly inappropriate response. His body felt tight, humming with tension. He was ashamed to realize that he was actually half-hard after their heated exchange, and what they had exchanged were mostly just words. Well, words and quite a bit of Monseigneur’s body pressed against his.

This was not good.

Not good at all.

When he was sure that Monseigneur was truly, soundly asleep, John carefully inched away from him, extracting himself from his arms, taking care to move slowly so as not to wake him. The feel of the stone floor beneath his bare feet was like pure ice as he emerged (rather, tumbled out) from the bed. He closed the bed’s curtains and stepped onto the carpets, shivering, arms around himself as he
made his way over to the little table where Billy had thoughtfully left some day clothes for him to change into.

He dressed quickly and quietly, firmly resisting the urge to pace, to grab at his hair and give in to a flurry of panic and want. No use berating himself on just how stupid and thoughtless he had been. How careless. *That* was as plain as day. And he was not going to give in to his body’s urges. Not this time.

But he needed to get out of here. That much was certain.

After he was done dressing, John opened the locked wooden doors and quietly slipped out.

He was not sure where he ought to go or how to get down; the corridor on both sides seemed to stretch on forever. He tried going down one way only to find it branching out into other, shadowy corridors and quickly retraced his steps to try the other end. Finally, he got to a narrow staircase that led him down several floors before emerging onto the castle’s grand staircase which, in turn, led to the main hall.

No sign of anyone just then, though John could not believe he was the only one up and about at this time.

He went down the steps quickly and crossed the main hall, looking this way and that, taking in the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and the huge tapestries that lined the high walls, the central one displaying Monseigneur’s heraldic device of a wolf rampant in black and silver. Impressive, all of it, but stifling. He needed to get out into the open air, to calm down.

He needed to leave Monseigneur and the humiliating memory of him being caught in the man’s bed far, far behind him. He needed to stop thinking what it could possibly mean to wake up, not to get thrown out of bed, but to have Monseigneur spooned behind him. He did not know what to make of the man, who seemed definitely mad. Mad, bad and dangerous to know. Also savagely forceful, ruthlessly charming, and oddly enough (God only knew how he could think this), even a little sweet.

John finally reached the main doors and opened them a crack. The air was cool and brisk against his burning face as he stepped outside. It felt wonderful.

In the grey light of very early morning, John surveyed the wide, stone courtyard in front of the castle. So this was where they had alighted last night. The warrior in John was keen to go exploring, to see the castle’s many fortifications and to work out its defenses against invading enemies. Considering its owner’s exacting nature, Wolf’s Lair promised to be a very, very interesting castle to look into.
Setting off at a brisk pace and in a most determined spirit of adventure, John marched across the broad expanse of courtyard, traversed so easily on horseback the night before but actually taking a great deal more time to cross on foot, until he reached the fortified walls of the main gateway. From there, he could see the narrow passageway or Barbican stretching out to the outer courtyard outside, where the servants were already at work in the stables, in the mews, carrying things and going about with their daily tasks.

Ah, but wait. This inner gateway and the Barbican were crucial elements of the castle’s defenses. The narrow passageways were a booby trap for enemies able to traverse the first lines of defenses outside. This was where they would need to pass through before they could reach the sanctum of the inner courtyard and the castle itself. This was where they could get trapped as people slammed the portcullis down on both ends of the passageways.

John walked through the gateway and into the Barbican, and looked up at the steep stone walls around him. Yes, right up there, all along the walls were arrow shafts— narrow, murder holes where the castle’s defenders could shoot at the trapped enemy below with arrows, or pour boiling oil and tar over their hapless heads.

He continued walking until he left the Barbican and emerged onto the outer courtyard. Here, again, was another castle feature— the moat. Unlike other castles where the moat was designed to be outside the castle, complete with a retractable drawbridge guarding the castle’s first gateway, the Lair’s moat was situated just inside the outer courtyard. This, John knew, was to protect the castle from any enemy cunning enough to think to dig his way underground to reach the castle. He would have met a watery death instead once he tunneled his way through the ground and reached the moat.

John grinned at the thought as he stared into the waters of the moat where some perch swam idly by. He turned back, entering the inner gateway and re-emerging onto the inner courtyard.

And took his first good look of Wolf’s Lair in clear daylight.

The castle was beautiful. An imposing, lovely thing of cool grey stone and brick, it was long and sprawling at the back but compact and gracious-looking up front. John found he could fight Monseigneur off for all he was worth, but Wolf’s Lair took the fight out of him in just seconds. And all John had to do was look at it.

Towards the castle’s rear were the private courtyard and the towers which, Billy promised him the night before, looked out over the sea.

And John found himself longing to look at the sea.

He made his way back into the castle, into the main hall, where he was promptly accosted by Billy.
“John, sir! Good morning,” said Billy cheerily, promptly taking his arm. “I’ve been looking all over for you. I went in to check on you but you weren’t in Monseigneur’s rooms. Did you have a good night’s sleep, sir?”

“Yes.” John cleared his throat. “Yes, I passed a very…comfortable night.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Billy eyed him dubiously. “I checked the divan and the sheets were just as I left them. You didn’t, by any chance, skip it entirely to spend the night on the floor?”

Well, goddamit, John Watson, don’t fucking blush in front of this boy!

“No. I, um— I guess I must have slept like a log, didn’t move around much to disturb anything,” he lied. “I refolded my blanket, as you must have noticed.”

“Oh, well, you shouldn’t have,” said Billy, still looking a bit dubious. “Anyway, Lady Hudson said you must be hungry so she sent me to fetch you for breakfast. She said the introductions last night had been too brief. She and everyone else would like to get to know you better.”

Author's Notes: The discussion of a castle's design and layout below is taken from "Design Secrets of Medieval Castles" and "Exploring Castles".

A lot of thought, ingenuity, and planning went into the design of Medieval castles. Everything from the outer walls to the shapes and location of stairwells were very carefully planned to provide maximum protection to the inhabitants. Here are some of the unique and lesser-known secrets of medieval castle designs.

The Moat – A moat, which is a body of water that surrounds a castle, is often thought of as a water obstacle that had to be crossed; but this wasn’t its primary function. One of the biggest concerns of the inhabitants of a medieval castle or fortress was the fear that an invading army would dig tunnels under the fortification. This tunneling could either provide access to the castle or cause a collapse of the castle walls. A moat prevented this because any tunnel dug under the moat would collapse and fill with water. It was a very effective deterrent against tunneling. Often times the moat wasn’t even on the outside of the castle. It was on the inside between the outer wall and the inner wall.

Concentric Circles of Defense – This was an extremely effective method of defense for the inhabitants of a Medieval castle. It was a series of obstacles that started on the outside of the castle and worked their way in. It was usually a progression like a cleared field: an outer wall, a moat, an inner wall, a keep and then a strong hold tower. An attacking army would have to overcome each of these obstacles one at a time. And this took a lot of time and effort to do.

The Main or Inner Gate as a Death Trap – The inner gate of a castle was often the most dangerous place in the castle because it was also a deadly trap. It is often connected to a narrow passageway or Barbican that had another gate at the far end. An iron portcullis guards the gates and if the attackers managed to break through the defenses and make it as far into the grounds as the Barbican, the portcullis was brought down on either end and the attackers were trapped in the narrow passageway. The walls of the Barbican had small holes called death holes or murder holes (meurtrières) where the defenders could fire arrows and other projectiles at the trapped attackers below them.

The Hidden Secrets of Stairwells – Stairwells were often very carefully designed in Medieval castles. The stairwells of towers were often curved very narrowly and in a clockwise direction. This meant that attackers coming up the stairs had their sword hands (right hand, usually) against the
interior curve of the wall and this made it very difficult for them to swing their swords. Defenders had their sword hands on the outside wall, which meant they had more room to swing. Another ingenious design of stairs was that they were designed with very uneven steps. Some steps were tall and others were short. The inhabitants, being familiar with the uneven pattern of the stair heights, could move quickly up and down the stairs but attackers, in a dimly lit stairwell, would easily fall and get bogged down in the stairwells. This slowed them down significantly and made them vulnerable to attack.

**Secret Passages** – What Medieval castle would be complete without secret passages? Many castles had secret passages and they served a variety of purposes. Some passages were designed to open up a distance from the castle so inhabitants could escape during an attack or get supplies in and out during a siege. Secret passages also led to secret chambers where people could hide, supplies could be kept or a well for water was dug.

The phrase “Mad, bad and dangerous to know” is attributed to Lady Caroline Lamb, famously describing her lover, Lord Byron.

"Set(ting) fire to the rain" is lifted from one of my favorite songs by Adele.
Chapter 18

Special Thanks: To PlumpPushu, for her excellent help with the French needed in this chapter, which is quite beyond my capabilities. Thanks so much, my dear!

Lady Hudson was waiting for them in the great dining hall.

“Oh, there you are,” she cried as soon as she caught sight of Billy and John. Smiling delightedly, she stretched out both hands to John who, after a brief hesitation, took them in his grasp uncertainly.

“John Watson. I didn’t manage to get a proper look at you last night. Let me look at you now,” she continued, peering closely into John’s face with kind, dark eyes. What she saw before her evidently met her approval, for she said warmly, “Well. I’m sure you must be hungry. Let’s get some breakfast into you, then.”

John did not really know what to say to her. Judging from last night, he knew the lady was kind-hearted but he had not really expected this kind of openness, this ready and unquestioning acceptance of his person, so fast. He cleared his throat and looked about him uncertainly. The long table stretched out before them, empty. No place had been set in readiness for any meal.

Lady Hudson gave a small chortle as she saw John’s brief gaze on the table, a little embarrassed, a little shy. “Oh, we’re not eating here, dear,” she said as she threaded an arm around his and led him gently out of the room. “We very rarely do. Only when Monseigneur is present and only if we absolutely have to. I thought you might be more comfortable breaking your fast with us elsewhere.”

She broke off as a thought occurred to her. “Unless…of course, if you would prefer…” she said, uncertainly, eyeing him and then the long table that they were leaving behind.

“No! No,” said John quickly. He breathed a sigh of relief as they left the cold, haughtily impersonal dining hall behind. “Thank you that we won’t have to eat there, actually.”

“I thought so,” she said, smiling. “Though I really hope you don’t mind. We’re all sorts around here, and we don’t really adhere to any of the stuffy protocol upheld at Court. Now come and help an old lady wobble out. I declare, this hip gets worse with each winter that passes.”

They walked sedately down a long hall with square, latticed windows and vaulted arches in the ceilings, bright with sunlight, with Billy trailing patiently behind.

“Of course, Monseigneur told me the circumstances surrounding your acquaintance,” she murmured, voice hushed so that only John could hear her. “Not in full detail, of course, but enough. How can we ever thank you?”

John fought to keep his features blank. “I…can’t refuse assistance when it is needed,” he said. Then, almost defiantly, he continued, “I would have done it for anyone.”

So Monseigneur had told the lady of their acquaintance. The man certainly had a way with words. John was willing to bet he had conveniently omitted the juicy parts of his being held captive and then forced to remain in the man’s service by coercion and blackmail.

“I know you would. I know that you’re just the type of person who would help out a stranger. Only, Monseigneur is hardly just any stranger,” replied Lady Hudson. “Think how it would be if, instead
of the homecoming we had last night, we would be meeting his funeral cortège right there outside the castle. It does not bear contemplation.”

John felt the sudden pinch of her grip on his arm and was startled by the depth of true feeling in her voice, the tight look in her eyes. She drew in a shaky breath and said, “This is what I’ve always feared would happen whenever he’s away from here: that lightning would strike twice.”

John turned to stare at her sharply. She nodded grimly. “This isn’t the first time he’s been poisoned,” she said.

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John did not get an opportunity to ask questions as they finally reached their destination.

“Well, everyone, here he is!” Lady Hudson announced as Billy flung the doors open to a small, well-lit dining room somewhere at the back of the castle.

The party was very small, consisting only of two people: a short, portly man about John's age and the girl from last night, Lady Mary. Cries of delighted greeting issued from them, as though John were an old and dear acquaintance rather than the complete stranger that he was.

“Lady Mary Hooper, whom I’m sure you will remember from last night,” said Lady Hudson, waving a hand at the girl. John smiled as the young woman bobbed him a neat curtsy.

“Enchanté, Monsieur,” said Lady Mary, smiling her pretty smile.

“Now, Mary, it’s not as if you cannot speak anything other than Gondalian,” chided Lady Hudson, a slight widening of her eyes belying the mildness of her tone.

Be polite and speak the language he understands, her look said.

Mary blushed furiously and immediately translated, “Enchanted to meet you, sir.”

“Uh. Likewise,” said John.

“And this is Michael Stamford,” said Lady Hudson, waving to the rotund, smiling man beside her.

“Pleased to meet you,” Stamford said easily.

John smiled. “Hello.”

“Mike is Monseigneur’s apothecarist and chief gardener,” said Lady Hudson. “He comes in during the day but goes home to the village after dark. And last, but not the least, I would like to introduce you to the person in charge of arranging our little breakfast.”

Billy opened a side door and a large, matronly woman with apple cheeks and grey hair pinned back neatly in a cap sidled in.

“John, this is Mary Turner, our chief cook. Mary, this is John Watson,” said Lady Hudson.

“Oh, good morning to ye, laddie,” said Mary Turner cheerily.

Her hearty, lilting accent caught John unawares. “Wait, you’re…you’re Angrian,” he said, breaking out into a grin as he heard the familiar cadences of his country in her voice.

“Aye, but I’ve lived me entire married life here in Gaaldine. I’ve been Monseigneur’s chief cook
since he moved here when he was a wee lad,” said Mary Turner, giving him a proud smile.

John’s smile widened.

Mary Turner gave him a fond glance up and down and said to Lady Hudson, “Well, my Lady, I see we have our work cut out for us. Just look at him—thin as a lath! We won’t be having that now, will we?”

“Oh, definitely not, Mary,” agreed Lady Hudson. “I am sure a week or so of your cooking will set him aright.”

“Aye, perhaps sooner if I can help it,” said Mary Turner, giving John a broad wink. “Well, I’d best be getting back to my kitchens before any of the pies being prepared for dinner goes missing. Enjoy your breakfast.”

They settled around the oak table and tucked into a generous breakfast of smoked herring and salmon, cheese and bread, weak beer and sop in wine.

"We don't usually eat like this during breakfast," clarified Lady Hudson to John, "but then it's not everyday that we get to welcome somebody to our small household."

Something about her words made John pause in mid-chew, made him consider for the first time his status in Monseigneur's household. From the way Lady Hudson was carrying on, it seemed as though he were going to be a permanent fixture about the place, and John was not sure how to feel about it.

He was not allowed time to contemplate it either. They had so many questions for him: where was he from? What were the Angrian Highlands like? How did he come to Gaaldine? How did he meet Monseigneur?

Billy cut in before John had to answer anything with a sanitized version of their fateful meeting: how Monseigneur had found him wandering about the edge of the forest near the garrison, lost. And how John had very effectively made Monseigneur's fever go away.

"John, sir, have you seen much fighting in Angria?" asked Billy, who had been very much impressed with John's performance at the behourd. John would have applauded how Billy had very deftly steered the conversation away from any potential awkwardness. Clearly, there was much to the boy he had yet to realize.

"Oh, William," interjected Lady Mary, "don't go pressing him into telling us about all that."

Billy turned pink up to his ears and stammered an apology. He had forgotten that they were in the company of ladies.

John watched, amused, as Lady Mary effortlessly took over the conversation and asked him, "Have you ever met your queen, sir? Is she a lovely lady? The royal wedding has been on everybody's lips since we heard of it days ago."

"Oh, heavens me! It almost slipped my mind!" cried Lady Hudson in dismay. "His Majesty is due for a visit in a week's time!"

A delighted squeal from Lady Mary, while the men all seemed to cast their eyes somewhere else.

Of course, thought John. The King's arrival meant more work for everyone, Lady Hudson most of all.
"Oh, there will be so many things to take care of," murmured Lady Hudson distractedly. "As soon as breakfast is finished, then. Mary, I will need you to take over some of the chores for this afternoon."

"So, John." Mike Stamford this time, as the ladies broke off to discuss their chores. "We heard you are a healer."

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

Mike smiled. "I'm sure you would love Monseigneur's gardens. We have all sorts of medicinal herbs growing here," he said. "All part of his work, but I'm sure you know that already."

"He did say something about it, yeah," said John.

"Well, we'll be given more specific instructions later on, I'm sure," Mike said.

John smiled. "All right."

Breakfast was finished very soon afterwards, with Mike heading back to his gardens, and Lady Hudson and Lady Mary still deep in their discussion on how to split the castle chores between them in the next few days.

As much as John would have wanted to know more about what Lady Hudson had hinted at regarding Monseigneur's poisoning, he was given no opportunity to pursue it. Nobody else seemed able to accommodate him, so he found himself tagging along after Billy as he went about his chores for the morning.

As Monseigneur's personal page, Billy was responsible for passing his lord's many messages to the servants all over the castle, and given that this was their first day back after having been away a long time, the messages were long and tedious, ranging from orders for the care of his horses and hawks to meetings with his musicians, his tailors, even his bathmen and barber.

So John followed Billy to the royal stables to see to Monseigneur's horses, to the mews to see to his hawks and falcons, and waited patiently as Billy chatted pleasantly with the men tending the animals, giving them Monseigneur's orders and receiving messages in return that needed to reach Monseigneur. In the mews, a familiar face: Azrail was perched on her wooden stand, a yellow leg chained down to keep her in place. She looked to be still recovering from her long journey home, though she regarded John with a bright-eyed look of interest as Eustace, Monseigneur's chief falconer, let him feed her strips of raw meat.

Afterwards, Billy and John were back at the Lair proper, and this time there was a little surprise for John himself.

"Monseigneur has asked his tailors to take your measurements for a set of new clothes," Billy said, ushering him inside a suite of rooms where an elderly man and two young apprentices waited. "He says you will need to put on something suitable for His Majesty."

"What? I'm going to meet the King?" asked John, taken aback. Somehow he did not think it would be necessary for him to do so.

"News travels fast," Billy said a bit wryly. "His Majesty has heard what you have done for Monseigneur and wishes to see you personally."

John found he could say nothing to that. He stood still and watched, bemused, as the tailors took his measurements—the lengths and half-lengths of his shoulders, his arms and his torso, the circumference of his waist, the lengths and half-lengths of his legs. Next came a milliner to measure
his head for hats and a shoemaker to make wooden casts of his feet for shoes. It was all a bit confusing to John that they should make such a complete fuss over him. Billy grinned delightedly as he watched the procedure a few feet away.

After that, there were other errands that brought them all over the castle. It took them the entire morning, but they were done before dinner with almost half an hour to spare.

"Where would you want to go after this?" Billy queried. "I'm sure your afternoon will be occupied with Monseigneur, once he's up."

"The towers," said John without hesitation. "I want to see the sea."

So Billy took him to the three towers situated at the back of the castle. The towers, John noted with interest, were round in configuration, with the largest of them—the Keep—being situated in the middle.

"It's the castle's stronghold," said Billy, motioning to the Keep as they walked past it. "But I've found the western tower over there to hold the best view of the ocean."

It took them minutes and minutes to climb the circular stairs that spiraled ever upwards, the occasional window they passed presenting John with a view of the world outside that steadily ascended to the skies, until they came to Billy's window.

Billy grinned as he watched John take the stunning view in. There, seen from a small distance outside the window where they had stopped, was the vast expanse of the blue ocean. John could see the white waves of the water rolling, crashing against the rocky cliff upon which the castle was situated.

"Lovely, isn't it?" said Billy.

"It's amazing," murmured John, eyes never leaving the sea as he rested his arms on the stony window ledge and heard the soothing rhythm of the waves for the first time.

"This is my favorite place in the entire castle," said Billy. "It's where I sometimes go when I need some time alone."

"You don't mind my sharing it?" John asked softly.

"No, of course not." Billy must have sensed something in John's tone, for he continued, "It's all happened so fast, hasn't it? I know how you feel, as though you've been uprooted."

John turned to him, surprised.

"It's all right," said Billy earnestly. "We've all been there before. All of us. I remember that day my lord uncle came to fetch me from my mother's house. It was almost like yesterday. It took us days to reach this place as well. I was fifteen—no longer that young, yet I cried everyday for home and Maman until one day I just stopped crying."

John stared at the boy in front of him, eyes hooded.

Billy swallowed. "All I'm saying is, you'll get used to the Lair, sir," he said. "I got used to it, and I'm sure you will, too. And we're all here to help. There's Lady Hudson and Lady Mary, who are both very kind. And Mike Stamford and myself. My lord uncle will be back in time for His Majesty's visit as well. We'll all help out in any way we can to make you feel at home."
John could not help but smile at Billy's kindness. He would like to say that it wasn't the Lair that he would have trouble getting used to, but of course he couldn't.

"You miss your mum, don't you?" asked John gently.

"Everyday."

"I'm just curious," said John, "about Monseigneur's household. How few we are here. I was expecting many more."

"Monseigneur is picky with the people around him," said Billy carefully.

Is he? thought John, thinking about the circumstances of his association with Monseigneur. How much care had Monseigneur really taken, bringing John under his wing like this? They had only known each other a week, and Monseigneur's hasty decisions were based on reasons which seemed flimsy, at best. After all, there were other healers besides John who could help him with his development of a universal poison antidote; there were other better fighters, better soldiers, than John. These two traits aside, who was John to anyone? He was nothing, he was nobody.

"As you may have noticed, Monseigneur does not place his trust on people very easily," Billy said.

John raised a mental eyebrow on that one.

"For good reason," Billy continued.

"What reason?" John asked, suddenly keen. "Does this have anything to do with his being poisoned a while back? Lady Hudson said something about this not being the only time he's been poisoned."

Billy looked briefly uncomfortable at John's directness but evidently decided that if Lady Hudson had been the first to spill the beans, he could afford to spill a little more.

"That was the reason why Monseigneur left Court to set up his home here," said Billy. "He was being poisoned by his own personal physician. He was thirteen years old at the time."

Of course, Billy said, he did not really know the full story. He heard it piecemeal over the years—bits here, bits there. Parts from his lord uncle during a careless or drunk moment, parts from Lady Hudson herself. Other parts were pure hearsay.

It was fact that the second prince had been born sickly. He had arrived a few weeks before the expected date and the queen—now the queen dowager—had almost died giving birth to him. After his birth there were no more royal children to be had. Yet the queen had slowly rallied back to health just as he had rallied with the care of a devoted nanny in the form of Lady Hudson, who was also one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting and her closest friend.

Monseigneur had grown up with a sharp mind and an equally sharp tongue—typical traits to be found in his family, apparently—but as a child he had not taken the air around the royal residences in Glasstown well and he had been periodically sick with an abdominal ailment during his thirteenth year.

The accidental discovery by Lady Hudson that Monseigneur's very own physician, a doctor named Culverton Smith, had been tainting his food and drink with a foul laxative had been the scandal of the court at the time. Unhappily enough, the doctor was the personal physician of the two princes, and the fact that the crown prince, who was now the King, had escaped such treatment from the
doctor had prompted certain ugly rumors to start that somehow the younger prince was being eliminated to prevent any possibility of succeeding the older one when he became King.

It was all untrue, of course, and entirely illogical, but the rumors spread like wildfire. To this day one would hear whispers, and more whispers. Nothing concrete, but whispers had a way of insinuating themselves in places that more solid things could not.

"Does Monseigneur himself believe any of this?" asked John, enthralled by Billy's story.

"He never really said anything to address the rumors, and his strained relationship with his brother does not help," Billy said. "They’ve never been the closest of brethren."

But hold on, thought John. Monseigneur did say something to him about the King and the reason why he could not be behind the latest poisoning attempt.

He wouldn’t quite dare or else he would have done it years ago.

And the one reason why the King would not dare: Because of Mummy...

"So he was given his own place here and removed from his family at the age of thirteen," said John, frowning. Bleeding Christ! "What did his mother have to say about it?"

"Oh, she had wept and wept, to be sure," said Billy. "But the King his father had decided it, and Lady Hudson came with him to manage his household for him, so there we have it."

John shook his head at the narrative. Unbelievable. Everything about Monseigneur was just unbelievable.

"So that was the reason why he doesn’t trust doctors," mused John, more to himself than to Billy.

"He’s never really needed one since he came here," said Billy. "The seclusion and the sea air did their work, and during the times he had been ill enough to really need something, Mike Stamford’s been able to give him a powder or two."

"So what happened to the doctor?" John wanted to know.

Billy shrugged. "He was executed, naturally," he said.

"Did he ever say why he thought to poison the prince?"

Billy scoffed. "This is where rumor comes in. He never formally said, but the priest who took his last confession claimed that he believed Monseigneur was not a human child, but the devil's spawn," he said, shaking his head. "Would you believe that nonsense?"

In all of Billy's narration what probably chilled John the most was the thought that he was not sure what to think of this last question.

They had been so engrossed with their talk that they had forgotten the time. Dinner would have started by the time they got back to the Lair. John knew as soon as they stepped into the great hall and a harried-looking manservant came rushing to them that something was up.

They had been looking for them for the greater part of an hour, said the manservant. Monseigneur had asked them to assemble in the grand dining hall to eat with him. John knew as soon as they stepped into the great hall and a harried-looking manservant came rushing to them that something was up.
They found Monseigneur seated at the head of the long, long table, now covered in snow-white linen and lined with silver plates and dishes. To his immediate right sat Lady Hudson and Lady Mary was perched gingerly on the edge of her seat several chairs down the table from him. Servants stood at the ready by the walls to serve the food. Nobody was talking—a tense silence hovered over them as Monseigneur, his face masked, contemplated his red wine, his long fingers gently swirling the ornate glass and silver wineglass around and around on the table.

Lady Hudson turned her head as Billy and John entered the room, huffing, breathing their excuses. "Where have you been?" she mouthed silently at Billy. Her puckered brows told them the situation was not good.

Billy merely shook his head and gestured at John to take the seat on Monseigneur's left as he seated himself farther down the table facing Lady Mary.

Monseigneur let go of the stem of his wineglass. "You may begin the prayers, Lady Hudson," he said neutrally, not even looking at John and Billy's direction.

The mealtime prayers were quickly over, and John found the heavy, oppressive silence settling in once more as the servants moved smoothly forward and began serving the food, beginning with Monseigneur.

John drank soup from a mazer and glanced at Monseigneur's profile, trying to wrap his mind around the concept that the man before him and the thirteen year old boy in Billy's story were one and the same person and found it an extremely difficult task. And yet, there was that cuddling incident from early morning. John could not remember it without feeling a twinge somewhere deep inside himself that was partly awkward revulsion, bewilderment and partly (and very, very remotely) something like pity. And a strange, hard twist deep in his gut, in his heart, as he remembered the feel of the man's arms around him.

The feeling did not last long, not when he was surrounded by a blanket of chill emanating from Monseigneur. John waited ten full minutes before he thought the silence too ridiculous to continue. "I uh...I asked Billy to take me to the towers after his errands," he said lightly. "The view of the sea there is fantastic. I've never—"

Monseigneur lifted his head and, still not looking at him, cut him off by saying in a voice completely devoid of inflection, "Don't speak at table unless you're addressed first, John."

John shut his mouth with an almost audible snap. Well, he was angry as hell, all right. Gone was the person who had insisted on a bit of cuddling with John in bed just that morning. It was as though he had never existed.

Monseigneur turned to address Billy: "En retard pour le dîner et maintenant ceci... Dites-moi, combien de mauvaises habitudes a-t-il pu s'acquérir en votre compagnie en une seule matinée et allons-nous laisser la situation continuer ainsi? (Late for dinner and now this. Tell me, how many bad habits has he acquired since this morning in your company and are we going to allow this to continue?)"

"J'en suis absolument désolé, Monsieur (I'm sorry, sir)," breathed Billy, looking stricken.

John stared at Monseigneur, then at Billy, understanding not a word that had just passed between them.

Monseigneur's voice was cold and precise as it cut through the silence like a whip: "N'en soyez pas désolé. Assurez-vous seulement que cela ne se reproduise plus. (Don't be sorry. See to it that it does
A moment when all eyes were downcast except John's.

Monseigneur’s gaze now slid to John. "I hardly think you would take all that time just admiring the sea. What were you doing there to forget the time so completely?" he queried.

John licked his lips, feeling as though he were walking on the edge of a very sharp knife. He was careful to keep his tone light as he said, "Well, we got to talking, Billy and I."

"About what?" asked Monseigneur as he sliced at a chunk of roasted beef with his knife.


Billy jerked his head up, threw him a look of frank alarm: *Are you mad?*!!

Even Lady Hudson was staring at him with wide eyes. But John never broke eye contact with Monseigneur.

Monseigneur stared at him for a moment, then lowered his knife and turned quite deliberately to Lady Hudson to say, "Incorrigible as always, I see. I should have known you’d be babbling like a brook as soon as you’ve heard my brief account of garrison life from last night."

"My dear, I don’t know what you’re talking about. You're the one who said we can trust John Watson fully, after all," returned Lady Hudson serenely as she sipped some of her wine. “And do mind your manners, young man, lest some people think you’ve been brought up without them.”

John felt a surge of admiration for the woman even as her words took him by surprise. "What I mean to say is, it's fine. It's all fine," he said quickly. “I needed to understand why, and now I think I do."

Monseigneur turned back to him, a corner of his mouth already quirking up in a smirk. "All fine?" He said, scoffing. "You must be dreaming, John, if you think I will trust you enough to be my doctor after that mushroom sleeping draught you dosed me with. Rest assured I have not forgotten about that."

John did not miss a beat as he deadpanned, "Well, you have to admit that the draught was quite effective. And beneficial."

"Mushroom sleeping draught?" repeated Lady Mary, who was not sure where the conversation was leading, or how the atmosphere could change around them so abruptly.

But the ice was already melting. Try as he might, Monseigneur found that he could not take back the smirk, which only widened into a full smile at the memory of John's audacious sleeping potion. The tension in the room gradually cleared as the ladies pressed him curiously about the draught and Monseigneur declined to recount the episode for the ladies' benefit. Instead, he launched into an account of His Majesty's plans for the upcoming wedding as written in his missives.

John smiled too and, catching Billy's vastly relieved and grateful eye over the ensuing chatter, gave him a small wink.

Don’t worry, I've got this one, his wink seemed to say. *For now.*

Author’s Notes: In the Middle Ages, breakfasts were not the elaborate affairs of Victorian times. It
was, in fact, practically nonexistent during the earlier medieval period, and quite sparse (by contemporary standards) in the latter years. To be able to have merely a “sop in wine” (bread or toast in wine) every day for one's morning repast was considered luxurious. As time went by other items began to appear on the menu, such as cheese, smoked or preserved herring, trout and salmon, or salted fish such as ling, hake, cod, or whiting and the occasional slice of boiled beef. The breakfast prepared by Mrs. Turner is already considered quite a feast just to make John feel welcome. (Source: Godecookery)

A typical dining table setting in the high middle ages consisted mostly of the table linens, metal plates (silver and gold dishes in royal or noble households, wood for the lower classes) or trenchers (as already mentioned in a previous chapter) and mazers, used for soups (these were large, wide-mouthed cups, similar to what lattes are served in today, but without the handle). Spoons were fairly common. Forks were also known, but used primarily by cooks, not by those eating. These generally only had 2 prongs. An interesting bit of info not yet fully expanded in the fic is that guests were expected to bring their own knives to the table (in fact, it would have been considered déclassé to eat off someone else's knife). This knife was the primary eating utensil, used not only for cutting but also much the same way we use forks nowadays. Drinking vessels were usually made of wood or horn or metal. Wineglasses were considered to be extremely rare (Source: Elise K from yahoo answers and Medieval-spell)

The phrase “thin as a lath” was used by Stamford to describe Watson in ACD’s “A Study in Scarlet”. Monseigneur’s murderous physician, Dr. Culverton Smith, is lifted from “The Adventure of the Dying Detective”.

During the Medieval ages, there were no titles such as Mr. or Mrs. to refer to common folk. They were usually referred to by their full names.

In a medieval castle, the Keep is the highest or strongest tower and is situated at the heart of the castle's fortifications, making it the strong-hold. During medieval times, people would not have called it the Keep, they would have called it don-jon (French for strong-hold) but because this is too easily confused with dungeon (which John will be seeing for the first time in the next chapter!), the Keep will pertain to the main tower throughout this story. (Source: Exploring Castles- Medieval Castle Layout)
It may seem harsh that royal children got sent away from home early, but it was a fairly common practice then. Henry VIII sent the Princess Mary (the future Mary I, or Bloody Mary) from her mother's household to hold her own court as Princess of Wales in Ludlow Castle when she was ten years old. (Source: Wikipedia)
Chapter 19

**Author's notes:** Hello everyone! Many thanks for the reviews, as always! Please do let me know what you guys think. More notes can be found at the end of the chapter.

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Monseigneur took John to see Mike Stamford after dinner was over.

It seemed his earlier churlishness was back. “I know what you’re doing, John,” he said as they made their way to the inner courtyards of the Lair. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replied John easily as he walked beside Monseigneur, quickening his steps to match the man’s long, graceful strides.

“Billy,” said Monseigneur succinctly. “Stop covering for the boy. As my page, he has to realize that there are consequences attached to everything he does or fails to do. He’s here to learn all he can to take after his uncle, after all. He’s responsible for you but don’t suppose you’re doing him any favors by covering for him whenever he trips up. Unless you want me going after you instead.”

“Well, you didn’t have to scare the living daylights out of him,’ retorted John. “From the way you were carrying on back there, you’d think Billy’s committed bloody murder. We were just late for dinner, not—”

Monseigneur stopped abruptly in his tracks and rounded on John. “I wait for no one, John,” he snapped. “Not even you.”

*So why did you wait?* John would have wanted to ask, though he very wisely did not.

Aloud, he said, “You know, that’s not how it works in the real world. Delays and accidents do happen and things sometimes don’t go the way you intend them to. You can’t just blow up every time things don’t go your way.”

Monseigneur’s lips thinned ominously as he stared at John. “You forget this isn’t the outside world,” he growled. “This is my realm. My Lair. Here, my word is law. Here, I don’t wait for anyone. So long as you’re here you’re subject to the same rules as everybody else, John.”

John stared back at him, surprised at the man’s vehemence. He was not sure what was going on, why Monseigneur seemed so upset, and something about the man’s words made John wonder. It was all so simple, really, to tell Monseigneur that he could have just gone ahead with the meal without waiting for him and Billy, but John instinctively knew this was going to lead to trouble. For reasons unknown, Monseigneur was spoiling for a fight today and John had the sneaking suspicion that he was being goaded into starting one for him. To hell with the man if he thought John could be lured into a nonsensical quarrel so easily.

“All right,” John finally said. “I promise I won’t ever be late for meals again.”

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say. He had meant it to be placating but it had come out as flippant instead. John actually felt something deep inside him quail as he saw Monseigneur’s eyes narrow at his words. “So now you’re mocking me. You think you’re being very clever, don’t you, John?” he asked coldly. “Or perhaps you think you’re so favored that you’re exempt from my rules or the consequences should they not be heeded?”
“I never said I was,” John found himself saying. “Favored, I mean. And I’m not mocking you.”

“Yes, you are,” said Monseigneur. “And obviously, you’re well aware of what it means to be a favorite.”

John blinked, stymied once again by the man’s words. He would not have put it that baldly, but yes, of course he had thought and wondered about it. How could he not after everything Monseigneur had subjected him to, so far? How could he not, after all that special attention in the garrison, that bit of cuddling in bed this morning? If *that* was not a mark of favor, highly unusual and outrageous though it was, then John was not exactly sure what being favored meant.

“Am I your favorite then?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself. Considering his painful ambivalence to Monseigneur’s attentions, John did not know what had made him say it, and he could see that it seemed to inflame Monseigneur’s volatile temper further.

“Careful, John,” said Monseigneur softly. “See to it that your impertinence knows its boundaries. Don’t think you’re special enough to be able to overstep them.”

With that, he turned abruptly away, leaving John behind to look at him as though he had gone completely mad. What had brought this on? Talk about someone getting up on the wrong side of the bed!

After a moment, John resumed walking, following him from a discrete distance into the gardens.

John ought to have been prepared. After all, Mike Stamford had promised him that he would love Monseigneur’s gardens, and indeed at first sight, the gardens— like everything else about the Lair— managed to take John’s breath away.

To say that the gardens were extensive would have been quite an understatement. They comprised the entire inner courtyard of the Lair and beyond, so that the impression John had as he stepped into the realm of the plants was of the gardens being a separate world all to their own. The variety was enough to have John stopping periodically to inspect a new specimen before him. He knew a lot of the plants, but it was intriguing that there were quite a few that he was entirely unfamiliar with.

Yet he didn’t have time to linger over them; Monseigneur was making his way resolutely to the very center of the gardens where a strange glass edifice stood. John had only a few seconds to gawk at the thing before he saw Monseigneur yank the doors to this wondrous structure open and stepped in.

“Mike!” He heard Monseigneur bellow.

John felt his jaw drop as he followed Monseigneur in and saw the contents of the glass house for the first time.

Flowers.

A profusion of them, a sudden riot of color in the quiet, green world they had just entered. Flowers all around— in great pots, in water, hanging in the air— most of them new to John.

After a moment, he saw Mike appear as though startled around a corner of this colorful jungle and scampered over to Monseigneur.

“My lord,” he said in greeting.
“Mike, this is John Watson,” said Monseigneur briefly, gesturing to John with a flick of his hand. “I’m sure you’ve already heard of him.”

At Monseigneur’s tone, Mike glanced uncertainly at John, who merely gave him a tight smile. Mike replied, “We’ve met, my lord. Over breakfast this morning.”

“Good,” drawled Monseigneur. “I shan’t be bothered with introducing you to each other again, then. John will be joining you in our work. How is the infusion coming along?”

“It’s coming along well, I would say,” said Mike as he got into step with Monseigneur. “Thirty-six ingredients, so far. My lord was right in recommending honey to mix them once they have been pounded to a fine powder. I would suggest a drop or two of castor to mask the scent of the concoction, though.”

“Thirty-seven ingredients now,” said Monseigneur as he pulled out John’s small bottle of medicine made from the White Star. “Have you a small batch of the infusion ready for testing?”

“Yes, my lord,” replied Mike as he set about preparing a sample of the infusion from a large bottle. Monseigneur took the vial finally handed to him. “I shall look forward to testing it amongst our subjects in the dungeons. See to it that I will not be disturbed from my work, and nobody is to enter the dungeons without my permission. Keep John with you and familiarize him with the gardens.”

John stared at Monseigneur as he made his departure, leaving him behind with Mike.

Mike’s shoulders slumped as he relaxed. “Well, that’s that,” he said, sounding relieved when he was sure Monseigneur was out of earshot.

“What was all that about?” John wanted to know.

“Oh. This,” said Mike, gesturing at the bottle that he held in his hand. “This is what we’ve been working on for months—a poison antidote.”

“What’s in it?” asked John, taking the amber bottle to peer at the contents.

“Well, there’s costmary, sweet flag, hypericum, gum, sagapenum, Ilyrian iris, even dried rose leaves, to name a few of the ingredients,” Mike enumerated. “The ingredients have all been selected based on their medicinal properties. The infusion is not yet complete though. I’m not even sure if it’s effective; that’s the reason why Monseigneur will have to try it out in the dungeons.”

John’s attention was instantly diverted from the bottle in his hands. He knew he had to tread around the subject carefully and not show Mike just how deeply interested he was in finding out more about the place mentioned. “Really?” he found himself saying casually. “And what’s in the dungeons?”

“Oh, he’s never told you?” queried Mike.

John smiled and shook his head. “No.”

“Well, you’ll just have to wait until he does. We’ve been sworn not to divulge anything without his permission.”

John was annoyed to find his heart sinking with intense disappointment at Mike’s words. “Why?” he prodded. “What’s in the dungeons to warrant such secrecy? He can’t possibly have prisoners in there now, or can he?”
Mike laughed a little uneasily. John could see that he was ready to change the subject, so he pressed on, adding a little bit of coaxing into his tone, “Come on. You can tell me. I mean, I do understand his interest in poisons, having been a victim of not just one, but two poisoning attempts.”

At Mike’s look of astonishment, John gave a brief and colorless account of the events that had transpired in the garrison. If he hoped that by doing so he could relax Mike’s guard, he was proven wrong.

“Listen, John,” said Mike solemnly. “I need you to make a promise that you won’t go wandering down the dungeons, especially without Monseigneur’s express permission, and without other people knowing you’re there.”


“It’s not a good place to be in,” said Mike simply.

“You’ve been there, haven’t you?” John said.

“Yes,” said Mike, his face pale. And would say no more.

Of course, John thought resentfully, this deliberate holding back of information regarding the dungeons was the perfect way to stoke one’s curiosity about the place.

For that first afternoon in Mike’s company, he was given a tour of the glass house and introduced to the rare and exotic flowers residing there, all of them medicinal, all of them extremely hard to attain and maintain.

Afterwards, they left the glass house to explore the gardens outside, and John found that he could only give Mike half his attention as his mind ruminated over the riddle that was the dungeons.

Even the sight of the massive topiary—a maze cut out from hedges of yew that reached well above a man’s head and spanning eighty feet by eighty feet—somehow failed to amaze John as it should.

“This is the Lady Mary’s favorite place,” said Mike as they walked past the entrance of the maze. “Nobody else can equal her knowledge of its paths, except perhaps Monseigneur. You ought to ask her to take you in sometime.”

John merely made a noncommittal sound as they marched over the extensive grounds of the gardens to take in other plants and specimens that John would need to know by heart in the coming weeks.

Monseigneur did not appear for supper that night, and John seriously considered asking Billy once again what all the fuss was about regarding the nether regions of the Lair. But he had subjected Billy to so much trouble already, and he did not think it wise to ask the ladies about something that might prove sensitive and unfit for feminine ears.

Of course, there was one person to bring his questions to, but the man in question effectively made himself scarce in the next few days. Monseigneur would be gone for long stretches of time, emerging from the dungeons only to take his meals alone and at odd hours, sometimes skipping them altogether. He would be gone until the small hours of the morning, and John would wake to find the curtains around his bed shut tight.

Surely, the people around John would know he was curious about the dungeons, but it seemed they were all bent on never broaching the subject with him unless given permission by Monseigneur.
So John took to exploring whenever he had the chance, which presented itself on more than one occasion when everyone else was busy with multiple tasks. Given Monseigneur’s small household, everyone was almost always preoccupied with various errands.

There were several passages that had caught his attention which may just lead him down to the dungeons. The first and most obvious route would be that of the wine cellar. He went down a passage that he knew the servants used whenever they went down to fetch bottles of wine. His progress was blocked by a heavy oak door, closed and bolted, requiring some heavy brass keys to open them. He could not ask for the keys without supplying a reason that would not raise suspicion as to his motives, and so far he could not think of any plausible excuse to be in this part of the castle.

There were other routes, but all of them led to doors sensibly barred from curious trespassers.

A few days later, he managed to come upon Monseigneur just before he could disappear into the dungeons. From the way the man was behaving towards him, John was almost tempted to think Monseigneur was deliberately avoiding him.

“How is it going with whatever it is you’re doing down there?” he asked rather awkwardly.

Monseigneur only gave him a shuttered, sidelong glance before replying, “Very well, indeed, John.”

John considered giving an excuse but finally settled for the truth. “I want to help,” he said. “With your work. If you’d let me.”

“I’ve already given you your tasks,” replied Monseigneur implacably. “I want you to familiarize yourself with everything in the gardens. When I need you below I shall certainly let you know. Until then you will make sure not to go against my wishes by appearing in places where you’re not wanted or needed.”

That, John would later realize, was the bait guaranteed to lure him in.

He should have known that he would not be able to follow Monseigneur if he really did not want to be followed. He had once tried to tail him around the castle, intent on discovering his route to the dungeons, only to turn around a corner to find him gone. That was when John realized that the Lair was riddled with secret passages.

He should have realized that Monseigneur was being deliberate when he went through the bookcases in the bedroom and left a clue behind for John to pick up. Late one night, John was lying on his divan bed, wondering what the man was doing in the bowels of the castle, when his gaze alighted on the bookcases across the room. At first he was not sure what it was that had caught his attention. A closer inspection finally revealed a slight misalignment of the shelves which John had definitely not noticed until now. That, and a faint, cool draft that issued somewhere between the misaligned shelves which told John the hidden passage he was looking for was right there in front of him.

John bit his lip, barely breathing in excitement as he took hold of one part of the shelves and pulled. A portion of the shelf swung forward silently and John stared for a moment into the deep, cavernous darkness before him without so much as feeling a prickle of unease.

*There is only one logical thing to do,* he thought. And it had nothing to do with shutting the bookshelf back into place and backing the hell out of there. John refused to even consider the warning that Monseigneur had given him. He had basically told John that sooner or later he would need him down there anyway. What difference would it make if John were to go down there now? Unless he was hiding something from him.
Besides, he knew that Monseigneur would not have brought him all the way here only to do him in just because of a little bit of trespassing. Somehow, he could not imagine Monseigneur ever harming him.

Thus, armed with this logic, John grabbed a lighted candlestick and slowly made his way down the newly illuminated steps that spiraled ever downwards.

John should have known that something was not right when everything seemed so easy—too easy. He finally arrived at the bottom of the stairs to find a well-lighted tunnel with a huge, iron door open some distance away. An irresistible invitation.

He made his way silently over to the door and peered carefully inside.

A part of the dungeons, at last. He could see lighted torches lining the walls, revealing a large room equipped with work tables filled with Monseigneur’s glasswares. There was nobody there: no prisoners awaiting death, and definitely no Monseigneur.

John swallowed and, disregarding the small voice of reason that screamed caution deep inside him, stepped into Monseigneur’s dungeons.

One step inside. Two. And another one.

Every moment he expected Monseigneur to pop out from nowhere to make him jump out of his skin, but it seemed the chamber was really empty.

John looked around and took his fill of the curious room, noting the glasswares on the tables and the colored fluids in them. The tables themselves were odd. They were enormous, ancient-looking slabs of roughened wood with dark stains on their surfaces. Strangely enough, there were chains attached to some of them.

Huge, rusty chains that led to…

Before John could see where the chains on the tables led to, the dungeon door shut with a bang behind him. John started, dropping the candlestick that he held as he whipped around to see Monseigneur standing behind him.

More author’s notes: The poison antidote being concocted by Mike and Monseigneur is based on Mithradatium, named after Mithradates VI, King of Pontus (died 36 BC), whose lifelong fear of being poisoned led him to an in-depth study of poisons and to develop one of the most well-known antidotes in antiquity (possibly with the help of his court physician, Crateuas). Experimenting with different formulations and trying them out on condemned prisoners, he compounded various antidotes to produce a single universal one, which he hoped would protect him against any poison. A hundred years after the death of Mithridates, Celsus recorded the formulation, which comprised thirty-six ingredients, all of which are derived from plants, except for honey to mix them and castor to enhance the aroma. The concoction is estimated to have weighed approximately three pounds and to have lasted for six months, taken daily in the amount the size of an almond.

Pliny attributes to Mithridates another antidote with fifty-four ingredients and remarks that the king drank poison daily after first taking remedies to achieve immunity. He also experimented with antidotes derived from the blood of Pontic ducks, which, says Pliny, suffered no harm, even though they were supposed to live on poisonous plants. When Mithridates was defeated by Pompey, Mithridates tried to poison himself to avoid being captured. His wife and children, who were
poisoned first, died readily enough, but his resistance was such that his poison exerted very little
effect on him. He finally achieved his demise by means of the sword.

(Source: Mithradatum— University of Chicago Encyclopaedia Romana)

A nod to Rawr, whose fantastic review a few chapters back touched on Mithradatum. Here it is in
the story, my dear!
Chapter 20

Author's notes: Well, I thought this chapter was going to be easy to write, but it turns out I’m wrong! I’ve tried toning down the angst but there will be quite a bit left and there will be some bondage thrown in as well. The chapter may not be everyone's cup of tea. Please be advised. More notes can be found at the end of the chapter.

Kat, you are right as always, my dear! More of Monseigneur’s POV to be found here.

Kilala-kun, many thanks for your suggestions. I’ve inserted some details here just for you!

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Really, this is all too easy, thought Monseigneur as he set about preparing his trap for John. Too ridiculously easy as to be almost dull.

John Watson may have his attractions, but mystery certainly was not one of them. Dangle a little bit of bait in front of him and he would come running without even so much as bothering to mask his curiosity and eagerness. Once he came running, Monseigneur would only need to reel the bait in little by little by refusing him access to the trap, by telling him that he was not needed, and in no time at all John would be ensnared.

It was so elementary that it was almost boring. Except that it wasn’t, because Monseigneur found that he was actually enjoying the game.

John’s person was certainly one of the easiest to read. From their earliest encounter, Monseigneur had worked him out within seconds: a simple soul, clean and pure as the untrodden snow. Strong and stubborn but naïve. Certainly there were untold disasters in John’s past, tragic enough to leave their mark on him and scarring him for life. Monseigneur was almost sure it had something to do with the death of somebody very close to John, but so far there was insufficient data to make further deductions. What Monseigneur found delectable about him was the fact that he could struggle against his demons and gain the upper hand— a measure of his strength. That, and the very blatant fact that John was deeply attracted to him from the very start.

It was a heady combination. As heady as the way John was struggling against his attraction to him every step of the way. There was something about John’s reluctance that was very exciting, enthralling. Monseigneur was used to every sort of obeisance accorded him by everyone around him since he was a child and he was frankly bored with it. John was so different from anyone he had ever known and it was simply quite refreshing to have such a man to challenge. He had never tamed a Highlander before.

There could only be one winner here. He must ensure that John would lose this particular fight and acknowledge that he, Monseigneur, was his lord and master. Which he really was, anyway.

He needed John to surrender to him. He wanted to break John and do what he pleased with him, but he was too proud to snatch things from reluctant hands. Where was the challenge in that? He wanted John willing. He wanted John on his knees in front of him. After all, from a very young age he had shown an aptitude for breaking things and bending people to his will.

But first he had to take care of certain things, seemingly trivial in their beginnings but problematic in the long run if not addressed immediately.
Monseigneur had first noticed it that morning when he had awakened to find himself all alone in his wide bed. As he had always been.

Until he had remembered John.

For a few hours before he had fallen asleep, he had not been alone. John had been there, warm and solid, beside him. The feel of John’s body in his arms had been incredible, and he had been surprised and more than a little alarmed to feel John’s absence so keenly when he had awakened to find him gone. He had not liked the feeling that had slashed at him like a knife—sharp, wounding. Entirely unexpected.

Lying there on his bed with a white arm flung over the empty space where John’s body had rested, he had been overcome with a sense of cold panic as he remembered John in a variety of situations during the past, busy week: the way John had stared at him as he bared himself supposedly for his bath; the sharp, heavy twist of desire he had felt deep in his loins as he surprised John in the bathing tent, dripping wet from his recent bath and clad in nothing but a skimpy towel; the vague, delicious, nocturnal sounds he had heard from John as he lay in restless sleep (what had he been dreaming about?).

Lying alone on that big, empty bed, he had been prey to all kinds of thoughts and speculations: how did John feel about all this, about him? Not that it really mattered, but still. Would John turn haughty at the realization that he was being favored by his attentions? Would he turn nasty? Would John use this newfound power to turn against him and use it to manipulate him? Could he really bring himself to think that John actually had power over him?

It had happened once before. He had barely escaped being burned, once. He must not let it happen again.

Possession must never go both ways. He must never let the things and the people that he owned end up owning him. He could make John want him, need him, but never the other way around.

And yet, the illogical feeling of vulnerability had not gone away as the day progressed. Much to his annoyance, it had only gotten worse. He had started reading all sorts of things into John’s simplest actions. John’s belated appearance at dinner together with Billy had set off a jealous rage so intense that it was appalling. Never mind that he knew Billy could be completely trusted; the fact remained that John had been with a person other than himself and had enjoyed the other person’s company enough to have forgotten the time, so much so that he had been kept waiting at his own table. Monseigneur had never seen the like. And the wink! John’s tiny wink at Billy’s direction—what cheek! Obviously, John had thought he was capable of mollifying him, Monseigneur!

John ought to be taught a lesson. He needed to know his place in Monseigneur’s world, the sooner the better. Monseigneur did not think he would be able to bear it if John were to change and lose that bewitching purity, to grow spoiled and arrogant as favorites tended to do over time. He knew he would derive considerable pleasure in chastising John and having him completely at his mercy.

That was when Monseigneur had decided a trip to the dungeons for John was in order.

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Everything was ready at last. Tonight was definitely the night that John would walk into his trap. There was no way he could miss that crack in the bookshelves that would lead him right into the palm of Monseigneur’s hand. The most delicious thing of all was that John would have nobody to blame but himself for directly defying Monseigneur’s orders.
Monseigneur sat down to do his experiments for a while, knowing John would not be making his move until bedtime. Everything, including John, fell away for the time being as he took out the vial of herbal infusion Mike had given him and added a few drops of John’s medicine into it. There were tests to be done on the infusion and he set about doing each of them quickly, methodically.

Everything seemed in order. The infusion seemed stable with the addition of the White Star. Monseigneur wondered whether the potion would be strong enough now to counteract the effect of poisoned mushrooms. There was only one way to find out: he would need to test it on the subjects and see whether they would fare better than their predecessors. Thoughtfully, he placed a few drops into his palm and licked it, tasting the bitter concoction. Mike was right: it needed some castor oil to mask the scent.

Monseigneur worked steadily on until it was bedtime at last.

Time to play.

He set aside his experiment and got up from his worktable to throw the heavy iron door of the chamber wide open, gazing up at the spiral stone steps where his quarry would descend.

The fun should begin any minute now.

Minutes passed, then a full hour, and Monseigneur took to pacing.

What is this? He wondered impatiently. Had John somehow gone to sleep and missed that clue in the bookshelves? Had he needed something more obvious to draw his attention? Of course, he knew John was no genius but he never realized he would be this thick—

A faint glow of light down the spiral stairs at last, growing ever nearer. Quickly, silently, Monseigneur got behind the iron door.

John was careful. He was slow, so very, impossibly slow! He lingered by the threshold of the door for so long, just peering into the chamber, that Monseigneur feared he might just bow to reason at the last minute and go back the way he had come.

Ah, but at last, John took his first, doomed step into the chamber. And another. And another. Until he stood in the middle of the huge, echoing room, clad simply in a nightshirt and a flimsy robe, his stance alert as he looked around with interest.

Pressed against the wall behind the door, Monseigneur watched him for a moment, elation and triumph a potent mixture that ran in his veins like something sweet and molten.

His captive. His John. Here, at last. Right where he wanted him.

Lifting a hand, he shoved the heavy door in front of him with all his strength so that it swung shut with a loud bang, making John jump and drop his candlestick as he whipped around, eyes wide with surprise and his body instantly going rigid with tension.

Monseigneur gave him no time to think. He pounced, fist ing a handful of John’s shirt at the middle of his chest and shoving him backward, backward towards the wall. John was so taken unawares that it never even occurred to him to shout or to cry out. A harsh intake of breath was all he could muster before his hands went instinctively around Monseigneur’s, trying to stop him, stop the momentum as he was hurled relentlessly back.
There was no stopping the force of Monseigneur’s onslaught though. He slammed John against the wall, knocking his breath from him. Before John could get his bearings, hard fingers bit into his wrists as Monseigneur drew his hands high above his head. A dreadful, metallic *click!* and Monseigneur’s fingers were replaced by cold, hard steel that encircled John’s wrists.

John’s gaze snapped upwards, staring in disbelief at his imprisoned hands. Oh, bloody hell, he was manacled to the bloody wall! Oh, bloody *fuck*!

His breathing harsh in his ears, John strained against his manacles briefly before realizing the futility of his actions. He glared at Monseigneur even as the man placed both hands on the wall at either side of his head and leaned in to gloat over him.

“Well now, look who’s decided to pay a nighttime visit,” Monseigneur drawled, smiling. “Against my orders, I might add.”

John stared unflinchingly at Monseigneur’s masked visage even as he contemplated directing a knee against the man’s groin.

“Careful now, John,” warned Monseigneur, accurately reading John’s intentions in his eyes. “Use your legs against me and I’ll have them chained down, if that’s what you would prefer. Or perhaps you’d want me to use the Knee Splitter on you. Considering what this chamber was used for in olden times, I’m sure there must be one lying around here somewhere, and that way perhaps we can also test the common saying about maimed prisoners being better lovers to see if there’s any truth behind it.”

A flare of outrage deep in John’s blue eyes. Monseigneur watched, fascinated, as John’s pupils dilated and his mouth thinned at his words. There was nothing he would like more than to touch John now, but he kept his eagerness in check with absolute discipline.

“My strong warrior, brave to the point of recklessness. Aren’t you afraid of the consequences of disobeying me? Don’t you know there is much talk that your lord is a freak who keeps countless male prisoners in these very chambers for sex?” Monseigneur goaded.

John’s eyes widened a fraction and involuntarily slid away from Monseigneur to scan the room briefly, as if expecting to see those prisoners huddled in a dark corner. Monseigneur nearly laughed. He could read recognition in John’s face as he uttered those words, but not surprise. So John was familiar with the rumors.

“What can we deduce of your actions then?” continued Monseigneur. “First you show up in my bed and now this, despite everything you’ve heard of my reputation. You’re practically throwing yourself at me, aren’t you? Whatever happened to your advice that I’d better not hold my breath, waiting for you?”

Still no answer from John as he continued to stare defiantly at Monseigneur, his heaving chest the only indication of his distress. He must be careful not to give the man anything to get off on: no fear, no anguish, certainly no frightened or angry words that Monseigneur would enjoy hurling back at him.

“Why can’t you ever do as you’re told?” asked Monseigneur, his voice deceptively soft as he pinned his prisoner with an intense gaze. “Surely you know that defying me is a dangerous enterprise, yet here you are. Do you derive much satisfaction from refusing to heed me? Or do you simply get off on the idea of punishment?”

“You planned all of this, didn’t you?” accused John, suddenly finding his voice. “This was all
deliberate on your part. You know I’d walk straight into your trap—"

“I simply laid a trap, John,” Monseigneur purred. “You did all the walking into it. The question is: why do you do it when you know very well that there are heavy consequences attached?”

He reached up a hand as he spoke and very deliberately touched the side of John’s face with the tips of his fingers, trailing them lightly down his jaw, his neck, over his chest. The searing warmth and moistness of John's body, felt through his thin shirt, instantly registered with Monseigneur. John was sweating. His pores had opened and Monseigneur could smell his desperation, even his arousal-- so different from his scent as he lay sleeping in clean linen. If he had smelled good in bed, this was even better-- musky, primal, exquisitely masculine. Almost against his will, Monseigneur found himself leaning down to brush the tip of his nose against John’s neck the better to breathe him in. He knew John’s sweat would be clean and lickable, but how would it taste like? How salty would it be? Soon. He would know soon enough.

John flinched from Monseigneur’s touch but it was not enough to stop the man from laying a hand more fully over him. Monseigneur could feel John’s heart pounding beneath his hand.

“Go ahead,” Monseigneur murmured, lifting his gaze to John’s face as John struggled briefly but violently with his manacles. “I like to hear you announce how you cannot escape.”

John instantly desisted, his breathing heavy, almost panting.

“You haven’t answered my question, John,” said Monseigneur conversationally. “Tell me why this reckless urge to defy me at every turn. You enjoy it, don’t you? Do you think you’re above the consequences? You’ve overstepped your limits this time, my friend.”

John bit his lip, hard. He shook his head and opened his mouth, only to have Monseigneur cut him off by saying, “I do hope you’re not going to cite your blasted curiosity as the culprit yet again. It’s unbearably dull to be parroting the same excuse over and over.”

Monseigneur’s tone hardened as he continued, “You’re in a bad position, John. This isn’t like any of the previous times you’ve struggled against me. This time you’ve disobeyed a direct command from me. It’s unacceptable. I’ll have to take action.”

John lifted his chin slightly. “What are you going to do?” he asked. A challenge.

Monseigneur said, “You will need to be punished.”

And smiled.

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“In what form will your punishment take, you wonder?” asked Monseigneur. “You’re a soldier, John. You’re used to physical pain. Back in the garrison, Lestrade’s punches barely registered with you. I’m afraid that you will find corporal punishment incredibly dull. We’ll have to resort to something more imaginative.”

John’s racing heart gave an odd lurch as he realized Monseigneur’s intentions. Of course, he should have known Monseigneur would resort to something cruel and unusual. But then, hadn’t he always known?

Hadn’t he known that the next thing Monseigneur was going to attempt was to kiss him?

John tried for exasperation even as he fought to suppress a shudder that was equal parts anticipation
and revulsion. “Look, how plain do you need me to be?” he said. “I’ve already told you that I’m not interested in your games.”

Something in Monseigneur seemed to snap as he heard John’s words, laced with just the right amount of disgust to sting effectively. “Aren’t you, John?” he growled, at the end of his patience at last. Between one breath and the next, he closed the distance between them, crushing John’s body against the wall as he leaned in. “Aren’t you interested? Your body begs to differ, I’m afraid.”

Monseigneur reached out a hand to grab at the back of John’s head just as he was about to turn away from him. He tilted John’s head, forcing him to remain still as Monseigneur’s mouth claimed his for their first, savage kiss. John had to force his lips shut against that warm, questing mouth as it ground against his.

Until now John had only ever kissed women. He had not known what to expect with a man’s kisses, and indeed, it had never occurred to him to want to know. Until, perhaps, now. And certainly, he had not expected this. There was nothing soft or gentle about Monseigneur’s lips. They were firm and warm and very sure. Worse, they were not unpleasant at all. John could feel unwanted desire flare inside him like a flame at the touch of the man’s mouth on his.

The texture of the kiss was different. New. Everything about Monseigneur felt different. Disturbingly intoxicating. John tried to turn his head away and he felt the faint beginnings of a stubble on Monseigneur’s cheek and his chin as his face scraped against his. That little detail was, perhaps, the one thing that made John realize that this-- all of this-- was real.

He was being kissed by a man. This was no dream. This was actually happening, right now.

Desire spread within John like wildfire. It had been so long since he had had anyone. Five years was too long. John found that he had to fight to keep himself from responding instinctively by surging against Monseigneur’s body, long and hard and aroused. Just like his.

With great difficulty, John curbed in the desire running rampant within him and forced himself to relax, not giving in but not fighting Monseigneur either. It seemed to work. After a moment, he felt Monseigneur tear away from him. The moist sound of their mouths parting was obscenely loud in the silence of the chamber that was saturated with centuries of pain. Much to his appalled embarrassment, John found that he had to stop himself from licking his lips.

“You’re a liar on top of everything else,” Monseigneur said, sounding oddly winded. “No matter how you will deny it, your body has betrayed you time and again these past few days. You’re hard even as we speak. I know you want me, John. You know it, too. Stop fighting me and perhaps I will desist in my games. Take the easy way out and give in to me now.”

“You’re right,” John found himself saying, his voice not quite steady. “You’re absolutely right: it’s all in my body. But that’s just what it is— a bodily reaction. Nothing but. We’re men after all, Sherlock. You and I. Since when did we ever consider our bodily reactions to mean anything much?”

Monseigneur’s eyes narrowed to icy blue slits. “What…did you just call me?” he said, his voice going dangerously soft.

John sensed an opportunity and seized it. “Sherlock,” he repeated quite boldly. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Whatever remained of Monseigneur’s composure seemed to shatter in that instant. For a moment John felt he was really in danger of getting killed as Monseigneur lunged at him. Then, as though
remembering himself, Monseigneur reined in his sudden fury. “You really are a glutton for punishment, aren’t you?” he asked.

John ignored Monseigneur’s words and said, “I don’t…I can’t.”

He knew he was not exactly being coherent, but he couldn’t bring himself to continue. But what he had just said was the truth, in a way. He could very well end up wanting Monseigneur and giving in to lust, but Mary had taken away his heart. There was nothing left of it to give to anyone.

Monseigneur, of course, did not understand. John felt the man’s hands tighten into fists in his nightshirt, bunching the cloth so that it tore a little in his hard grasp. “After everything you’ve been through, you’re still saying you don’t like men, no matter how much your body would say otherwise. Well, we’ll just have to see about that,” Monseigneur said coldly. “Your punishment isn’t over yet. Not by a long way. I suppose I should thank you for clarifying where our actual battlefield lies, but you forget that you’re my man now, John, to do as I please. There will be no escaping me. Your captive heart is mine, along with everything else about you.”

Monseigneur abruptly released him and strode away, out of the chambers. Long minutes passed and just when John was starting to fear that he had been left behind to spend the night under such ignominious and painful circumstances, Monseigneur returned, looking distinctively calmer. Back in control and as cold as ice.

“Disobey me once again, especially in front of my brother when he arrives in two days’ time, and you will find yourself spending your nights here, chained to this wall,” Monseigneur said, reaching up to free John from the manacles. “You have my word on it.”

John felt his heavy, lifeless arms fall to his sides, the numbness quickly giving way to the prickly sensation of pins and needles as blood started to circulate properly once again in his limbs. He leaned against the wall for a moment, catching his breath, his legs trembling and feeling curiously weak. He knew there would be bruises around his wrists but it was nothing compared to the blow he had delivered against Monseigneur. Nothing compared to what Monseigneur would have in store for him now.

“Leave!” ordered Monseigneur curtly.

This time, John obeyed.

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**Author’s Notes:** The **knee splitter** as mentioned by Monseigneur is one of many gruesome instruments used during the Medieval Ages for torture. It was a popular device used during the Inquisition and it lives up to its name by splitting victims’ knees and rendering them useless. Built from two spiked wood blocks, the knee splitter is placed on top of and behind the knee of its victims. Two large screws connecting the blocks are then turned, causing the two blocks to close towards each other and effectively destroy a victim’s knee. This device could also be used to inflict damage on other parts of the body such as the arms. Other medieval torture devices with colorful names include the **head crusher, Cat’s Paw, Scavenger’s Daughter, Judas Chair, Spanish Donkey, Choke Pear,** and **Crocodile Shears,** among others. (Source: ListVerse)
There is an idea (of unknown origin) that maimed individuals are supposedly better lovers. I know I’ve read this somewhere before but I can’t remember where and I can’t seem to be able to trace this anywhere in the Net. I’m not even sure whether this is just a piece of fiction or rooted in superstition. If you guys know anything about this, please do let me know. Many thanks!
John did not have much time to recover from his ordeal in the dungeons. There simply wasn’t time. The Gaaldinian king was due to arrive in two days and everyone in the castle was in a frenzy to finish all preparations before the royal guest arrived.

Throughout the day, John was dragged from one task to another as he received hasty instructions from Billy, Lady Hudson and the Lady Mary on the proper etiquette necessary to conduct himself in front of His Most Tedious Majesty, as John had come to call Monseigneur’s brother in his mind. Because, really, this was all an exercise in tedium. Everything had to be rehearsed from the proper way to approach the King to the way John had to bow in front of him; from the way the King was to be addressed to the way he may reply when addressed by His Majesty.

He had to mime the silly, fawning movements that Billy and the Lady Mary showed him for special occasions; he had to be taught the proper table manners; he had to rehearse certain bits of tête-à-tête with Lady Hudson just in case his conversation was required to entertain the royal personage who would doubtless be interested in him. Apparently, his accent was so thick that Lady Hudson could not understand a word he was saying half the time. He took all the lessons in stride and without complaint, silently relegating them to the back of his head where they would never be recalled into service.

He just could not pay proper attention to these inanities when his mind was busily engaged elsewhere.

He had not seen or heard from Monseigneur since last night which, he told himself, was really quite a blessing. It was fine-- more than fine!-- if the man had decided to leave him alone from now on. After all, what was there to be said between them after the incident in the dungeons? There were no words capable of shaping John’s thoughts and feelings with what nearly transpired between them in that ghastly chamber.

There were no words for the occasion, but John did think and feel deeply about it. The memories were incessantly upon him, in fact. He couldn’t get the events out of his mind and was tortured with the tiniest details that would arise, unbidden, to grip him at the most inopportune moments: the feel of long, white fingers trailing down lightly, teasingly over the side of his face, his chest; the feel of warm, firm lips crushing against his own; pale eyes made of fire and ice that could impale and caress at the same time. The novel sensation of a man’s slightly stubbled cheek and chin scraping against his.

And words, words, always his words as though Monseigneur were breathing them for the first time against his ear: Your captive heart is mine…

It was the words wrapped in the velvet rasp of Monseigneur’s voice which, more than anything else, had the power to strike at John and leave him breathless with outrage. And with helpless, blind arousal— heedless of who had stoked it to life— which did nothing but add to the fury he felt toward the man and at himself.
Because what kind of a deviant was Monseigneur, really, to subject him to this kind of treatment? And indeed, what kind of a deviant was he, John, to endure Monseigneur’s treatment and feel desire for the man more than a righteous sense of having been wronged?

Whatever he was feeling was not normal, let alone right. It was unholy, unclean, as black as sin. It stood against every belief he had ever been taught to uphold. He was sinning just by recalling Monseigneur’s touch without feeling the appropriate amount of revulsion. To be sure, he felt quite bit of disgust, but not enough. His emotions were conflicted, his indignation heavily tainted with an answering lust, an unnatural longing for more. Oh, so much more than Monseigneur’s kiss.

This was what it meant to fall from grace. He was now truly infected by Monseigneur’s special madness.

As a soldier, John had seen the depths to which men could descend when deprived of certain necessities for a long time. Honor and pride be damned when the body was overcome with urges that needed satisfying. But somehow, these five years after losing Mary, he had scraped through. He had thought himself capable of rising above sheer animalistic needs. And for Monseigneur to take that conviction away from him now was nothing short of terrifying, enraging.

Why did he have to be attracted to a man? Why this man, in particular? Why now? Was he really so starved that he could set aside his usual preferences to feast on something exotic and unusual when it presented itself?

As a test, John tried to think of Mary. He tried to conjure her golden radiance every time his treacherous thoughts threatened to turn to the events in the dungeons, but the memory of Mary was insufficient under the onslaught of that dark desire that was now so firmly entrenched in his gut, awakening without fail whenever he thought of Monseigneur. Worse, it was unworthy of him to defile the sacred memory of Mary by trying to conjure her as a shield against this particular demon. After a while, he could not bear to think of Mary together with Monseigneur. It was indecent, obscene.

Yet something had to be done; otherwise, John thought he would perish from want. Lying alone on his divan that night and taking advantage of Monseigneur’s absence from the bedroom, John let down his defenses enough to give himself pleasure—quick, rough, brutally wonderful. But the relief was temporary. So temporary. The emptiness returned as soon as John’s sated body had settled down to normal.

With the emptiness came resentment, anger. This, thought John, is all that man’s fucking fault!

He glared at the direction of the bookcases, willing the bastard to appear before him and thinking which choice insults he ought to hurl at Monseigneur’s head when he finally made his appearance. But Monseigneur did not come, and John woke up the following day to find his bed had not been slept in.

So he really was avoiding him. Odd though, that Monseigneur would relinquish the use of his quarters instead of having John thrown out of them.

Well, to hell with him, thought John grimly as he got dressed. He was annoyed at having to remind himself that he was the victim here. After what he had gone through, he was not going to spend the rest of his day moping after the man. It was just completely, utterly sick.

Lestrade arrived later that day, giving John a most welcome distraction. He was accompanied by Donovan and a sour-faced Anderson. And bags upon bags of items collected from the forests around the garrison.
“Well, John, it’s good to see you again,” said Lestrade cheerfully as he finally came upon him in the
line of people who had gathered to welcome him back. He laid a heavy paw upon John’s shoulder.
“See how much inconvenience you’ve cost us on top of having a garrison to close down. I daresay
we made quite a sight, indeed: some of Gaaldine's finest, battle-hardened soldiers skipping through
wood and glen with bags, plucking off all the white flowers we can find, not to mention stripping
quite a bit of the trees of their bark. And of course, all the mushrooms and fungi you would ever
desire.”

John smiled, amazed that he would ever find Lestrade a sight for sore eyes. “The garrison’s been
shut down then?” he asked.

“On its way,” said Lestrade as they moved into the grand hall. “It will take another fortnight but it's
in good hands. It will still be there when I get back. I can't wait for it to close down entirely when
I’ve been summoned by royal command to be here for a few days to wait upon the King.”

John raised his brows at that but said nothing. He had gleaned from previous conversations that
Lestrade was the King’s man before he was assigned to serve Monseigneur, after all.

Lestrade was looking around him. “Monseigneur is busy?” he inquired, noting the absence of his
lord.

“Yes, well, you know how he is,” remarked John off-handedly. Something of his resentment must
have shown in his tone, for Lestrade glanced at him briefly before looking away again.

“Right. Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” said Lestrade, moving on to talk to Lady Hudson at greater
length. “I’m sure he’s busy with his own preparations for meeting His Majesty.”

Donovan and Anderson filed past John as they trailed after Lestrade, with Donovan casting him a sly
glance from the corner of her eye. John stared back at her with a bland equanimity he was far from
feeling.

Suddenly, he hated Monseigneur for proving the rumors, and Sally Donovan, right.

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Apparently, Monseigneur had enough time to spare that evening to sit down with Lestrade for
supper. Minus everyone else, including John.

John raised his brows and pursed his lips thoughtfully as he sat within the merry circle of people
headed by Lady Hudson in the smaller dining room where they had taken their first breakfast.
Beyond the door, John could hear the warm, cheerful bustle of the nearby kitchens.

To hell with him, he reminded himself as he passed Billy a small basket of fresh bread, warm and
fragrant from the ovens. After all, who would want to be sitting in the chill formality of that drafty
dining hall, having to talk to an equally icy Monseigneur and eating from dishes which have cooled
after their long trek from the kitchens? Poor Lestrade, having to endure all that and missing out on
the laughter and banter of this tightly knit, delightful company before John.

They ate heartily, exchanging stories and listening to Anderson talk expansively of the many curious
things he had seen in his campaigns with Lord Lestrade. The man was insufferably full of himself,
but even John had to admit that his accounts of garrison life were quite amusing. Was that what had
drawn Sally Donovan to him?

John glanced across the table at Donovan to find that she was actually looking at him with a
speculative gaze. John could almost imagine a pair of antennae on her head, twitching, as she stared
at him. John looked away, firmly suppressing a derisive snort and focusing instead on the lively conversation around the table.

If he had hoped to beat a hasty and clean retreat after supper, John was to be proven sadly wrong.

“Well, John Watson, so here you are,” said Sally as she sidled up to him after their group broke up for an early night.

“Yes, here I am,” John said quite pleasantly. “Surprised to see me still alive after a week in the Lair?”

Sally smirked. “I don’t see him inviting you to the ole grand table for supper. Has your novelty worn off so quickly?” she asked.

“He does let me out of the dungeons every once in a while to cavort among the living, if that’s what you want to know,” parried John smoothly as he grew annoyed.

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets. So far he had successfully hidden the ring of bruises around his wrists from view with the cuffs of his long shirt, but one could never be too careful around an Amazon.

Really, thought John in irritation. What's with the woman and her need to sink her sharpened claws into him, always, when it came to Monseigneur?

Unless…

Unexpected epiphany suddenly hit John as he continued to hold Sally Donovan’s gaze.

No, he thought, looking Sally up and down in a new light.

*What happened between you and Monseigneur, Sally?* John wondered. *As far as I can understand of your situation, you owe Monseigneur your freedom. You’re no less a captive to his whims as I am. Did you think perhaps that he might have saved you from a lifetime of slavery because he was interested in your personal charms? Were you so foolish as to have shown your thoughts, perhaps even voiced them? Had he stung so much when he spurned your advances, so much so that you’ve found yourself trying to retaliate at any given opportunity ever since?*

John’s thoughts were uncharitable in the extreme. He knew they were unworthy. He tried to banish them as quickly as they had entered his mind, but not quickly enough. Sally saw the change in his eyes, perhaps even saw the brief flash of pity, and a cold haughtiness settled in her dark gaze.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, the answer is no,” said Sally shortly, drawing her dignity about her like a cloak.

“I’d say the same about what you're thinking of me,” muttered John, thinking it wise not to pursue the matter further.

Sally let out a silent breath of laughter and relaxed her stance a bit. “I suppose I was laying it on a bit too thick,” she conceded.

John let his shoulders slump slightly. “Why all the hostility?” he wanted to know.

“Because he's a freak, that's why,” answered Sally bitterly. “It's like he can read people's minds. It's not right. I don't like it. Back where I came from he would have been branded as a witch. He gets on my nerves as he does everyone’s. Except yours, maybe.”
John gave her a tight, noncommittal smile and declined to comment. Instead, he nodded at the direction of the doorway where Anderson’s lanky frame loomed, shoulders hunched a bit as he stared at John a bit resentfully. “Go on,” he said. “Before he starts to get the wrong idea about us.”

Well, you’re quite wrong, Sally, my lass, thought John dryly as he watched her go. He does get on my nerves, though not in the usual way. Which is why I'm bloody damned.

According to Lady Hudson, Glasstown was not a day’s ride away from Elderidge. If one were to start the journey early in the morning, one would have arrived at the Lair by late afternoon.

Still, His Majesty’s entourage was late. It was already well past suppertime when the royal coaches started arriving. Dressed in his uncomfortable new clothes and standing outside in the courtyard along with everyone else, John glanced at Monseigneur’s stiff back as he stood beside Lestrade and knew that he was deeply, deeply annoyed.

His Majesty arrived in an impressive coach bearing his coat of arms, surrounded by an army of servants. Almost before the coach had stopped before Monseigneur and Lestrade, several servants were placing a small flight of steps in front of the coach’s door, ready for His Majesty’s descent.

The door of the coach was opened, and instead of a man coming out, a dog— unnaturally huge and slightly mangy, dark brown all over— loped out. John was struck by the hound's features-- its face and muzzle were dark, as though it were wearing a mask, just as surely as its owner was wearing one. It made for Lestrade as though it knew him. Which it probably did.

“Baskerville!” exclaimed Lestrade, reaching down to scratch at the dog’s large head even as Monseigneur let out an exasperated, “Oh, for God’s sake! Must you bring that blasted beast with you everywhere you go?”

The king finally emerged, holding a walking stick in one hand. He descended the small steps gingerly with the aid of a servant as though they might give way at any moment.

He was a tall man, taller than Monseigneur, magnificently dressed in well-cut clothes of rich scarlet and gold and pale ivory, glittering with jewels. A dark hat was perched carefully on his head and a flowing black cape was slung across his shoulders, elaborately designed to conceal his tendency towards heaviness. In the same manner as the mask on his face was designed to conceal his features.

It was a strange mask. John was used to Monseigneur’s black mask either of velvet or satin that stood in perfect contrast to his pale skin. His Majesty’s mask was flesh-colored. It blended so smoothly into his features that for a moment, in the soft gloom of late evening, John had thought he was not wearing one at all.

“Now, now, what way is this to be greeting thy sovereign?” chided the king in a pleasant voice as he stopped before his brother. “I trust that thou art in excellent health, my dearest brother.”

Monseigneur gave a soft grunt and declined to answer more fully. His rude demeanor gave the King pause, eyes carefully fixed on Monseigneur for a second longer than necessary before he extended a hand encrusted with rings for Lestrade to kiss. “And my Lord Lestrade, t’is always a felicitous occasion to see thee, mon cher ami (my dear friend),” he said, his tone noticeably warming.

“It has been a while, your Majesty,” answered Lestrade.

With the initial pleasantries behind them, Monseigneur turned unceremoniously to march his brother down the line of people waiting for him.
“You know very well the ladies, of course,” he said quite shortly as Lady Hudson and the Lady Mary curtsied gracefully before the king. “I hope you remember young William, Lestrade’s nephew. In fact, there’s hardly an unfamiliar face here, except perhaps John Watson.”

It took a moment for John to realize that he was frowning at Monseigneur’s brusque introduction. This was the first time John had seen him since the episode in the dungeons and the man was not even looking at him as he pointed him out to the King. After a moment, John tore his gaze away from Monseigneur to bow briefly before the King as he had been taught. He straightened back to find himself being carefully scrutinized by a pair of deep blue eyes, deceptively mild.

_Leather_, thought John fleetingly as he gazed back at the King and his flesh-colored mask. Seen at this proximity, he looked like a person scalded, with no eyebrows. It was a bit disturbing.

“Ah yes,” murmured His Majesty. “Your Highland healer.”

Then, to John’s surprise, the king suddenly asked in Angrian, “Ciamar a tha sibh, John Watson (How are you)?”

John glanced uncertainly at Monseigneur, who stood just behind the King and who only rolled his eyes briefly heavenward, unimpressed.

"Tha... gu math, tapadh leibh (I...am well, thank you)," answered John cautiously.

The King smiled. "He says he is well," he said to nobody in particular.

A murmur of admiration from the crowd and a bit of sycophantic handclapping. For the first time since their encounter in the dungeons, Monseigneur looked straight at John, fixing him with an intense stare: _Don't get taken in, John. Not this easily..._

John frowned back at him, uncomprehending.

The King’s next words did much to clarify things.

"Oh no," said His Majesty airily as he waved away the applause. "It was nothing at all. It is all done for the sake of my future wife."

Then, voice dropping so that only those closest to him could hear, he sighed and muttered, "God only knows what else is to be expected of me upon this marriage."

Something about John’s expression seemed to flatten and grow distant as he caught the dry, cold words, tinged with a little distaste. Monseigneur almost smiled with satisfaction. He turned away, hands behind his back, and trudged back to the castle with his royal brother by his side.

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Dinner was a long and torturous affair. It was never anything otherwise when his brother came to visit.

Monseigneur could hardly sit still as the King droned on and on in Gondalian by his side. It was fortunate that Lestrade was at the receiving end of most of his brother’s grating chatter and the lively music was loud enough to drown out his words.

The King was only staying for the weekend and he was hardly exaggerating when he said he only brought with him a skeleton crew of servants and courtiers. By that, of course, he meant a retinue of no less than fifty persons ranging from his private secretary and some gentlemen of the bedchamber
to his lute players.

Bored and growing increasingly restless, Monseigneur cast a glance down the long table, his gaze unerringly resting on John who, at that particular moment, was just about to look away from him.

He would have wanted to tell John not be too obvious, that he was under observation from the very moment his brother had arrived, but he could not do so without risking further, unwanted attention from the King.

Already, he had seen his brother cast a glance or two at John as supper was served. Seemingly harmless, curious glances, but Monseigneur knew better. There was hardly any doubt in his mind that the King was already piecing together the puzzle that was John Watson and what he was doing here.

And John’s looks were not helping at all. They were smoldering with rage and resentment, as though all John wanted to do was pointedly ignore Monseigneur only to find that he couldn't do so. Monseigneur, who knew the reason behind the dirty looks, could perfectly understand John’s motivations. The king, who knew nothing, merely saw the looks as smoldering.

*John, look away. Just look away,* thought Monseigneur. But a part of him was taking perverse pleasure out of the realization that John could not look away from him in the same way that he, Monseigneur, could not leave the man alone with his eyes. It felt strangely gratifying to realize that John was far from unaffected by what had happened between them. Because Monseigneur definitely could not say he had emerged from the experience unscathed, it was just as well that John had not, either.

Remembering those few, stark minutes when he had lost control of himself in the dungeons, Monseigneur could feel his gorge rising within him yet again. One moment he had been perfectly in control and the next moment, he had...slipped. He had lost his focus completely and bungled a procedure that should have been carefully calculated and coordinated. And all because of a few choice words from John.

He knew he should never have kissed John. Not when neither of them had been ready for it.

He remembered again the feel of John's lips beneath his and how much it had taken him to wrench himself away from them; those endless minutes when he had paced outside the dungeons, trying to calm down and get a hold of himself. He remembered the feel of his hands pressing hard against his burning face; the mask he had on had been quite useless-- it could not contain his humiliation. And then John had gone, leaving him all alone. He had gripped the edge of a table for a long time, overcome with helpless rage at himself, at John. He had always prided himself in being able to keep his mind apart, distant, divorced from feelings. And this man had proven him wrong.

He had been wrong about John.

*How could he have been so wrong about John!*

Monseigneur suddenly emerged from his reverie to realize that the King had asked him something. Carefully, unhurriedly, he removed his gaze from John's direction and glanced at his brother, all the while thinking furiously what he had just been asked.

*Rooms...he was asking something about rooms...*

Monseigneur shrugged. "I care not which ones you use should you find the usual arrangements not to your liking," he said indifferently. "I am sure I shall have no choice but to accommodate your
wishes, anyway."

The King's voice was an appreciative murmur: "The very soul of generosity, as always. Gramercy (thank you)."

A pause before the King asked delicately, "Perchance (Perhaps) thou would wish to tell me what thou art thinking right now, Sherlock?"

"Oh, I wish I can, though I am sure that I know not what my own thoughts can be," replied Monseigneur lightly as he drank his wine. "And do stop with the Courtspeak. It's driving me insane."

At last, there was a bit of time after supper when the King could engage in private conversation with Monseigneur and Lestrade. It was not something that Sherlock was looking forward to.

"You ought to have stayed in town for James's ordination as cardinal," said the King, lapsing into more natural-sounding phrases in Gondalian as soon as they entered the suite of rooms that were allocated to him as his study whenever he came for his visits. "Splendid affair, of course. No expense spared. You know how the Moriartys are when it comes to their celebrations. Considering you're thick as thieves with him for several months running, everyone had something to say about your absence."

"I was ill," answered Monseigneur briefly. "Haven't you been reading my dispatches?"

"You're not fooling anyone, you know," said the King softly.

"Then how about this? I think it's a perfect sham that the Pope would elect his own nephew to the post of cardinal," said Monseigneur shortly. "Considering that I am fairly outspoken of my views, wouldn't you say it was all for the best that I stayed away?"

The King fixed him with a surprised look. "So you've been fighting with him?" he asked. "Was that the reason why you kept away?"

"Why? What did you think the real reason was?" said Monseigneur coldly. "Let's just say we're no longer friends. The name James Moriarty means absolutely nothing to me now. Why don't we change the subject and get on to your concerns? That's the reason why you're here, isn't it? Tell us what has been weighing on your mind urgently enough to necessitate this visit?"

True to his expectations, the King seemed to deflate a little into his chair. "The date has been set," said the King, his voice curiously flat as he rubbed his face with his hands. "I am to be married in less than three months' time."

"And what of the Angrian Queen's perceptions?" asked Monseigneur, sitting across from his brother and propping his legs on the edge of the table. "Does she find it agreeable to be married to you on such short notice?"

"I hardly think she has any more say in it than I," retorted the King, lifting his head from his hands to glare at Monseigneur. "She-- Anna Thea-- declared that the date is of little import so long as a wedding takes place. Through her ambassador, she...she has made it known that she wants children, before it's too late."

The King sounded a bit overwhelmed at the mention of children, a bit overwhelmed that his future bride would be indelicate enough to lay the facts bare before him in such a manner. It was quite clear that he had not bargained for such a woman-- any woman-- when he had thought of acquiring
"Well that settles it, then," drawled Monseigneur. "At least she speaks her mind quite clearly. You won't be left in the dark with regards your husbandly duties. Best to just get on with it. Just close your eyes and think of Gaaldine on your wedding night."

The King stared daggers at Monseigneur, who ignored his look. Behind him, Lestrade cleared his throat uncomfortably. "If I may, Your Majesty," he said quite gently, "I am quite sure the Queen is a lovely woman. Once you meet face to face and you get to talking with her, I am sure it will all turn out right. She has yet to speak with you, after all."

Monseigneur raised an eyebrow at that. "Quite," he said dryly, removing his legs from the table and standing up in one fluid motion. "I'd wish her the best of luck on that. Now, if there is nothing else...?"

"There is," said the King wearily. "But there is no hurry. We can talk about it tomorrow. Good night, Sherlock."

Really, thought Monseigneur disgustedly as he left the King's apartments. If Mycroft had only intended to pour his heart out to Lestrade, he ought to have left him out of it completely.

But then he understood that a garrison was hardly a place for a king to be comforted by his favorite general and all-around best friend, and the Glasstown palaces, infested with courtiers and laden with intrigue, were even less so. These things required some privacy lest grave misunderstandings should occur.

What must be happening now behind those closed doors? Would Mycroft be weeping in Lestrade's arms just about now? If truth be told, Monseigneur could not quite imagine it. He simply could not imagine his brother capable of weeping. Unless it was to weep little droplets of ice.

At the thought of the King's favorite, Sherlock found himself suddenly thinking of John, of what it meant to have a favorite of his own.

And there it was again— that strange, hard twist deep in the center of his chest. An actual ache, whenever John turned up in his thoughts, which was happening more and more as the days went by.

No, he thought, frowning, feeling a wave of anger and confusion wash over him as he clutched at his chest. Impossible.

He had been reliably informed that he did not have one.

John may be a good healer but surely even he would not be able to conjure a heart from thin air.

Author's Notes: I have reserved Old English (or, at least, bits and pieces of it) for Mycroft's use as part of Courtspeak, or the stilted ways of speech used in Gaaldinian court circles whenever they're not speaking in Gondalian. I have often found it hilarious when historical romance novelists would insert words like "T'is" or "Aye" or "Nay" in an otherwise modern-sounding sentence just to add a bit of authenticity to their characters' way of talking. I do realize, though, just how difficult and awkward it is to use Old English convincingly in a historical romance. Here, I have decided to use the archaic forms of words to render Mycroft's speech highly artificial (and as a way of poking fun at historical romances). I hope I have succeeded. (Sources for Old English words: Medieval Faire and Medieval England-- A Phrase Book. There is even an Old English translator at oldenglishtranslator.org.uk)
Hey guys! Sorry, there's been a mistake in the above paragraph. The Courtspeak employed by Mycroft is not Old English; rather, it is Early Modern English (sometimes abbreviated to EModE or EMnE). This phase of the English language was used at the beginnings of the Tudor period (Renaissance and no longer the Medieval era) and we can read it in the first edition of the King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare. Old English pertains to the earliest form of English spoken circa 500 AD. Also known as Anglo-Saxon, it is almost completely unintelligible to modern English speakers. Read more about Early Modern English here. For laughs, try this page. (Special thanks to dduane for pointing this out to me and for providing the links!)

The Scottish Gaelic phrases are lifted from scotgaelic.tripod.com.

His Majesty's dog, Baskerville, is fashioned as a prototype of the English Mastiff. Referred to by most kennel clubs simply as the Mastiff, it is a breed of large dog perhaps descended from the ancient Alaunt (an extinct breed of shepherd dog) through the Pugnaces Britanniae. Distinguishable by its enormous size, massive head, and a limited range of colors, but always displaying a black mask, the Mastiff is noted for its gentle temperament. The lineage of modern dogs can be traced back to the early 19th century, and the modern type was stabilized only in the 1880s. (Source: Wikipedia)

The practice of creating cardinal-nephews by the reigning Pope originated in the Middle Ages and reached its apex during the 16th and 17th centuries before it was abolished. According to Thomas Adolphus Trollope, a famed papal historian, "the evil wrought by them in and to the church has been well nigh fatal to it; and it continued to increase until increasing danger warned the Pontiffs to abstain. The worst cardinals, providing, of course, the material for the worst Popes, have been for the most part cardinal nephews, the temptation to the creation of such having been rendered to great to be resisted by the exorbitant greatness of the power, dignity, and wealth attributed to the members of the Sacred College. The value of these great "prizes" was so enormous, that the "hat" became an object of ambition to princes, and it was the primary object with a long series of Popes to bestow it on their kinsmen." The term nepotism is derived from the Italian for "nepote" or nephew, and it is used to indicate favoritism granted to relatives regardless of merit. (Source: Wikipedia)

The saying "Close your eyes and think of England (Gaaldine)" is a reference to unwanted sexual intercourse -- usually, it serves as advice to an unwilling wife when sexually approached by her husband, although it works just as well the other way around as in the case of Mycroft. The phrase sometimes has been attributed to Queen Victoria as her advice for her daughter, the Princess Royal, on her wedding night. I'm not sure how reliable the anecdote really is, as it is widely known that Victoria had a very fulfilling and happy marriage to Prince Albert and their union produced nine royal children. (Source: Phrases.org.uk)
Chapter 22

Special thanks: To PlumpPushu, who provided not one, but two sets of French translations for the exchange between Monseigneur and the King in this chapter. Can anyone be more awesome?? She very kindly provided a choice of using the formal/polite or the familiar forms of address. I figured since this is a row between the brothers, Sherlock will definitely not be polite to Mycroft, hehe.

To Sher_locked_up, for doing an amazing, amazing job beta-reading this chapter and knocking it into better shape.

Thanks so much, my dears!!!

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Author's notes: For the sake of convenience (and to save us from having to scroll up and down the page continuously), I would normally place the English translation of a French passage immediately after the passage. However, for this chapter, some of the French passages have been laid out to provide us with John’s perspective and how he heard the argument between Sherlock and Mycroft (i.e. initially the words were incomprehensible to him, so I temporarily left out the translations for those lines). Please scroll down to the end of the chapter for the English translations.

More notes can be found at the end of the chapter.

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The King did weep; long and copiously, with Lestrade lending an awkward but reassuring hand on one shoulder. Considering how long they had been friends, Lestrade had never seen the King in such distress, except perhaps on only two other occasions in the past: the death of the old king, and when Monseigneur was thirteen years of age.

“I never wanted to remarry,” the King said over and over. “It is God’s will if my wife has left me with no issue.”

Lestrade’s hand merely tightened on His Majesty’s shaking shoulder. While the King’s words may be true, his Queen had also departed quite prematurely for the afterlife just a year before, putting a decisive end to the possibility of royal heirs ever appearing on the scene unless the King remarried, or (and this was more far-fetched) if Monseigneur did. The dead queen was barely cold in her beautifully sculpted tomb when Parliament had convened to discuss the subject of the King’s next marriage, an important affair of state.

It was a stroke of Providence, to be taken almost as a sign from the heavens, members of the Gaaldinian Parliament had declared unanimously, that a solution aside from war with Angria was conveniently at hand to soothe troubled relations between the two nations. Let others wage war; we, happy Gaaldine, marry!

Of course, it had all depended on whether Angria’s queen, who had long been a widow herself and wily enough to evade a second state of matrimony being constantly pressed upon her by her unruly nobility, would consider the match that His Majesty’s ambassador had dangled before her. Her reaction had been as unflatteringly lukewarm as Mycroft’s.

Infuriatingly, she had held out for a few months, examining the proposal, weighing the advantages and disadvantages, once even threatening to pull out of the negotiations when the King had suddenly
balked and suggested Monseigneur for the post of bridegroom instead. And underneath all the present drama lay old resentments as thwarted plans from nearly a lifetime ago had finally come full circle: the old king had tried to secure the hand of the three year old Anna Thea for seven year old Mycroft, only to meet with point-blank refusal from the prospective bride’s parents. They had feared a reprisal (or an abduction), so for good measure, they had sent the little princess away at the age of five, promising her hand to a prince from some distant kingdom beyond Gaaldinian concerns and influence. It had been such a clear insult to the King of Gaaldine that war had very nearly broken out between the two countries then and there.

Such was the distrust simmering constantly between Angria and Gaaldine for hundreds of years. And now everyone was suddenly expecting both countries to set aside their differences and join hands in matrimony. Mycroft could not believe it, and Anna Thea’s eyes had been as big as dinner plates, the Gaaldinian ambassador had faithfully reported back to the King, when he first informed her of the King’s intentions. It was completely farcical, and yet Gaaldinians had taken to the notion of a royal wedding almost at once. They had not had one for almost twenty years.

The Angrians had been more cautious. Anna Thea probably would have held it all off for much longer if the King had not lost a bit of his famous patience and, with Parliament’s full sanction, had ordered his armies to start their march toward the frontier. This tactic, Lestrade knew, was His Majesty’s preferred method of taking Angria, but the ensuing loss of life would have been inexcusable especially when a peaceful alternative was in sight.

So now the King wept, and for the greater part of an hour that night, Lestrade silently gave his friend a comforting hand and finally, an arm and a shoulder, to lean on.

“God help me, Gregory,” said the King after he had recovered his composure a little, “I have become maudlin in my old age.”

Lestrade gave a small smile. “Your Majesty can afford to be,” he said. “Marriage comes but once or twice in a man’s life, after all.”

The King sighed. “I am too old to be a bridegroom.”

“Your Majesty is only two and thirty,” Lestrade reminded him.

“Wouldn’t you say she is closer in age to Monseigneur?” The King’s tone was a bit desperate. “Surely if she were only to see him in person and disregard all she has heard…”

Lestrade struggled not to snort. “If you will recall Monseigneur’s nine year old betrothed and her famous words before she trounced out of his presence almost ten years ago, Your Majesty.”

The King seemed to remember something at the mention of Monseigneur. “Well, he won’t be getting off so easily this time, I’m afraid,” he said, finally detaching himself from his friend’s arm. “Nothing has changed. They are still betrothed, after all. How shall the world be if we are to base our decisions on the opinions of two children who had disliked each other at first sight and had a quarrel?”

Lestrade gave him an enquiring look. “So, Monseigneur is…?”

“The Princess Irene is going to be invited to the wedding,” said the King, having recovered sufficiently to settle back down to business. “Monseigneur has skillfully evaded his responsibilities long enough. Tell me, Gregory, and spare me nothing. Who is this John Watson and what is he, really, to my brother?”
John was running through dark, silent woods. All around him, huge, gnarled, ancient conifers towered. He was lost. Lost for hours and hours in the cold, dark, alien woods, his finely honed sense of direction failing him just when he needed it most.

And he was afraid.

Because he was not alone. He was being stalked, and finally chased.

John dared not turn his head to look at the thing pursuing him as he plunged headlong down the twisting path among the trees. All he knew was that it was huge and black, closing in upon him fast. It was so close now that he could hear its snarling, panting breath behind him.

What was it? A wolf, most likely.

He knew what to do with wolves, but his knife was missing from his belt. He did not know where it had gone. He had no weapon and he had no option but to run.

But it was no use. He could feel it gaining on him.

And then John stumbled. The ground beneath him was uneven, treacherous with hidden obstacles. At the most critical point of the chase, John tripped. It was all he could do not to fall down completely, but it was enough. He was done for.

Any moment now that great, feral body will be upon him, slamming into him and bearing him down to the ground, tearing him to pieces with its razor-sharp teeth…

Yet upon the dreaded moment of impact, John felt the touch of a hand, the heavy body of a man colliding against him instead of the wet muzzle and the sharp, tearing bite of a wolf. He was mistaken though, if he thought the man would be any gentler.

He was hurled to the ground, the hands rough on him as they bit down on his shoulder, his nape, forcing his head for a moment into the deep, soft carpet of leaves on the forest floor. He was pinned by a body behind him, decidedly taller than he was, and heavier. John twisted his head sideways, coughing, spitting out bits of leaf and dirt as they strayed into his open, gasping mouth.

Impossibly enough, he heard laughter, dark and rich and so very familiar…

“You can’t run away from me, John,” growled the deep, low voice next to his ear. “You’re mine, remember?”

No, thought John, despairingly, feeling every nerve fiber in his being come alive and catch on fire at the sound of that voice. No, no, no…! Not him, please, God, no…!

He was flipped unceremoniously onto his back, his thrashing limbs useless as he felt Monseigneur’s hard, muscled legs straddling him on either side, strapping him down. The demon-man used his full weight to pin John to the ground, dark-gloved hands biting into his wrists, effortlessly keeping his hands down beside him.

“There is no escaping me,” said Monseigneur. “Your captive heart is mine.”

He lowered his head, and John caught the faint outline of his features not hidden by his mask, the smile on his lips, and at that split second before Monseigneur captured his mouth for a hungry kiss, John knew.

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John came fully awake to find that he had bolted to a sitting position on his divan. He clutched at his chest, feeling his heart hammering painfully away. He was covered in a light sheen of sweat.

Teeth clenched tightly, he turned and sent a fist into his pillow, imagining it briefly to be Monseigneur’s face.

*Enough.*

He’d had enough with the man!

Breathing harshly, John turned his head to stare balefully at the large bed behind his own, the dream still very fresh in his mind.

Monseigneur’s bed was unoccupied. Again.

Had the bastard decided to relegate this luxurious room for John's exclusive use from here onwards? Good. Wonderful!

*Damn him to hell,* he thought as he got up.

It was still pretty early. Not feeling particularly hungry, John decided to skip breakfast and started for the gardens. He didn’t have much time. He needed to start work on the sacks that Lestrade had brought back from the forest before the materials started to rot. He needed to work to keep his mind off the upsetting realization he had just had with his dream.

He found the bags laid out inside Mike’s glass house, piled haphazardly on the work table, clustered together on the floor. It took him a while to clear the table of the bags— they were heavy. He then opened a large sack and spilled the contents onto the table surface.

He sifted carefully through the twigs and the bark, the leaves and the dirt, piling the refuse back into the sack. There was hardly anything useful to be found. John blew out a frustrated breath. This was what he had feared. Lestrade and company had gone and dug up half of the forest— the useless half.

He stared at all the other remaining bags and felt his shoulders sag. It was going to be a long day.

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John was tipping over the contents of his fifth bag on the table when Mike and Billy entered the glass house.

“Oh, John, there you are,” Mike said. “We missed you at breakfast.”

“Yes, well…” John made a vague gesture at the bags.

“John, sir,” said Billy, looking rather uneasy. “I have orders to take you to the King.”

John stared at him blankly for a moment. Then he moved around the table to join Billy by the door.

“You might need to wash your hands first, sir,” said Billy, and John stared down at his soiled hands, hanging forgotten at his sides.

“What is this about?” asked John after he had cleaned up and they were on their way back to the castle.

Billy merely shook his head. “I don’t know, sir,” he said. “Monseigneur must be informed. I must look for him after I’ve delivered you to the King’s apartments.”
Billy would say nothing more, but his unease communicated itself to John, so much so that John could feel the hairs on his nape standing on end by the time they found themselves before the doors leading to the King’s apartments.

The King’s private secretary, Sir Bruce Partington, was waiting for them.

“It’s going to be all right,” whispered Billy. “Go on.”

“Just a brief bow, no need for anything fancy,” instructed the private secretary to John before he opened the doors.

John walked into a hushed room, covered wall to wall in rich tapestries. Behind him, he heard the private secretary announce, “John Watson, Your Majesty.”

“Gramercy, Bruce,” the King said without looking up from the documents that he held in his hands. His secretary closed the doors behind John without entering himself. John’s short, awkward bow went unacknowledged.

The King was seated behind a huge table, piled with official papers. Reclining in a rather graceless heap beside the table sat His Majesty’s dog, Baskerville. Pink tongue lolling gently out from a slackly open mouth, Baskerville leisurely got up to make a closer inspection of John.

John steeled himself as the large dog approached him. It was just so huge, like one of those monstrous, spectral hounds that populated both Angrian and Gaaldinian legends, that John’s first instinct was to flinch from it. It snuffled around John for a bit, pushing its moist muzzle at his hands to see whether there were any hidden treats there. John bared a hand for the dog to examine more fully and felt Baskerville gently licking his palm.

The King finally looked up from his papers. “Ah, John Watson,” he said quite pleasantly. “I pray I have not disturbed thee by bringing thee before me this early in the morn?”

“I…” John cleared his throat. “I wasn’t busy.”

The King smiled mildly as he surveyed John from behind his desk. “Thou seem to have a way with canines,” he remarked. “Baskerville can be quite choosy of the company around him at times.”

John said nothing, merely ran a hand lightly over the dog’s shaggy head before he brought his gaze back to His Majesty.

The King’s mask was different this morning— dark brown, velvety. His blue gaze was calm, bland, impossible to read. John stared back at him with a steady eye that belied the flutter of nerves he felt in the pit of his stomach. Studying the man in the pale morning light and without His Majesty’s hat to obscure his head, John was surprised to note that his hair— lighter than Monseigneur’s and cut much closer to his head— was already thinning.

Between the two brothers, it was clear who had gotten all the looks.

John frowned. Oh hell. Where on earth did that thought come from?

“Well,” said the King, finally standing up to walk towards John. “I would have asked thee to take a seat but we do not have much time. Monseigneur may already have been alerted and is probably on his way here. Sir Bruce may be able to stop him for a few seconds outside the doors but knowing my brother, he will easily overpower my secretary or find another way in. We have but five minutes at our disposal, probably less, so I will come straight to the point, John. What is thy connection to Monseigneur?”
That was truly direct. John found that he was not prepared for it.

“We…met while he was…” John licked his suddenly parched lips. “I cured him of a fever.”

“Indeed. So my lord Lestrade has informed me,” said the King. “Just over a week ago, was it? And now he has brought thee back to his castle, with his page’s sleeping arrangements immediately allocated to thee and situated conveniently within his rooms. Advise me, am I to expect a happy announcement soon?”

“What?” John could not help himself. “No, that’s—”

“So thou art not sleeping in his rooms?” queried the King, eyes widening just a bit as he gazed at John.

“Well, I am, but he made me—”

“I see. And pray, how else has he made thee service him since thy first… acquaintance?”

John’s frown deepened as he heard the King’s ugly words, uttered with the utmost civility. “There’s nothing else,” he finally said. Which was quite true, considering Monseigneur had not succeeded in his diabolical schemes concerning him. Yet.

The King appeared unconvinced. “Nothing?” he queried. “If so, then those looks exchanged between thee and Monseigneur at supper last night were quite a lot of nothing, yes?”

John glared at the King but wisely declined to answer.

“Pray forgive me if thou shalt find my words a little too straightforward,” the King continued in a murmur. “In time thou shalt realize that I only mean the very best intentions for thee. Perchance it is best for thee to understand now. My brother has a tendency to form— how shall we call it— fast and fleeting friendships with certain gentlemen over the years. It is not natural. It is not healthy. But there we have it, and he is my own brother. So far his status and those of his occasional friends have ensured that a certain… discretion had been exercised in these friendships. So now thou must acknowledge we have a problem.”

John felt his brows rise even as his lips thinned in dawning outrage. “What problem is that?” he asked, even if he knew precisely what the King meant: he was not of the class of gentlemen that Monseigneur usually pursued.

The King did not acknowledge his question, merely brought out one of his own, brutally straight to the point. “Is it money thou desire?” he asked. “It must be. I see not what else there is to tempt thee. Certainly not his personal charms. Perhaps we can be of use to one another this way.”

John let out a sharp laugh. *Bloody Jesus Christ, this is unbelievable!*

“No, thank you,” he found himself saying.

“But I have not yet mentioned a figure,” said the King. “Thou can name thy price, in silver or gold. Or perhaps it is land thou art seeking?”

“Yes, well, I am not interested.”

The King surveyed him with narrowed eyes. “Thou art very loyal, very quickly,” he observed softly.

“No, I’m not…! You know, you ought to sit down and actually talk to your brother before you
interrogate me,” snapped John.

The King angled his head as he looked at John penetratingly. “And what dost thou mean by that?”

John thought he ought to tell him. Tell this fathead the exact nature of his relationship with Monseigneur. Looking at the King and the way he was studying him, John suddenly realized how the King saw him.

_He doesn't know I was forced into everything as Sherlock's captive._

John’s eyes widened as his mind raced on. Perhaps the King was the solution he was looking for, the key to his freedom. He did not approve of Monseigneur's tendencies. Once the man knew the conditions of his confinement here, how John had been forced into Monseigneur’s service, there was no way the King could possibly allow it to continue. The King could force Monseigneur to set him free…

John paused, startled, as a sudden, strange pain flared inside his chest alongside the thoughts racing through his head. He frowned at himself.

_What is this?_ He thought angrily. But he already knew what it was. The dream had _shown_ him what it was.

For fuck's sake! It was absurd to feel like this. The opportunity was ripe for the taking. He was being absurd if he were not to take advantage of it now!

And yet John held off, remembering the look of warning Monseigneur had leveled at him last evening as he was introduced to this man. Perhaps there would be no harm in being a bit careful here. After all, this was Monseigneur's brother. He could trust this creature standing before him as much as he could trust Monseigneur.

The King stared at him for a second or two before his eyes fell rather deliberately on his hands. “There is something thou art not telling me,” he said. "And I think it is in thy hands. Show them to me."


“Thou hast been fingering the sleeves of thy shirt thrice in the past five minutes alone,” said the King, holding out his hand. “Show me.”

John hesitated, thinking of something, anything, to delay or stop this, but nothing came to mind.

The King stared at him for a second or two before his eyes fell rather deliberately on his hands. “There is something thou art not telling me,” he said. "And I think it is in thy hands. Show them to me."


“Thou hast been fingering the sleeves of thy shirt thrice in the past five minutes alone,” said the King, holding out his hand. “Show me.”

John hesitated, thinking of something, anything, to delay or stop this, but nothing came to mind.

The King gave him a look from under his brows and John reluctantly held his hands out. His were obviously peasant hands before they gained the calluses of a soldier: small, rough, with totally unremarkable, square-tipped fingers. To add to the overall attraction, his fingernails were rimmed with earth from his sifting activities earlier.

But His Majesty barely looked his hands over. Instead, he made for the cuffs that covered John’s wrists, undoing them and lifting them out of the way. He did a double take, then stared hard at the chafed skin underneath, at the bruises encircling the wrists, healing but still clearly visible.

“Thou art a prisoner.” His Majesty’s voice was hushed, shocked.

“No,” said John, not knowing where his answer came from. “I’m...”

What was he, really? John wasn’t sure at this point.
The King looked quite ill as he gazed at him. “You…he—?”

“No!” The word was out of John’s mouth before he could make sense of the situation. Aghast, he tried again, “I mean, I’ve not been... he has... he has his reasons—”

John shut his mouth abruptly, painfully aware that he was not making sense. What the bloody hell was he saying?! He had not been what? Ill-treated? Not ill-treated, when he had been trussed up in the dungeons not two nights ago? And Monseigneur had his reasons?

Here was his chance to spill everything at last, to tell this man of the many peculiar treatments Monseigneur had subjected him to. This was his bloody one-in-a-million chance to escape, and he was back-pedaling and running in the opposite direction, back to Monseigneur!

John would have wanted to send a fist into his own mouth then. But before he could think to amend the words that had somehow bypassed his brain altogether and come pouring out of his mouth, the bookcase behind him swung open in a violent arc and Monseigneur charged into the room.

He was still in his nightshirt, with a robe of royal blue thrown hastily over his sleeping apparel. His hair was wild and the expression on his face even more so.

John's eyes widened in disbelief as the thought registered properly in his mind: he could see Monseigneur's face. In his obvious haste, Monseigneur had forgotten to put on his mask.

In no time at all, Monseigneur was standing behind John. He placed a hard, imperious hand on John’s shoulder and pushed him towards the direction of the open bookcase.

“Out of here, John, now!” John had never heard Monseigneur sound so furious.

John turned away and fled, discovering Billy lurking in the shadows of the secret passage hidden by the revolving bookcase.

“Come, John, sir, let’s be away,” whispered Billy urgently as the bookcase swung shut behind them, but John stood rooted, listening urgently to the sound of Monseigneur’s voice on the other side.

“Comment oses-tu.” A snarl in Monseigneur’s voice.

John could not understand a word Monseigneur was saying. He grabbed at Billy, who was trying to lead him away by his elbow. “What’s he saying?” he hissed.

The King’s voice, very cold: “Oh, mais bien sur que j’oses. Je suis ton frère. Après tout, l’un de nous deux se doit d’être responsable et réfléchit.”

“Oh oui… Responsable pour avoir ruiné littéralement ma vie, certainement.”

“John, sir, we must go—”

John fisted a hand into Billy’s shirt and hauled him roughly in. “Tell me what they’re saying!” he ground out.

“Es-tu devenu fou?” demanded the King.

His voice trembling, Billy began to translate: Have you gone insane?

“Qui ou quoi est ce John Watson? Tu ne connais rien à propos de lui, n’est-ce pas?”

Who or what is John Watson? You don't know a thing about him, do you?
Monseigneur’s voice was clear and cold as ice: “Il m’appartient. Je l’ai choisi. C’est une raison suffisante selon moi.”

He is mine. I chose him. That is reason enough.

The King’s voice rose in indignation: “Incroyable. Je n’en crois pas mes Oreilles!”

Incredible. I can’t believe I’m hearing this!

The King’s voice turned urgently pleading: “As-tu moindrement une idée à quel point tu t’es mis dans une situation dangereuse? Cet homme était principalement ton prisonnier! Tout ceci est une grave erreur.”

Have you any idea just how dangerous a situation you’ve placed yourself in? The man was basically your captive! This is all a big mistake—

Billy and John both jumped as Monseigneur shouted, “JOHN N’EST PAS UNE ERREUR!”

“John…John is not a mistake.” Billy’s voice was an awed whisper.

John could contain himself no longer.

He pushed at the wall of the bookcase before him, reopening the secret passage into the King’s study as he launched himself back into the room.

"For God's sake why don't you just tell him why I'm here?" cried John.

Monseigneur and the King turned to him, startled.

Monseigneur said in a voice tight with warning, "Not another word from you, John—"

"Tell me what?" demanded the King, voice also rising.

"Why can’t you just tell him?" John asked Monseigneur, bewildered.

"John, shut up!"

"As thy sovereign, I demand to know what is going on here!” roared Mycroft.

John stared at Monseigneur, whose hands were on his forehead, his hair.

"He was poisoned, all right?" John finally said.

The effect of John’s words was curious, as though it could turn people to stone. For a moment, nobody moved, then slowly, as though the strength had suddenly left his legs, the King sank down to sit on the edge of his desk.

"Poisoned..." It was little more than a whisper. "How...?"

Monseigneur gave out a curse as he raked his hands over his hair. "Through a wound incurred during the last jousting tournament," he finally said.

The King looked stricken. "The last one held at court?"

"The very same."
John stared as the King blanched noticeably. Monseigneur glanced at John accusingly. \textit{Now you've done it.}

"It's all right, he's still here," said John uncertainly.

The King lifted his head to stare at John. "You...cured him, then," he said slowly. "That fever..."

John nodded. "Yes."

The King whipped around to yell at Monseigneur: "When the \textit{hell} do you plan to tell me the entire truth?"

"Obviously when you've calmed down," drawled Monseigneur in reply. "And quite definitely it could never be written down or alluded to in our despatches. I've instructed Lestrade not tell you as well so you need not break this over his head."

The King was shaking his head. "Poison..." he murmured in disbelief. Then, oddly: "I have nothing to do with this, Sherlock. You know that."

John frowned in puzzlement as he stared at the King who appeared genuinely shaken— enough, at least, to drop his customary manner of speech—then at Monseigneur, who closed his eyes briefly upon hearing the King’s words.

"Let it be for the record," said Monseigneur, slowly, "that those words issued from your lips, not mine. I never said anything about you being involved. Not then, not now."

More silence as the King brought a shaking hand to wipe at his mouth. Monseigneur sighed and turned to John.

"What are you still doing here, John?" he said. "Go get some breakfast. You certainly look like you need it. His Majesty and I have some things to discuss privately."

It was only when John was back at Billy's side that he realized he was trembling. And not just because of the confrontation with the King.

Everything was lost.

The dream had made him realize it. At that particular moment before Monseigneur leaned down to kiss him, he had known.

He had \textit{known}.\footnote{The reader is encouraged to assume that the original text contains a typographical error, where the intended word is \textit{known}.}

As if he needed further proof, he asked Billy, "How long were you and Monseigneur behind that bookcase before he decided to barge in on my conversation with the King?"

Billy smiled and said, "Enough time to have heard every word of your defence of Monseigneur, sir."

John had to close his eyes. \textit{Fuck}, he thought.

So now Monseigneur knew that John had lost to him.

His defiance, his resistance— everything was a sham. He had not known it before. It had taken the dream to make him realize it, that he would lose this fight. He had already lost it long ago. Long before the chase really took place. It took the confrontation with the King to confirm it: no matter how much he would put up a fight against Monseigneur, when the chance came for an actual escape, deep down inside him he knew he would never be able to take it and leave his tormentor behind. He
would not just lose to Monseigneur, he would actually let Monseigneur win over him.

"John, sir," said Billy, concerned, as John suddenly stopped walking and sagged against the wall.

"It's nothing," he managed to say after a moment, forehead still resting on the cool, rough wall of the dim passage. "I'm just a little dizzy all of a sudden. I think I will need to take in some breakfast, after all."

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More authors' notes: The phrase "Let others wage war, we, Happy Gaaldine, marry" is lifted from a line of medieval poetry signifying the rise of the Habsburgs: "Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube! (Latin for "Let others wage war, you, Happy Austria, marry!")", with the Empress Maria Theresa being master of the game of striking politically strategic marriages for her children, including Marie Antoinette, Queen of France. (Sources: Actilingua and Wikipedia)

Anna Thea's situation parallels the life of Mary, Queen of Scots. More details on her life in future chapters.

Given the shorter life expectancy of medieval people, I have adjusted our characters’ ages accordingly. Here, Mycroft is 32 years old, Monseigneur is around 24 or 25, John is barely 30, and Lestrade is in his late thirties.

Translations:

Sherlock: Comment oses-tu. (How dare you.)

Mycroft: Oh, mais bien sur que j’oses. Je suis ton frère. Après tout, l’un de nous deux se doit d’être responsable et réfléchi. (Of course I dare. I'm your brother. Somebody ought to be the sensible, responsible one between us.)

S: Oh oui... Responsable pour avoir ruiné littéralement ma vie, certainement. (Oh yes. Responsible for ruining my life, quite definitely so.)
Chapter 23

Special thanks: To Sher_locked_up for her wonderful beta, as always!

Author’s notes are at the end of the chapter.

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Not long after Monseigneur had sent John away to his breakfast, he and the King sat down to their own.

Monseigneur watched the King pile food on his plate with something akin to desperate, defiant abandon and winced. Mycroft was never an easy man to read unless you saw him eating, particularly after he had just received a nasty shock. This would probably account for his preference in taking his meals privately.

"Control yourself," advised Monseigneur after a moment. "Otherwise I will be blamed for ruining your diet."

"It's still more than two months away but already I am being half-starved, Sherlock, just to fit into some of the ceremonial robes for the wedding," said Mycroft as he chewed on, unrepentant. "You have no idea of the torture that it involves. This is excellent honey, by the way."

Monseigneur nodded at the honey, served in a section of comb fresh from the hives. "It's originally from the monastery's apiary."

"You know you ought to keep a priest permanently in the household, instead of having some of the monks over from Elderidge Abbey to perform the necessary services," said the King. "Not having a single chaplain in residence at the castle is most unbecoming, not to mention the stuff of scandal—"

Monseigneur rolled his eyes. "Spare me the lecture when you already know what my response shall be," he drawled in a bored tone. "I've not changed my view since the last time we've had this discussion."

"People are talking—"

"And so they have for years. What difference does it make now?" cut in Monseigneur. "They've already considered me a lost cause and consigned my soul to the devil. Why should I disabuse them of the notion?"

The King eyed him wearily. "You enjoy your foul reputation that much, do you?" he said.

"It has its uses, as you very well know," replied Monseigneur curtly. "Although in the case of winning over your future bride, I daresay it wasn't my demonic presence along the borders that finally prompted her capitulation as I had first thought. So how did you manage it?"

The King gave him a gentle, scoffing laugh. "What made you think that?" he said as he continued eating.

"You've seen John Watson," murmured Monseigneur. "If the Angrian Queen has but a fraction of his stubbornness and courage she will not be frightened so easily into giving in just because she has heard of my arrival along the frontlines. We've long been posturing up and down the borders, and so have they. In fact the Angrians were prepared to go war in the beginning. It must have been
something else you did that made her change her mind at the last minute. What was it?"

"You are giving me far too much credit," said the King blandly. "I did nothing except pass along
some vital information, which happened to be quite true, uncovered by one our loyal retainers at
great personal cost, that one of the more ambitious noblemen advising the Queen was planning an
abduction of her person once she had departed Dùn Èideann to see to her armies."

"I see," Monseigneur said in immediate and complete comprehension. "And that information
conveniently carries with it the implication that the Queen's person would be taken forcibly by this
ambitious nobleman, in which case she would be reduced to a pawn as the balance of power tips
over and her country would embroil itself in another civil war wherein one noble house pits itself
against all the others. Assuming they won the war against us first."

"Assuming that, of course," said the King agreeably. "I am glad she saw reason just in the nick of
time. You will see, my dear brother, just how useful it is to have personal stakes involved in a crisis.
They can galvanize an individual into decisive action like no other cause."

"What did you offer her in return?"

"My protection, of course," replied the King. "And the full preservation of her ruling powers. Given
everything she has to deal with so far, she has shown herself a capable monarch. She just needs the
right husband whispering the occasional advice in her ear."

Monseigneur's laughter was a soft exhalation of breath. "A masterful stroke indeed, though I must
say we are not going to have an easy time with them, the Angrians," he said.

"No," said the King meditatively. "I don't think we shall. As subjects, they will be quite a handful, to
be sure. So you see how it is even more a mystery that you got John Watson to serve you."

"Not by gentle persuasion, I can tell you that," remarked Monseigneur.

"Obviously not," agreed the King dryly. He eyed his brother's unmasked visage. "So he has seen
your face, or you've made him see it. That's how you've managed to bind him to you. Why go farther
by having him manacled then, Sherlock? That seems excessive even by your standards."

A small, almost fond smile touched Monseigneur's lips as he said, "Obviously he needs time
to...adjust to me. He's incredibly willful and disobedient. He still needs to be taught his proper place."

The King stared at him in astonishment for a second or two before finally muttering, "I can't believe
this. I've said it once, I will say it again: how can you possibly trust a man you've basically forced
into your service?"

Monseigneur looked away, his gaze distant, pensive. "Within five minutes of meeting him, I just
knew that I could trust him," he said. "And after the poison started to make itself manifest, I simply
didn't have a choice. At any rate, I was right about him. I am right. He's not a mistake."

"Let us just hope your powers of deduction holds out, in this case," said the King, shaking his head.
"Dear God! As if the wedding is not enough of a problem, now we have to track down a poisoner
lurking in our midst—"

Monseigneur could sense his brother's panic mounting again and moved quickly to stop it from
spilling over. "You don't have to concern yourself with it," he interrupted coldly. "I hardly think you
are in any danger, considering how vigilant you are with the measures you have set up about you. I
will deal with the problem personally."
The King stared hard at him. "Hmm. And by that tone of voice, I take it that it would be useless attempting to pry your plans out of you. Of course you can count on my full support should you need it, but there is one other thing that we need to discuss. I am afraid you will have other concerns apart from the poisoner to deal with quite soon."

Something in the King’s voice made Monseigneur turn his head to pin him with an intense gaze. From past experience, that particular tone of voice from Mycroft always meant trouble.

"Meaning?" Monseigneur prompted.

"The Princess Irene of Exina is coming to the wedding."

"Who?" asked Monseigneur, frowning, sounding as though he did not have the faintest idea what Mycroft was talking about.

"Your betrothed, Sherlock!" exclaimed the King in disbelief. "How could you have forgotten about her so completely?"

Monseigneur was instantly on guard. "What?" he said sharply. "That snub-nosed, outspoken little chit—"

"I'd hardly call her little," retorted the King. "She's almost twenty now. And if reports are to be believed, quite beautiful."

"Whatever's come of her plans to become a nun?" sneered Monseigneur.

"Obviously they have not been carried out," said the King. "Now, Sherlock I want you to behave when you—"

"You can't make me go through with this," snarled Monseigneur. "Otherwise you would not have hesitated with this business all these years. You know we shall get nothing advantageous out of the marriage, unlike Angria. Quite the contrary. We will be taking on a load of unnecessary problems, and that on top of the Angrian situation that you have just embraced. What was Father thinking when he agreed to the betrothal? I can hardly believe he would give in to sentiment. You can't make me go through with this, Mycroft. You know what I am, this won't work."

"From my situation, you ought to have deduced the fact that we are captive to our duties, Sherlock," Mycroft replied implacably. "That is the price we pay for being born into royalty. Our responsibilities are quite removed from our personal desires. It has always been so and always will be. Grow up and get used to it."

"I've never asked to be born into our family," snapped Monseigneur. "And I already have somebody I like."

"So do I," returned Mycroft dismissively. "But that has not stopped me from fulfilling my royal obligations by marrying my first wife, and it will not be able to stop my second marriage from taking place. But you know this is all irrelevant so long as we meet our goals. Fulfill your duties first and you may get to play afterwards."

Monseigneur shook his head as he stared at his brother with an expression that was equal parts wariness and dislike. "No," he said. "No, this isn't it. This isn't all there is to it. You would not have brought this up after all these years if your aim is simply to vex me. There is something more."

"Of course there is something more," the King said, cloaking his triumph as he finally gained his brother's full attention and, very likely, his cooperation. "There is always something more, and I need
The breakfast meeting dragged on for another hour or so, after which Monseigneur felt the irrational but compelling need for a long, hot bath to wash off the unsavory sensation that Mycroft's particular brand of political intrigue had left on his person as though it were something physical and palpable, like dirt.

Fuming as he sat in his bath, he debated over the morning's events and his brother's special assignment, deciding that the only thing that had pleased him (and rather unexpectedly, too) was John's response to Mycroft's carefully calculated attack. Very few could deal with Mycroft the way John had. Of course, it did not escape his notice that he was constantly finding something in John to be surprised and delighted about.

After the episode in the dungeons, he had to admit he was more than a little lost on how to approach John. He had botched it up pretty badly. Never had he felt this raw and exposed, his emotions starkly naked and rampantly obvious to enable any decent or effective cover up. Worse, he had not known what to make of John's reaction until this morning when he had been ready to barge into his brother's little inquisition and, hardly breathing as he stood behind the bookshelves, heard for himself what John had to say.

Perhaps now was the right time to talk to him.

Monseigneur dressed carefully after his bath and, with his face properly locked away behind his mask, set out for the gardens.

He found John inside the glass house, chatting away with Mike as they sorted out the contents of the sacks Lestrade had brought back from the forest. John had his back turned to him and it was Mike who saw his approach. The amicable chatter abruptly ceased as Monseigneur made a little gesture at Mike with a tilt of his head: Away.

By the subtle change in John's bearing, as though a steel rod were suddenly being inserted up his spine in slow, painful degrees, Monseigneur could tell the man was instantly aware that he was standing just a few feet behind him. Yet John did not turn his head, not even when Mike cleared his throat apologetically and moved away.

The silence was thick and heavy as Mike left the glass house. John fell back to examining the debris before him, his movements suddenly tense, awkward. He was still not looking at him.

Monseigneur said without preamble, "I came as soon as Billy told me what was happening. My brother may be the king but I won't have him treat you in that manner."

John gave no sign of hearing him as he continued to sift mechanically through the bark and leaves before him.

"Though, of course, you didn't seem to require much help," continued Monseigneur, aware that his words seemed to be forming themselves without much conscious effort from his brain. Where they were coming from he wasn't exactly sure. "What you did...that was very good."

This time John snorted. He placed his hands, balled into fists, on top of the work table and leaned his weight into them. "We're not talking, Sherlock," he said shortly, still not looking at him.

"Aren't we?"
"No. We're not." John shook his head as though in disbelief and made as though to move away. He flinched as he suddenly felt Monseigneur's hand on the crook of his arm. He had not heard his approach from behind at all. He would have shaken his arm away but Monseigneur merely tightened his grip as he turned him around to face him.

"Your instincts were perfectly sound," said Monseigneur as he looked down at John. "You had every reason not to trust him. A word from you against me and you would have given him an excuse to take you away. Away from here and into his world and I would not be able to do anything to get you back. He would not have let you go either. It would have been like exchanging a cage for a snake pit."

John removed his arm roughly from Monseigneur's grip, jaw clenched hard as he glared at Monseigneur's visage for a moment. "I really don't see how it's any different," he ground out.

"Ah, but you do," responded Monseigneur. "Otherwise you would not have said those words to him."

"Yes, well, I didn't mean them," returned John coldly, gaze already sliding away from him. "I had to tell him something and they were the first that came to mind."

A lie, obviously, to judge from John's overly defensive tone and his heightened color, but Monseigneur was prepared to give John a little leeway as he desperately tried to save face. It was all so unpleasant and Monseigneur could hardly wait to get it all behind them.

"And are not our unguarded words the most significant? The most honest? What you did was... extraordinary," he murmured. "You don't understand, John, that the situation could have spiraled out of control at the very mention of the word 'poison'."

This time John stirred, gave him a half glance before looking away again.

"How?" John finally asked as Monseigneur fell silent.

"There is so much you don't know and understand about us," continued Monseigneur. "Hence my need for your absolute obedience. The King has always been very cagey about poison. He has cause to be, given his position and our family history. You are aware of the case of my poisoning at the hands of my physician when I was thirteen. There were... complications."

"What complications?" asked John, growing annoyed because, damn it to hell, here was his curiosity being stoked once again by this man as surely as a puppet-master manipulating the strings of one of his creations.

"The aftermath of the incident was perfectly hideous," said Monseigneur. "Even under torture, the physician refused to divulge just how many people were involved in his scheme. Eventually, he and he alone was executed for the crime. But somehow, word got around that it was instigated by my brother."

Beats of silence as John finally stared at Monseigneur. "But you don't believe it," he finally said.

"I don't now, but back then nobody knew what to believe. Not for a long time," answered Monseigneur. "That was partly the reason why I was sent away to live here, because we didn't know just how close the threat to my person was. Mummy— our very own mother— had to make my brother swear on a bible that he was not behind the plot. You can imagine how that affected him and our familial relations."

"Oh. Oh God," murmured John despite himself.
"So now you see," said Monseigneur. "My brother has very few weaknesses, and poison is one of
them. Nothing can turn his head the way this topic can. He's terrified of the very word. We've not
been able to discuss my poisoning for years without the discussion deteriorating into a shouting
match. Even now, you can see how he responded to your words and I think it is only because you
presented a viable solution when you cured me that I was able to turn him around. He could have
just shut down and refuse to hear what you have to say. He's done it often enough before. There
were moments there when I thought I really could have lost you, John."

Silence fell once again as John continued to grip the edge of the table with his hands, staring at
Monseigneur who half-sat, half-leaned against the table just a few feet away from him, arms folded
across his chest.

"So, I will say it again," Monseigneur said, his tone carefully neutral. "Well done."

John looked away, angry and ashamed at the mixture of feelings coursing through him at the
compliment. It was impossible that he should feel this way about this man, the way Monseigneur
could elicit equal amounts of rage and pleasure to run side by side inside him.

"Well, good for you that things turned out better than expected," muttered John. "This changes
nothing between us, by the way."

"Indeed it doesn't," agreed Monseigneur. "The consequences attached to disobeying my orders
remain intact, John, and I have yet to decide the nature of your continued punishment."

John let out a colorful curse in Angrian as he abruptly moved away from the man. Just where did this
bloke get off?

"The incident with the King ought to have shown you that your obedience to my every word is
vital," said Monseigneur, his tone entirely unapologetic. "Thankfully, it all turned out all right, but
you cannot presume to know or understand everything that is going on around us and I will not have
the luxury to explain everything to you all the time. I need you to trust me enough to obey me
unconditionally, John."

"See, that's the problem right there," John pointed out as he rounded back to face Monseigneur.
"You haven't earned my trust. Not one bit."

"And I probably can't. You will just have to learn to trust me," said Monseigneur, his tone flat and
unyielding.

John threw up his hands in exasperation. Unbelievable! There was just no way to make this man see
any sense.

"That thing in the dungeons," ground out John. "What was that all about?"

"That was me telling you that you can't go wandering down there against my permission, and
certainly not without my knowledge. It's dangerous," said Monseigneur. "The chambers extend deep
into the Lair and there have been times in the past when people have gotten dangerously lost down
there. You can ask Mike Stamford if you don't believe me."

John felt his brow rise. "Mike?" he said. "You mean—"

"Years ago, when he was new to the castle," said Monseigneur. "He went down without anyone
knowing. We searched for an entire day before we found him."

"Christ." John eyed Monseigneur with misgiving. "So why all the secrecy when you could have just
told me all this quite plainly?"

"Would you have obeyed me then?"

John considered. "I might have."

"Not good enough," replied Monseigneur. "I will need you to obey me almost as though it were second nature to you. You will just have to trust me when I say I have my reasons."

"That's completely ridiculous."

"Is it? We are on the trail of an assassin or assassins unknown, John. It is going to be extremely dangerous especially when we get to Glasstown for the wedding celebrations. The last thing I will need is you getting out of line and spoiling my plans just because you need to have everything explained to you beforehand. Tell me now so I may decide on whether to involve you in the chase or leave you here to tend to the gardens when the wedding takes place. Are you in or are you out?"

John exhaled a breath and shook his head. "Look, it's not as easy as that—"

"Yes, it is. In or out, John?" asked Monseigneur, eyes narrowed as he regarded him. "Remember, it could get exceedingly dangerous."

John felt his shoulders sag after a moment. "Of course I'm in," he finally said.

"We'll just have to see about that," Monseigneur said, straightening up. He nodded over the debris scattered across the table. "Have you found anything so far?"

John shook his head. "Just some mushrooms, but they're poisonous," he said.

"Perfect," said Monseigneur. "Don't throw them away. I shall have use for them. What else have you found?"

And just like that, without John being able to fully understand how it all came about, they were talking again.

Having fulfilled the purpose of his visit, the King announced that circumstances required his immediate return to Glasstown after Mass was heard the next day, Sunday, and the breakfast that would follow.

The day dawned crisp and clear as everyone filed into the chapel for Mass. Standing at the back of the small congregation, John let his attention wander as the service started. The chapel was stately and old, with beautiful stained glass windows. It definitely belonged to the older sections of the castle and was probably the most vulnerable part. Such was the design of castles that the weakest parts were made into the chapel in the hopes that, during a siege, it would be under the direct protection of God as His sanctuary.

Well, good luck with that, John thought. He had been through enough conflicts to know that churches were hardly exempt from pillaging men intent on looting.

John had no trouble following the service. Angria and Gaaldine shared the same religion, after all. What he found surprising were the three priests officiating. Obviously they were monks from the nearby abbey who had been specially imported for the occasion, and now that John thought about it, he had not seen a single priest in the vicinity of the castle all throughout his stay.
Perhaps it was just one of Monseigneur's quirks, he thought, staring at the man's back as he stood in the front row with the King, his entire posture hardly belonging to a penitent: head held high on his shoulders, restless hands either folded across his chest or held linked behind his back. Impatience was etched in every graceful line of his person as the service drew on. John could almost imagine him tapping an irritated foot as he listened to the Canon. The thought almost made John smile.

There were other thoughts that gradually drew John’s attention as he continued to stare at Monseigneur’s straight back—thoughts that distinctively had no place in a Holy Mass. He stared at that imperious back, clad in supple, dark silk, and remembered the first time he had run his hands over it; the feel of Monseigneur’s fever-hot skin beneath his fingertips, the firm texture of the man’s muscled contours beneath his callused palms.

John was aware that he was lapsing more and more into these dangerous daydreams, yet they did not alarm him as much as his reaction to them, or lack thereof, did. Slowly he found that he was becoming used to these thoughts suddenly flitting in as if from nowhere and he was disturbed to realize that he was gradually allowing them more and more time in his head.

Now he remembered their talk in the glass house, the feel of Monseigneur’s hand on his arm—their first contact since the incident in the dungeons. John could swear that his flesh had leaped at the touch, not so much in revulsion as in recognition, as though his very flesh had missed the feel of Monseigneur’s hands. And ah, the memory of his bruising lips as he kissed him.

He wondered how Sherlock would react if he ever touched him back.

Standing absolutely still and seemingly absorbed in listening to the ravishing chant-song of the monks, John closed his eyes at his treacherous thoughts and waited for the mortification to set in. It did not. That was the frightening part. He knew he was becoming addicted to Monseigneur’s wicked little game yet he could not think of a way to make him stop. Something within him despaired at the thought that he was not even sure now if he wanted the man to stop.

He opened his eyes to find everyone's attention riveted at the proceedings in the altar. He had not been noticed.

He glanced at Monseigneur again and wondered briefly what he thought of God and of religion in general, and how he could possibly justify his wicked behavior as he attended Mass. It seemed a mockery of the worst kind. Or perhaps he did not feel he had to justify himself to anyone, not even God.

In which case they may have more in common than John would have initially thought.

John’s gaze broke away from Monseigneur to settle on the consecrated host as it was held up by the priest. He felt nothing. His lips moved through the familiar words that shaped the prayers being chanted but no words came out.

With the Mass and the breakfast finished, the King prepared to take his leave.

"I shall expect you in town no less than two weeks before the wedding," said the King as he paused before the door of his coach. "You have your own preparations to see to."

Monseigneur exhaled an impatient sigh. "You'd best be going before the morning is out," he merely said.

"And I shall miss you too," said the King lightly. He turned in search of Baskerville, who was still
making his rounds with the queue of people a few feet away, gathering his share of farewells and head pats.

"Interesting fellow, John Watson," murmured the King as he and Monseigneur watched John scratch Baskerville lightly on his head. "It would be quite something to tame a man like that."

Monseigneur made a scoffing noise. "Get your own Highlander, Mycroft. I found him first."

"He has a way about him when it comes to dogs," continued the King, eyes fixed disconcertingly on his brother's profile. "And I daresay he'll have no problem handling wolves as well."

His Majesty was already getting into the coach by the time Monseigneur turned his head to look at him. A sharp whistle, and Baskerville came bounding into the coach after his master.

"I do hope you know what you're doing, Sherlock," said the King as he poked his head one last time through the window of the coach.

"You've no need to worry," replied Monseigneur. "I can handle him, Mycroft."

"Hmm. I wonder," said the King. "I'll be seeing you then, brother dear."

As always, there was a blessed feeling of relief as the royal coach drew away. Monseigneur merely shook his head at his brother's parting words, turning away as soon as the coach was on its way out of the courtyard with a procession of smaller coaches and carts trailing behind it.

"Come along, John," he called, never breaking stride as he headed back to the Lair. "We have work to do."

Author’s notes: The Angrian Queen’s plight and near-abduction is lifted from the murky relations between Mary, Queen of Scots and James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. Near the end of her reign, she was abducted by the Earl, who then forced his person upon her. Mary’s downfall can be charted when she married the cad. It did not help that he was already considered suspect number one in the murder of the queen’s first husband, Lord Darnley. This association forever tainted her reputation in the eyes of her people. (Source: Wikipedia. Antonia Fraser’s biography of the Queen also makes for fascinating reading of her life and times)

Exina is lifted from the imaginary worlds of the Bronte children. (Source: Wikipedia)

Details of the Medieval Mass is lifted from Introduction to Medieval Christian Liturgy (yale.edu)

John’s allusion to Monseigneur’s "wicked game" is inspired by some lines from Chris Isaak’s song of the same title:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The world was on fire and no one could save me but you} \\
\text{It's strange what desire will make foolish people do} \\
\text{I'd never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you} \\
\text{I'd never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you} \\
\text{What a wicked game you played to make me feel this way} \\
\text{What a wicked thing to do to let me dream of you} \\
\text{What a wicked thing to say you never felt this way} \\
\text{What a wicked thing to do to make me dream of you}
\end{align*}
\]
No I don't want to fall in love with you
The days passed, and John found himself gradually settling down to life at Wolf's Lair. After the King's departure, he was folded into the daily routine of Monseigneur's household as naturally and effortlessly as though he had always been a part of this small cluster of curious people.

He was kept busy. Early in the mornings, before breakfast, he was tasked to help Billy with his sword practice. He was given the assignment by Monseigneur himself, something which had delighted Billy no end. To John's wordless inquiry, Monseigneur had said in a half-bored tone, "The boy needs a proper teacher. He's not getting satisfactory training at the pell which only had him acquiring a set of bad habits when it comes to handling the hand-and-a-half."

So, for an hour or two each morning in a secluded section of the inner courtyards, John had Billy go through a rigorous session with him using the longsword. Billy's technique was far from bad, but whether it was due to Gaaldinian sword techniques or simply a pack of bad habits learned from others, Monseigneur was not exaggerating: Billy had acquired a set of fancy and unnecessary movements which drastically reduced the strength of his strikes. The first few confrontations had been brutally quick to finish as John repeatedly disarmed Billy within seconds. Billy was a fast and enthusiastic learner though, buoyed no doubt by John's implacable encouragement, and John found that disarming him was taking longer and longer as the days went by. All of this was most satisfactory.

After breakfast, John would go over to the glass house to work with Mike. Over the ensuing days, he was taught the basics of Gaaldinian apothecary and the uses of the quaint medicinal plants growing in profusion in Monseigneur's gardens. He, in turn, showed Mike the specimens of bark and mushrooms which Lestrade's men had picked from the forest and which were essential for Angrian healers. The sacks had not yielded a single White Star, but there was quite a bit of fungi, various specimens of medicinal bark and even some flowers which may be used for one ailment or the other. On more than one occasion, they had time to spare for lengthy chats.

"I didn't know you got lost in the dungeons," said John as he watched Mike prepare a powder, which was supposedly good for toothaches, for one of the maids.

Mike's face scrunched into a look of uneasy amusement. "Aye, it was not a good experience, let me tell you that," he said. "The dungeons are one dangerous maze."

"So what did you see down there?"

Mike sighed. "There's no doubt that some of the chambers had been used for torture and imprisonment by the lords of Elderidge, perhaps as recently as half a century ago. You know how a place can become unlucky when associated with certain bad events. I mean, people had died down there, scores of them over who knows how long. Then the activities those dungeons witnessed trickled and finally stopped as the last of the Elderidge lords died out. The castle had not been in use for a number of years when it finally came into the possession of the Crown. Then Monseigneur moved in more than ten years ago. Of course, clearing all the dungeons would have been well-nigh
impossible, so only a portion— the usable portion— got cleared for his wine cellars and his workspace as well as a huge storage space for all sorts of things."

John raised an eyebrow at Mike's words but said nothing.

“I don’t know how he does it,” said Mike, shaking his head, “being able to work alone down there all night and not get the willies. Back when I got lost, I could almost feel something or some things dogging my every step as I got deeper and deeper into the maze of chambers. I thought I was not going to come out there alive.”

“Did you shout, yell for help?”

“I did more than that, mate,” remarked Mike darkly. “I screamed myself hoarse and nobody heard me for hours and hours.”

John pursed his lips, wondering if Mike’s screams were what really gave rise to the rumors that he had heard from Sally. “Did you, uh, see anything? Prisoners, that sort of thing?” he asked, trying for a tone of nonchalance.

Mike laughed. “I see you’ve heard the rumors,” he said. “No. Nothing like that. But there are things down there that could raise one’s hairs. Racks and torture instruments, all rusty with disuse. One could almost imagine the mold and mildew on the walls in some parts to be bloodstains. Then again, I guess one would almost expect stories like this to become attached to Monseigneur’s person, eh? His reputation precedes him.”

John fought a shiver as he remembered the ancient, wooden tables in Monseigneur’s chamber— how the wood had suspicious dark stains on them, and those rusty chains trailing down to the ground. These could only mean one thing, obviously. What sort of man would ever think to convert torture tables into his workbenches?!

“Well, how do you view him then?” asked John. “You’ve worked for him some years.”

Mike smiled. “Well, he’s certainly not an easy man to work for, and I won’t say that I’ll ever understand what he’s about most of the time. I don’t think anyone can claim that, not even Lady Hudson. He’s got a mind that streaks by as fast and fiery as a comet,” he said. “He is tough and demanding most times, but he’s fair in his own way. Not to mention generous in his rewards and wages.”

John gave a small, wry smile and said nothing. All the while he could not get rid of the memory of having been manacled to the wall by Monseigneur, and he sure as hell would not be able to forget the events that had followed. It had lasted no more than ten minutes, but it was enough. It was more than enough to sear that burning memory of the man into John’s mind forever.

“Was he angry when he finally found you?” John asked, not knowing why he wanted to know.

Mike snorted. “Nearly apoplectic with rage, more like,” he replied. “Monseigneur told me the next time I get myself down there without his knowledge or permission, he was going to let me take my chances. Needless to say, I’ve not been down there without anyone knowing ever since.”

They were silent for a few moments as Mike finished mixing his powder.

“You know there is a story about the dungeons, how some rooms in the chambers have walls six feet thick,” Mike finally continued, his voice soft, thoughtful. “They said there was once a prominent clan who lost out on some forgotten war hundreds of years ago who took refuge in this castle. The lord of the castle then did not know what to do with them. They still had enough political clout so that he
could not just send them away, yet he could not afford to be seen sheltering them without risking fierce retribution from the victors.”

“So what did he do?” asked John curiously.

“He had them taken down to the dungeons and shut them into one of those rooms,” said Mike. “Someplace out of sight and out of mind, where their cries for help would not pass the thick walls. Those who knew of their existence were loyal to their lord first and kept their mouths shut. God only knows just how long those wretched souls had to endure thirst and starvation. Their mummified corpses were found centuries later, shreds of clothes still clinging to them. Apparently, some of them had died still gnawing at their own flesh.”

John stared at Mike for a moment. “No,” he finally said.

Mike shrugged. “That’s how the story went,” he said. “I didn’t invent it.”

After an entire morning spent with Mike in the gardens, John was treated to the company of the ladies in the afternoon as part of an effort to infuse a sense of Gaaldinian culture into him. There was Lady Hudson, if she could spare the time, but more often, John found himself in the company of the Lady Mary.

Of everyone in the castle, this young lady’s position in Monseigneur’s household was perhaps the most enigmatic of all to John, until he found out that she was the daughter of Monseigneur’s tutor, now deceased.

Nevertheless, it was strange even for a man of Monseigneur’s stature to acquire a female ward who was not his relative in this manner. His reputation notwithstanding, the fact that Monseigneur was not married ought to make the subject even more delicate. Thinking that perhaps it would be rude to ask the lady in question personally, John had made unobtrusive inquiries from Lady Hudson.

It was true that the Lady Mary’s circumstances were highly unusual, Lady Hudson had replied, but the girl’s father was the last of her kin and there was really nothing untoward about Monseigneur taking her in, as he had assigned her, Lady Hudson, to take responsibility as a sort of surrogate mother to the Lady Mary. It was an act of charity that John could hardly believe Monseigneur to be capable of, and yet there it was. What was even more remarkable was that Monseigneur actually went further by having the Lady Mary educated enough to be able to read and write; she always carried a book with her wherever she went and she had once even read aloud to John a chapter from a Gondalian fairy story, complete with translations.

Mary’s mother had died not long after she had been born, Lady Hudson had continued, and her father had been her entire world. Before he died, the old man had secured a promise from his royal pupil to look after his little girl, who had been no more than ten years old at the time. She was now only sixteen, a sweet, proper young lady who could effortlessly wrap anyone around her little finger without her even being aware of her considerable powers. John had seen her at it with Billy, who could be reduced to a red-faced, blubbering heap of awkward youth whenever she favored him with a few words.

The only one who seemed immune to her charms was Monseigneur, who could, in his turn, reduce the girl to gauche, blushing incoherence with one flick of his pale, cold gaze. And John noticed that this was not a common occurrence either. Most times, Monseigneur acted as though Mary was not even there before him. As bad as this was, it was even worse during those infrequent times that he did take notice of her, as it invariably involved his making candid, unkind comments on her person
or activities, calling her "Mary the Younger", as if she needed any reminder of her junior position in his household. John would watch in silent indignation as Mary shrank in embarrassment or turned pale and silent before fleeing from Monseigneur’s offhand remarks.

“You can’t possibly be this thick. You know she obviously adores you, don’t you?” John pointed out to Monseigneur one time when he could no longer bear the man’s boorishness. “She’d do anything for you if you’d only ask. Why be so unkind to her for no particular reason whatsoever?”

“Precisely because her apparent adoration stifles me,” Monseigneur had replied coldly. “I’ll ask for gushing adulation when I need it, thank you very much.”

His brusque answer had struck John momentarily silent, because just then he found himself wondering if that was what Monseigneur had been doing to him— wordlessly asking (or perhaps demanding might be a better word) for some part of his affections by subjecting him to all these questionable physical gestures which had something deeply emotional at their heart.

If so, then it was utterly demented and definitely not something that could be couched into words. John wisely did not attempt it. God only knew what it could unleash.

Monseigneur had continued to stare at John, sizing his reaction up. “I don’t require people to like me, John,” he said, his voice flat.

“Well, thank God for that, as I hardly think it could ever be an easy task,” John had muttered before turning on his heel and walking away, not bothering to register Monseigneur’s reaction.

Of course, once John had cooled down he realized the futility of his argument; nevertheless, John translated his resentment of Monseigneur’s treatment of the Lady Mary by being especially attentive to her.

At the start of their acquaintance, proper manners had kept the Lady Mary a bit distant and it took a while before she allowed herself to settle down around John’s person. Once she grew comfortable in his presence, though, she was irrepressible. John could well remember her highly original approach.

“As a means for us to get to know each other better,” she had announced early into their acquaintance, “I want you to tell me an Angrian ghost story, John Watson.”

“Ghost story?” John had repeated, not sure he had heard right.

“The scarier the better,” the Lady Mary had urged.

Scratching his head and thinking, John had finally come up with the Bean Nighe—a spirit whose story was familiar enough with Angrian knights and soldiers.

She was, according to John, an Angrian fairy who nobody wanted to meet, because she carried with her the news of certain death. She may or may not be old and ugly with webbed feet, but she would definitely be found alongside lonely streams and fords, singing or wailing a lament as she washed the bloodstained shrouds and armor of people who were about to die.

Once, a wealthy and powerful Earl came across her on the eve of battle as he took an evening stroll alongside the stream near his castle. He knew the moment he saw her that he would not survive the fight the next day. Nevertheless, he could not bring himself to walk on by without actually asking the question. He had never been a humble man, but now he very meekly asked whether his clothes were in the pile she was washing. She said yes. Undeterred by the terrible news, he went on to ask if his men might, at least, emerge victorious in combat.
She said, “If your lady wife will serve you cheese for breakfast tomorrow without your asking for it, your armies shall be victorious.”

And so it was with considerable anxiety that the Earl waited for his final breakfast at dawn the next day. His wife served almost everything imaginable to her departing husband, but no cheese was to be found on the table. Discouraged and distraught, he led his army into a smashing defeat at the hands of their enemies. Before the day was out, the Earl met his death when his head was taken clean off his shoulders by an enemy swordsman. The legend concluded with the ghost of the headless Earl serving as another messenger of death to his own family, appearing still in full armor and on horseback minus his head to gallop across a stretch of moor or grassland before disappearing into the evening mists days before one of his own descendents would die.

John had smiled at the Lady Mary’s wide-eyed countenance and asked, “Is that scary enough?”

“Yes,” she had said in a small voice.

“You know, I should ask you for a Gaaldinian ghost story in return,” John had said.

The Lady Mary had thought for a moment, then said, “There was once a wicked queen who was rumored to have murdered her husband. While she lived, they could not prove that she was the murderess, but upon death, she was denied entry to heaven and her spirit was condemned to roam the turrets of her now-ruined castle, weeping, screaming, holding her husband’s still-beating and bleeding heart in her hands.”

John had waited a good while before he realized that she was done with her story. “What? That’s it?” he had asked.

“That’s it,” she had said simply. “It carries the important lesson that there’s no rest for the wicked.”

“So she’s just there, haunting her own castle clutching her husband’s heart in her hands?” John had asked, not knowing what to make of such a specter. She did not seem especially malevolent. “Could she at least strike people dead when they look upon her, or something like that?”

“Well, I can imagine I’d drop dead with fright if I were to see such an apparition appear before me,” the Lady Mary had said, nodding solemnly.

John had shaken his head. “I doubt that,” he had said.

He had also meant it. This girl could withstand Monseigneur’s many verbal slings and arrows, enduring much in white silence. John hardly doubted she would drop dead at the mere sight of an apparition when she could hold out against an actual demon.

With his ghost story cementing their new friendship, she had asked, “What would you like me to help you with then, John?”

“I want you to teach me some Gondalian,” John had said without hesitation.

They were at their informal Gondalian lessons one afternoon when somebody came looking for Mary.

“Seriously, you shouldn’t be so self-conscious,” the Lady Mary chided him. “You sound just fine. Now, repeat after me: *Mon nom est John Watson et je viens d'Angria.*”
Of course, John thought she was being perfectly lovely and encouraging, but the truth was that he sounded awful—very much like Azrail hawking up small bones and other undigested parts of her meal—whenever he had to force those elegant syllables through his nose or undulate them at the back of his throat.

“I’ll try next time. Just keep talking to me,” hedged John.

Just then they heard Mary Turner calling down the corridor, “Mary, is that ye?”

“I’m here, Madam,” answered the Lady Mary.

Mary Turner rounded the corner and saw them sitting on the alcove. “Oh, not ye, love,” she said. “I’m looking for the other Mary—Lady Hudson. I’ll be needing to sit down with my lady to discuss the menu for the coming days. So how are ye getting on then, John Watson?”

“I’m getting on fine, thanks,” said John, smiling.

“She’s probably in the Great Hall,” the Lady Mary instructed.

John shook his head as they watched Mary Turner’s broad back disappearing as she trotted off and said, “Just how many of you are named Mary, anyway?”

“There are six of us,” said the Lady Mary with a small sigh. “Lady Hudson, Mary Turner, myself, two chamber maids and one little scullery maid. This happens nearly everyday—somebody calling for one Mary or the other and getting the wrong one. I don’t even know why I’d bother responding as nobody ever asks for me, really. I don’t count.”

John stared at the Lady Mary as she said it, noting her gentle, matter-of-fact tone which held no trace of self-pity. That was when he decided she ought to have a nickname.

“Well, that’s a shame, really,” he said. “I don’t think people ought to get confused over your name and your person, Molly. They shouldn’t.”

When the Lady Mary tilted her head to give him a look from bright, robin’s eyes, he clarified, “Molly. That’s what we call our Marys in Angria. Unless, of course, if you don’t like it—”

“Oh, no!” she said quickly. “I like it. Very much.”

She gave him a pleased, impish smile.

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So that was how John spent his days. His nights were a different thing altogether.

After supper was over (they had supper early, around dusk), his company belonged solely to Monseigneur.

The man’s schedule was extremely erratic. He was basically a nocturnal creature, working in the dungeons (which were still off-limits to John) or in the library at all hours of the night. Most days, John would not catch a glimpse of him until well after dinner, and even then, Monseigneur had other matters to attend to—the nasty practicalities of daily life as lord of the castle and Prince of Gaaldine—and he would leave John to have his lessons with Molly in peace.

After supper though, John was expected to attend to him and him alone.

After they had made their peace (if John could call it that), Monseigneur was once again very much
into John’s activities. He would tolerate no awkwardness that might linger between them, brushing aside any ill feelings that John might harbor by turning him to work. He launched John into all sorts of chores: giving him a pile of books to read; making him sit for hours on end, discussing the poison antidote with him or just bending his ear to Monseigneur’s many monologues on the subject. Then there were times when John was required to do nothing at all as Monseigneur slipped away into what he called his mind palace. Sometimes this would take up the entire night and John would find himself waking up from a doze in one of the library’s comfortable divan chairs to find that Monseigneur had not budged an inch from his own chair nearby.

And somewhere in the middle of all that, John could feel a gradual thawing of relations taking place as he and Monseigneur slowly adjusted to each other’s continued presence.

Monseigneur had moved back into his rooms the very evening when they were on speaking terms again, and John could not help but laugh at his unorthodox arrangement of keeping away.

“You know, I’m the one who should have been booted out of your rooms, not the other way around,” he had observed dryly as Monseigneur prepared for bed that night.

“What? And provide you with the excuse to stay away, perhaps indefinitely, from here?” Monseigneur had replied. “I think not, John. I’d have to think of something especially creative to drag you back.”

It had taken a moment for John to realize that he had been gaping at Monseigneur and he had quickly looked away, aware of the uncomfortable flush suffusing his face. It had been an odd thing to say, but John ought to have gotten used to expecting the unexpected from Monseigneur by then.

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Those were the regular nights. There were other nights when Monseigneur had other ideas on how to make use of John’s company.

John knew it would only be a matter of time before Monseigneur made true his promise of carrying out John’s continued punishment. Sooner or later, he knew the man was going to pounce.

“You can’t possibly think I’ll give in without a fight,” John said flatly on one such night upon hearing the man’s request. They stood rooted on opposite sides, regarding each other warily from across Monseigneur’s vast bed with the covers all turned down and ready for occupancy.

Hands on his hips, Monseigneur replied, “We all know how this is going to end, so why even bother fighting?”

“Because you can’t expect me to just meekly climb into your bed, that’s why!” railed John.

“Of course not,” said Monseigneur with maddening calm. “But, as always, you miss the point, John.”

When John fell silent, he continued, “You are being punished, therefore, you are in no position to dictate in what form your punishment shall or shall not take. But then again, I doubt if you’ve imagined your punishment to be anything otherwise.”
There was a dip in Monseigneur’s voice at the last words, accompanied by a tilt of his head towards the bed as if in invitation.

John still said nothing as he glared at Monseigneur. The sheer arrogance of the man was breathtaking, but no, he could not say he was surprised by his demand. And damn his bloody heart from beating so fast at the thought. Damn that strange, heady mixture of unease and attraction stirring to life low in his gut.

Monseigneur leveled him a cool, hard gaze from behind his mask. “Don’t make me do anything tiresome like chase you around the room, John,” he warned.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to give me a reason for sharing your bed,” John remarked, stalling the inevitable.

“You’re wasting time, but all right. I’ll give you two reasons, if you like,” said Monseigneur. “One, consider this a part of the obedience training I’ve promised you. And two, you’ve been wanting to feel my furs again around you for quite some time now—don’t even bother denying it! Don’t think I’ve not noticed how you’ve eyed this bed covetously. I’m simply giving you permission to indulge. So what’s it to be, John? You can either come quietly or I’ll have to resort to picking you up bodily and carrying you over here.”

“I’d like to see you try,” said John with gritted teeth.

Almost before he realized it, they had gradually begun to move around the bed—Monseigneur advancing and John retreating to the other side. But John was at the wrong side of the four-poster: the doors of the sleeping chambers lay behind Monseigneur while John only had the windows at his side. Soon Monseigneur would reach his end and he would be trapped into deciding on whether to jump out the windows in his bid to get away or scurry across the bed to reach the doors on the other side.

There was no real option, actually. He was cornered long before they had begun.

Sensing John’s dilemma, Monseigneur suddenly quickened his stride, lunging at him as he turned John’s corner.

Fuck!

John dived onto the bed, aware of just how badly this would end. Instantly he was on his hands and knees, scurrying to cover the width of the bed in record time. He almost made it, too, but then he felt Monseigneur’s weight settling relentlessly on his back, wrestling him roughly down on his stomach and immobilizing his thrashing legs with his own.

“The perfect position,” purred Monseigneur. “It’s exactly how I want you this first time around. Thank you, John.”

“Come on, stop it,” John heard himself say, disbelief and exasperation in his tone as he jabbed a hard elbow up and against the man’s chest behind him. “Why are you doing this?”

“I thought I’ve made myself clear,” said Monseigneur, his voice gone all guttural as he effortlessly folded John’s offending elbow against his back. “Yours is not to reason why. Ever.”

“Wait,” gasped John, trying to gain leverage where no leverage could be found.
“I’d advise you not to make me wait for anything,” Monseigneur said, leaning in to whisper the words in John’s ear. “Patience is not one of my strengths.”

Of course, John could struggle against him with everything he had. Hell, he might even be able to overpower this git. He could make things more than a little difficult, more than a little inconvenient for Monseigneur, but the man was ahead of him as always.

“Remember what I said about disobeying me, John,” Monseigneur growled in warning. “I meant what I said about leaving you chained in the dungeons and nobody can ever interfere. Feel free to choose between a warm bed or the cold dungeons for your punishment.”

“If you can haul me all the way down there,” challenged John.

“There are ways,” Monseigneur assured him coldly. John grunted as the man ground his full, hard weight into him from behind.

“Now we come to your penance, John,” said Monseigneur, mouth barely an inch from John’s ear. “I’ll leave you to make it easy or make it difficult on yourself. It’s all up to you. You are not to move an inch from your position, and you are not to talk. You will do nothing but take whatever I decide to give you. Is that clear?”

Even before John could attempt any sign of acknowledgement, he felt Monseigneur’s hand move from his imprisoned wrist to tangle in his hair. John held his breath, feeling his heart might just explode in his chest from the pace it was setting.

Long minutes passed, yet Monseigneur did nothing but touch John, feeling the texture of his short, golden hair, trailing those long fingers down his nape to linger on the tense muscles of his back. Barely breathing, John felt those teasing fingertips lift when they reached the end of his nape, to be replaced by the flat palm of Monseigneur’s hand as it glided and stroked systematically across the plains of John’s clothed back. The feel of that hand through his nightshift was strange— not really sensual but thoughtful and curious, almost clinical. The touch was initially hard and relentless, but John felt the change in the restraining hand gripping his trapped arm behind his back as it gradually eased its hold over him.

Why? Not for the first time, John found himself thinking the question in pained confusion.

And as though he could read minds, Monseigneur said, “I wish to know you, John. All of you, inside and out, so much so that you will never be able to hide anything from me. I’ll be able to find you wherever you may be, in whatever guise you may think to assume.”

A sudden movement from Monseigneur, and John felt him sit up to straddle him from behind. For a moment, John could not rid himself of the image of an incubus— a night demon straddling its dreaming prey. Would he tear his heart out to hold in his hands? And all the while, Monseigneur’s hands continued their ministrations as they roamed over John’s rigid arms, cataloguing and storing away the many textures that comprised John’s skin and the feel of the firm muscles and tendons that lay underneath.

This would have been a good time to break away, but John seemed paralyzed as though he were indeed in a dream, unable to move under Monseigneur’s almost hypnotic touch. Little by little, John could feel himself relaxing into Monseigneur’s spell despite his wishes. He felt his much-abused nightshift being gradually eased away from his back and from his arms. The air in the sleeping chamber was cool against his heated skin and he could barely contain the soft gasp that formed on his lips as he felt those long, tapered hands touch his naked flesh at last.
Monseigneur’s hands were also callused, but his calluses felt different from John’s. His hands were also better tended, the skin softer from regular applications of perfumed oils and myrrh. John gritted his teeth to keep a startled moan in as Monseigneur suddenly leaned down to trail his lips along John’s nape.

The touch of his mouth was maddeningly light, almost not there. It touched John’s nape in the briefest of caresses before tracing a line down the first few notches of his spine. And then it was gone, filling John with intense disappointment and anticipation as to where it might land next.

He shook out a startled breath as he felt Monseigneur move to touch the line of faint, almost-gone bruises on one wrist with his lips.

_He’s owning them, owning what he did to me in the dungeons_, a part of John’s mind thought hazily, recalling Monseigneur’s treatment of his bruises incurred by Lestrade’s fists. _This is the closest he’ll ever come to saying he’s sorry for inflicting them._

Monseigneur’s chaste kisses on John’s bruised skin were infinitely gentle, tender beyond belief. John felt his heart do a strange, painful twist deep inside his chest and he could not explain the moisture slowly gathering in his eyes.

He kept his head to one side as he continued to lie on his stomach. From his limited viewpoint, John could see Monseigneur’s unruly dark hair obscuring his face as he kissed his wrist; he was near enough for John to feel the slight tickle of a few, loose strands of those midnight curls against his face. For the first time, John registered Monseigneur’s scent—like a forest after the rains, fragrantly earthy and intoxicating.

At last, the kisses ended, and John watched as Monseigneur lifted his head away, followed moments later by his body shifting to partially free John’s trapped body underneath his. The movement finally broke John’s stupor. He suddenly turned, and kept turning even as he felt Monseigneur’s grip tighten around him.

“John,” said Monseigneur in warning.

But John was not listening. He was heedless of Monseigneur’s restraining hands as he finished turning over to lie fully on his back, gazing up at the man as Monseigneur leaned over him. Monseigneur, his tone disapproving: “John, I thought I said—”

His words abruptly trailed off as John placed a hand on his mouth.

John watched the flare of surprise lighting those pale eyes. _I don’t know what I’m doing_, he thought distinctly as he felt the first brush of panic deep inside him. _I don’t even know if this is really what I want, but what I do know is that I need you to shut up for a bit just this once and let me think._

The conflict warring inside John was palpable in his hand, in every line of his body. The hand on Monseigneur’s mouth was not exactly hard, but it was unyielding, full of uncertainty as to its intentions. Did John wish to push him away or urge him closer?

Monseigneur watched John’s emotions play across his face for a moment, disapproval of this man’s stubborn disobedience melting away into reluctant fascination as he gazed at John’s expressive face.

John felt Monseigneur’s lips move against his palm as he whispered one word, a promise: “Soon.”

John continued to stare at Monseigneur, his heart still in his throat and desire raging hot and hard in his loins as he recognized this to be the most dangerous incarnation that Monseigneur could ever
assume: when he would choose to cast aside his demonic mantle for a few minutes, just long enough for John to catch a glimpse of the man underneath.

Author’s Notes: Pell training, which makes use of a wooden post planted firmly on the ground for sword practice, was essential during the Medieval Ages. It allowed knights to practice various vicious strokes and manoeuvres such as thrusting, cutting, and slicing without imposing an injury on his opponent. The longsword is also known as the hand-and-a-half sword. (Source: Medieval Life and Times)

The Scottish Bean Nighe, or washerwoman of the ford, is a cousin of the more well-known Banshee (Bean sith) of Irish folklore and legend. Like all magical creatures, certain ways must be observed when approaching this entity to minimize offense: If one can get between the washerwoman and the water, three questions may be answered by the Bean Nighe, but only after three questions have been answered by the mortal first. A mortal who is bold enough to sneak up to her while she is washing and suck her breast can claim to be her foster child. The mortal can then gain a wish from her. If a mortal passing by asks politely, she will tell the names of the chosen that are going to die. While generally appearing as a hag, she can also manifest as a beautiful young woman when it suits her, much as does her Irish counterpart. John’s account of her here, along with Mike’s story about the clan members shut into one of the dungeon rooms in the Lair, are lifted from Wikipedia, Mysteries of the Afterlife (Aldus Books) and Uncovering Scotland. There will be more about the Bean Nighe in future chapters.

(Bean Nighe from paranormalgirl.com)
The apparition in Molly’s ghost story is said to be the ghost of Isabella, She-Wolf of France and Queen of England, who was rumored to have murdered her husband, Edward II. (Source: Wikipedia, and the queen’s biography by Alison Weir).

During the early to mid-Medieval Ages, women’s education was largely frowned upon. Some high-born ladies were taught to read and write, but they were the fortunate few. In the 13th century, according to Philip of Navarre, women in general “should not learn to read and write unless they are going to be nuns, as much harm has come from such knowledge. For men will dare to send letters near them in the form of indecent requests…and the Devil can soon lead her on to read the letters or”— even worse— “answer them.” (from Isabella, by Alison Weir)

Translation:

_Mon nom est John Watson et je viens d'Angria:_ My name is John Watson and I am from Angria.
For what seemed like endless minutes, Monseigneur continued to gaze down at John in wonder. John’s gradual adjustment to his person had taken time— so much time it seemed to Monseigneur, who was not used to waiting for anything. Yet here, at last, was some proof that his sorely tested patience was finally bearing fruit.

Here he was, with John exactly where he wanted him: pinned underneath him from the hips down and not struggling violently, for once. Yet there was a vestige of opposition: John’s hand was on Monseigneur’s mouth— strong, blunt fingers pressed against his slightly parted lips. Monseigneur could sense John’s resolve slowly weakening, but there was still enough of it to keep him at bay. For now.

Wait, John’s hand on his mouth seemed to say.

It was the last thing Monseigneur wanted to do right now, not when he’d finally had John spread out beneath him, unresisting and more pliant than he had ever been. Through his questing hands, Monseigneur had finally known the various textures of John’s skin and the muscled planes of his firm, compact body: a fascinating range of smooth to rough and soft to hard, incredibly warm and alive.

And aroused.

In the midst of their earlier, rough horseplay, John’s nightshift had come undone and was twisted somewhere around his lower torso. Monseigneur could feel the frantic thrumming of the man’s heart as he rested a hand at the center of John’s naked chest. Farther down, tantalizingly hidden from view but lying thick and hard against Monseigneur’s muscled thigh was the heady evidence of John’s need that echoed Monseigneur’s very own. So John had not been unaffected by his little game, after all. John wanted him too.

It was all Monseigneur could do not to throw caution to the winds and just take this man here and now— this stubborn, mistrusting, utterly captivating man who was so different from anyone he’d ever known: his greatest temptation. God only knew when he’d have another chance like this. It was all he could do not to lap at John’s fingertips with his tongue and suck them into his mouth. It was all he could do not to lean down and take John’s mouth savagely with his the way he had done in the dungeons and grind his aching arousal against his.

He’d told John he wanted him willing. He may not be entirely willing now but perhaps Monseigneur could dissuade him from his reluctance a few minutes down the line— as soon as he could kiss that ironclad resolve away.

But John’s hand on his mouth was unyielding, a little tense, willing him to remain still. John’s touch was uncertain but more than ready to harden into full-fledged resistance should Monseigneur make one false move, and John’s eyes staring steadfastly into Monseigneur’s seemed to belie his body’s needs with the shadows of perennial sadness that lurked in their depths.
Monseigneur could certainly boast that he had a talent for reading people; indeed, John was practically an open book, as far as he was concerned. He had paid rapt attention to the unspoken nuances of John’s thoughts in his body language and his eyes. Initially, his advances had elicited traces of revulsion, the unease that accompanied John’s adjustment to a strange and unfamiliar situation. Monseigneur was pleased to see these feelings had gradually shifted, to be replaced by reluctant desire.

Yet the pain and anguish in John’s eyes remained undiminished— wordless testaments to a burden of memories. Staring into John’s blue gaze, Monseigneur could see it: that old, nameless grief he had glimpsed once before that mired John’s soul and turned him from a healer to a soldier. There were ghosts in John’s past that were very much alive in his heart and his mind, stealing the smile from John’s face before it could linger too long and presenting themselves as a shield for John to use against Monseigneur’s advances. So long as they were there, festering inside his heart like a wound that refused to heal properly, John would never be free. Monseigneur would never be able to claim him fully for his own.

Just like everything else about John, Monseigneur would have to know his sorrows. Instinctively, he knew it would be a mistake to force himself on John now without addressing his inner demons. He’d have to know each of them, by name if necessary, in order to banish and destroy them. It would take time. There was nothing he could do but wait.

Curbing his impatience was never something Monseigneur was good at, and right now it required near-heroic efforts to rein himself in. Yet somehow, he managed it. With as much grace as he could muster, he took John’s restraining hand in his and turned his head slightly to kiss its palm, murmuring once again the promise he had made: “Soon, John.”

John left soon after they had settled down. An impossible task, this: lying side by side with their backs to one another in the claustrophobic confines of the closed, curtained bed, not speaking and not quite touching, their bodies still racing and sleep the farthest thing from their minds. After a while it became intolerable, and whether or not he thought Monseigneur was asleep beside him, John quietly got up and departed for his divan. Monseigneur could feel John easing away from him ever so carefully and he did nothing to stop him. Instead, he was stunned to feel an unfamiliar, deep-seated pain starting deep inside his chest, like blood blossoming gradually on white linen— the spreading petals of a red, red flower— immediately after a knife’s clean and fatal stroke.

There would be no sleep for him tonight as he examined in his restless mind the phantoms of grief he had glimpsed in John’s eyes. He was beginning to sense that he had a problem in his hands— a huge one. Data. He needed more data before he could go on, before he allowed himself to be engulfed by suspicions— dark and insidious— already forming inside his head.

Dawn was encroaching upon his windows when he finally drifted off for a short nap, interrupted all too soon by Billy. He could not laze around in bed: Lestrade would be leaving for the garrison again soon and Monseigneur could no longer put off the reception of his endorsements on various matters that required his attention.

As he got up to dress, Monseigneur could sense a foul mood coming on.

Lestrade had stayed on after the King’s visit, taking care of his responsibilities on Monseigneur’s behalf at the Lair which he had allocated to various trusted retainers while he took on the full business of leading a garrison for the past few months.
Everything had been in order while they were away. Having dealt with his lord’s many concerns quickly and efficiently, Lestrade could now go back to overseeing the final stages of stripping down the garrison and converting it into an outpost to be manned by a skeleton crew of soldiers in the north. Then he would be free of his obligations for a few weeks to go back to his wife and daughters for some much-needed rest before resuming his duties in Monseigneur’s household.

Monseigneur was barely listening to him as he droned on with report after report of everything from the state of the knights and soldiers in his retinue, his horses, his equipment, and the various expenditures which had been incurred in housing and feeding his army to the ceremonial procedures which his men must be made familiar with at the royal wedding. All Monseigneur was conscious of was the lightness in the deep timber of Lestrade’s voice that spoke of relief that the worst of the work was over and the anticipation that he would be seeing his family again soon.

And all the while, Monseigneur stared out the window of his study at the three distant figures below, standing in the courtyard: Donovan, Anderson and John, conferring in a huddle as Donovan showed John how to man her boomerang. It was, by all standards, a most astonishing turn of events. What special powers did John possess to be able to befriend the insufferably haughty Donovan and the doofus Anderson?

But that’s what normal people do, don’t they? They meet people and make friends with them, and it will only be a matter of time before someone special comes along for them to fall in love and start a family with.

Boring.

The entire notion was boring— so hopelessly common and boring and not worth his time because it had nothing to do with him. Until now. And all because it concerned John. Quite suddenly—practically overnight—he found himself saddled with a problem he had no idea how to deal with. It was a piece of the puzzle that was John Watson that he did not know where to fit in his own scheme of things.

That strange, unhappy twist deep inside his chest again— an alien feeling of almost-pain that had somehow taken root within him in the small hours of last night and had grown at a monstrous pace ever since. It was appalling that he should feel something as vile as this.

It took a moment for him to realize that Lestrade was finished with his reports and was awaiting further orders. There were several, which he had Dimmock, his private secretary, put down on parchment days before, and this he handed silently to Lestrade. Just when Lestrade was preparing to take his leave, he asked, “Was it worth it, going into exile with me?”

Lestrade had been in a pickle the entire morning. He had found Monseigneur in one of his moods, which had always meant trouble before. Already unpredictable at the best of times, Monseigneur could make Lestrade feel like he’d taken a special trip to hell when he was in one of his moods. So Lestrade had braced himself for every possible unpleasantness—mulish disagreements and the undermining of his decisions in just about anything, or perhaps one of Monseigneur’s sudden flare-ups over the smallest matters that he had not foreseen as an inconvenience to him. Certainly, Lestrade was prepared for all of these things and more, but he had never expected Monseigneur’s question.

So now he blinked and said, “Sir?”

Monseigneur tore his gaze from the window long enough to give him an oblique glance. “Back when I was seventeen and my brother sent you here, you’d begged him to take you back after a week with me,” he said in a tone that challenged Lestrade to contradict him.
Lestrade shifted uncomfortably on his booted feet. “Well. Yes,” he admitted. Quickly, he added, “But that was then. And this isn’t exile.”

Monseigneur almost smiled at Lestrade’s tact, but the fact was, this wasn’t just exile for Lestrade; it was practically a demotion. And Monseigneur had made it even more complicated by doing his aggressive best to drive Lestrade away at that first, awful week because he had deduced quite rightly that his brother had sent Lestrade over to serve and spy on him at the same time. He had ultimately gained Lestrade’s respect and loyalty, but that had come much later and after certain agreements of non-interference had been struck with his brother.

“You never harbored any resentment when the King refused to take you back?” Monseigneur pressed on.

Lestrade’s mouth thinned into a grim line. “It was…necessary,” he replied.

And indeed, it had been of the utmost necessity for both of them. Whether he would admit it or not, Monseigneur had needed someone skillful and trustworthy to manage his soldiers for him. After getting rid of Lestrade’s five predecessors under one pretext or another, the King had finally had enough of Monseigneur’s antics and he had been coldly furious over the shabby treatment of his favorite. It was either Lestrade stayed on, Mycroft had declared, or Monseigneur would find his household dissolved and combined with the King’s own. Of course, it had been a preposterous idea, but there was no telling what his brother was capable of when he was in a rage. Just the thought of having to face the King for dinner and perhaps even supper every day had been enough to stifle Monseigneur’s arguments. Besides, Lestrade had proven to be an excellent administrator and was the least irritating of the noblemen the King had sent his way.

For his part, it had become imperative for Lestrade to be sent away from the hotbed of court politics because the King’s partiality for his company had instigated a vicious backlash from various barons jealous of the King’s patronage that Lestrade was seen to enjoy, no matter how well deserved. As Lestrade had come to learn, being the sovereign’s favorite could be a blessing and a curse at the same time.

It had not been an easy thing for the King to banish his favorite from court, yet Mycroft had done so before Lestrade’s name was forever soiled and he would be forced to fight for his honor. In the King’s private summons to chastise him, Monseigneur had been made aware of his brother’s sacrifice in harsh and no uncertain terms. Afterwards, Mycroft had handed Lestrade back to Monseigneur, declaring they should both make the best of their lot. And yet, despite that inauspicious beginning to their working relationship, they had somehow managed to set aside their differences and made things work between them.

With Lestrade safely out of harm’s way, the King had been left with more room to deal with his critics one by one with his usual sly and insidious tactics, but it had taken time. After the furor had effectively died down at court, the King had tried to recall Lestrade, but Monseigneur had flatly refused to give him up by then. Perhaps what had been even more surprising was that Lestrade himself had chosen to stay with Monseigneur.

Monseigneur looked at his silver-haired general now and remembered him with a head of jet-black hair when he had first arrived. He said, “You’ve not answered my question. The truth, Lestrade. Now’s your chance to spare me nothing from your barbed tongue.”

When it finally came to his lips, Lestrade’s smile was a little wry. “I have no regrets, my lord,” he said staunchly. His smile widened as he murmured, “It’s funny you should ask that question now.”

“How so?”
“I remember John Watson asking me the same thing back in the garrison,” answered Lestrade. "Though not in terms of exile, of course. He asked me if it’s worth it, serving you.”

Monseigneur forced himself to remain still as he asked, his tone carefully neutral, “Did he? And what did you tell him?”

“I told him yes, of course,” said Lestrade, “if he’s strong enough. And I think he is. He’s settling down rather well, I must say. He’s not been much trouble, I trust, my lord?”

Monseigneur said nothing as he sullenly watched the subject of their conversation let fly Donovan’s boomerang in the courtyard. John had no business to appear so cheery and unaffected after what very nearly happened between them last night. Then, he murmured, “You’ve not voiced your opinion on the King’s upcoming marriage.”

Lestrade was startled. “Haven’t I?” he asked. “Of course, I wish His Majesty every happiness.”

“Do you really?” Monseigneur asked, his tone dull.

Lestrade frowned. “Of course,” he said, wondering what Monseigneur was about. “The King is my oldest and dearest friend. I will always wish him the very best.”

Monseigneur closed his eyes briefly. For the life of him, he did not know how Mycroft and Lestrade managed it. Even he did not know the actual extent of their relationship. It was hard to define, but what his brother and Lestrade had was a kind of devoted kinship that was commonly seen among Gaaldinian men friends and close male associates serving together for a long time in the armies. It was a kind of affection that went deeper than normal friendship, flirting on the very margins of intimacy without actually overstepping itself. Even so, it was not without risk and much care was exercised in making sure certain lines were never crossed. What Monseigneur felt for John was a different thing altogether— from the very start, it was something far more primal and passionate, exceeding the boundaries of accepted conventions by a full mile, at the very least. Needless to say, it could become an extremely complicated and dangerous situation. Something to be exploited by enemies, and Monseigneur had lots of those.

For once, Monseigneur’s train of thought was not difficult to follow. Lestrade was thinking along the same lines, with an important addition: what made the situation even more dangerous was that once he was in the thick of things, Monseigneur would hardly care what people thought of him or his actions. This was enough to prompt Lestrade to ask in a concerned tone, “What has brought this on, my lord? Does John Watson have anything—”

“He’s not to be faulted for anything.” Monseigneur’s tone was sharp.

*Oh, God,* thought Lestrade in dismay as he noted Monseigneur’s lack of denial. Of course, he had noticed some signs along the way these past few weeks, and there had been whispers. He had also heard of the King’s confrontation with John and the drama that had ensued. Lestrade wondered just how many in the castle knew about it. All the servants, no doubt.

This was not good.

Incredibly still, instead of backing down, Monseigneur whisked around in a swirl of royal blue robes and pinned Lestrade with an intense gaze. “Has John ever mentioned his family in any way to you?” he asked abruptly.

Lestrade was momentarily taken aback by his question, but finally answered, “No. He’s never mentioned anything about his life in Angria. Of course, I won’t be surprised if he’s got a wife and
children tucked away somewhere in the Highlands. How old is he, anyway? Eight and twenty? Perhaps even thirty?"

Monseigneur was fairly certain that John currently had no family, but Lestrade’s words were the last thing he wanted to hear because, in a way, he was bringing flesh to what was mere bones before. He suddenly found that he did not want to consider the very real possibility that John had a wife and children.

A stretch of uncomfortable silence before Lestrade asked, “If you wish, my lord, I can find out if—"

“No!” Then, more softly: “There’s no need. And anyway, it’s not important. He’s just being… recalcitrant. I’ll bring him to heel soon enough.”

This time, Lestrade could not suppress his alarm. He cleared his throat after a moment and said, “A suggestion, my lord?”

Monseigneur resisted the urge to roll his eyes and drawled, “By all means.”

“Whatever your plans to bring the man to heel, don’t drag his family into it,” advised Lestrade urgently. “A man may get used to a lot of things, even something as extreme as being held captive, but never this form of personal intrusion. He may forgive a wrong inflicted upon him on other grounds, but never anything that touches his family.”

“I am his lord and master now. I can do whatever I wish with him,” replied Monseigneur coldly. Lestrade shook his head. “I fear not in this case, my lord,” he said, refusing to give way. “Not if you do not wish to have a knife stuck in your back in the middle of the night.”

“John would never do such a thing,” retorted Monseigneur, the surprise in his voice only assuring Lestrade that the thought of infuriating John with attempts to ply any information about his family from him had never even occurred to Monseigneur.

Something seemed to snap in Lestrade then, driving him to retort: "I know I would."

There was only stony silence as Monseigneur looked at him with shuttered eyes and said nothing. Lestrade could see black fury mounting steadily in those eyes but he was far from done.

"You told me to spare you nothing, my lord," reminded Lestrade obstinately. “There are limits to what a man can take, and there is such a thing as breaking him. Once it happens, you will find that there may not be a way to put him back together in one piece.”

He had expected Monseigneur to scoff angrily, perhaps even let loose a stream of hurtful invective. What he did not expect was Monseigneur's reply. "In case you've not noticed, the man is already broken, Lestrade. In more places than one. Yet here he is, still standing. He's stronger than you're making him out to be. I've no plans to break him further. I just want..."

Monseigneur broke off before he could finish. What did he want? For the first time in a long while, he did not know. All of a sudden, he felt like he'd stepped off the chessboard and was on unfamiliar terrain, unsure of what move to make next.

To say that Lestrade was shocked by his lord's words would have been an understatement. For several minutes, he did not know what to say. Finally, he managed, "You must allow a man to keep a secret or two about his past. When he's ready, he will divulge all. Until then, it would be unwise to force it out of him."
Lestrade watched as Monseigneur impatiently jerked his head away at his words but forbore to comment. Monseigneur had already said too much, revealed more than what was necessary. Already, Lestrade could feel him sweeping everything back in and locking it away behind those cold, pale eyes.

Another moment of tight-lipped silence, then Lestrade said, “He’s really this special to you then, my lord.” It was not a question.

Monseigneur was done talking. He merely lifted his chin a fraction as he stared at Lestrade haughtily, almost defiantly.

But it was Lestrade's turn to surprise Monseigneur. “He will need to be protected at court,” was all he said.

Monseigneur hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

Lestrade was not sure what to make of his extraordinary conversation with Monseigneur. He now had an entirely new set of problems in his hands, the foremost of which was his uncertainty if his warning would sink in sufficiently with the man. So he decided to try John. Between the two, Lestrade felt it was time he dealt with the adult in this situation.

It was not going to be easy talking to him though. Lestrade actually did not know how to start or what to say, really. All he knew was that he had to convey to John the importance of not losing his temper with Monseigneur in the coming days and murdering him in his sleep.

He did not get a chance until after dinner, when he found John among the young people in the topiary, the Lady Mary's special sanctuary in the vast gardens. It had been years since he was last here, but it was easy enough to trace their whereabouts in the yew maze; all he had to do was follow their laughing voices. He was rounding a corner of neatly trimmed shrubbery when he was startled to hear the deep, drawling baritone of Monsiegneur, followed by irreverent hoots of laughter and applause. But of course, that was impossible. He was sure Monseigneur was still in the Lair, caged in his study going over various papers and probably driving Dimmock mad in the process. Also, he had yet to see anyone laugh like that in front of Monseigneur.

True enough, it turned out to be only Billy, doing one of his voices again. Lestrade's nephew, when he got over being painfully shy, was a clever and natural mimic, able to switch from the shrill tones of a young girl to the full, barrel-chested boom of a battle-hardened soldier seemingly at will. Once, Lestrade had even come upon the boy impersonating his own voice— the harsh, low grate of it unmistakably his yet sounding strange when it issued from the throat of another. Needless to say, he had given Billy a sound cuffing for his efforts.

The little group came into view at last: the Lady Mary, or Molly as she insisted on being called nowadays, and John seated on a low marble bench, cheering him on while Billy stood in front of them, hands on his hips, the straight line of his back a disturbingly accurate rendition of Monseigneur's imperious posture. Were it not for Billy's ginger curls, Lestrade would have found himself blinking and shaking his head just to clear it a bit.

His sudden appearance immediately checked the laughing banter. Billy caught the look on the faces of the Lady Mary and John and, turning, gave a small start at seeing his uncle glowering at him a few feet away.

"My...my lord," stammered Billy, his voice his very own once more.
"Later for you," growled Lestrade. "John, a minute of your time, if you will."

"He didn't mean anything by it, you know," John began as soon as they were out of earshot.

Lestrade gave an irritated huff. "Stop covering for him," he said shortly. "He's here to learn the form and manners of an honorable knight, not to indulge in tomfoolery."

He stopped and turned to survey John in full. He looked well, and he had filled out quite nicely since Lestrade saw him last. The difference a few weeks in the Lair and Mary Turner's cooking could make.

"I see you've settled down satisfactorily, John. You've not had difficulty making friends," Lestrade said after a moment. "Are you happy here?"

Upon hearing Lestrade's words, something in John's eyes changed, grew guarded. "I'm...never bored," he said carefully.

Lestrade nodded. "Well, good. That's good, I suppose," he said abstractedly. "Monseigneur has been treating you well, then?"

This time, John did not bother replying, merely tilted his head an angle as he fixed Lestrade with an opaque gaze: Your point?

Yes, that. He was getting there.

How to explain to John the concept of being a favorite to a Gaaldinian prince? Lestrade absolutely had no idea. For God's sake, he was a general with a series of successful military campaigns to his name, not someone people came to for personal advice and a bit of handholding. This was not his division. He ought to have enlisted Lady Hudson's assistance in this, but the subject matter was not suitable for discussion in front of ladies, even someone as mature and experienced as Lady Hudson.

John stared at Lestrade as the venerable lord shifted uncomfortably in front of him, groping for words. Oh, God, where to begin?

Lestrade finally said, "You're not a stupid man, John. I think you know your position with regards Monseigneur."

If John was surprised, he did not let it show much. He said nothing, merely stood his ground as he continued to regard Lestrade with raised eyebrows.

Lestrade’s next words were hopelessly blunt: "Do you like him, John?" Catching John’s expression as his brows came crashing down over his eyes, Lestrade hastily backtracked: "You don't have to answer that. Trust me, I don’t want to know."

“What’s going on?” asked John, clearly sensing a trap of some sort.

Lestrade sighed. He felt like he’d dug himself into a hole with very little choice but to plough right on ahead. "I'm sure you would have noticed by now that Monseigneur is not...like us," he said.

Before John could misunderstand him further, he hastened to add, "What I mean is, he's a Prince of the Blood, John. He's our prince and our lord. He belongs to an entirely different class of men altogether and as such, our expectations of him must be different. Do you understand?"

It seemed John did. "If you mean we're supposed to allow princes to do as they please with us, yeah, I think I do," he said, his voice cool. "Only it's not supposed to work that way."
"Well, I'm glad you think so, too," said Lestrade, relieved. "Because it only works to a certain degree out there. He may have absolute power over us, but Monseigneur also needs people—steady, down-to-earth people—who will keep his feet firmly on the ground for him. And out of all the people he could have chosen, he chose you for the job. You may not think it, but men would kill to be in the position you're in now."

John snorted and looked away. Obviously, he had his doubts about that.

"But it's not an easy position, trust me," continued Lestrade, shaking his head. "It's one of the most difficult in the world. There will be times when you will be sorely tested by him, when he will prove to be beyond endurance. I think you've already noticed that. But you're one of us now, and we are all his people. We do not expect a prince to adhere to consistency, but we've sworn our allegiance to him. You will honor your word and look out for him despite everything he'll throw your way, won't you?"

John frowned at Lestrade's urgent tone, then something seemed to occur to him. "Wait, hold on," he said. "What's he told you, exactly? Did he put you up to this?"

"He's going to try to test your limits, John," growled Lestrade, reaching the end of his patience at last, "as he did to all of us at one point or another. He will regard nothing of yours sacred in his quest to know everything about you. Don't break down in the process, or even worse, break him to pieces. Understood?"

John pursed his lips, thoughtfully. Finally, he said, "That was what he did to you the first week you came into his service, didn't he?"

Lestrade muttered something under his breath, something about tracking down whoever had been spreading these things around and putting him slowly to death, then he said quite clearly, "Yes. And as you can see, I survived. My question is: can you survive Monseigneur, John?"

John found he could hardly resist, when the man phrased it like that. "Yeah," he said with a slow smile touching his lips. "I think I can."

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Data. Monseigneur desperately needed more data before he could plan his offensive. Short of asking John direct questions, though, he was not certain how to go about obtaining the information he needed.

A name. He just needed one name to crack open the mystery of John's past.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, he came upon it days later courtesy of Lady Hudson. Lady Hudson had trapped him in one of her tedious interviews outlining the expenses to be incurred for dressing the entire household for the royal wedding. Apparently, Lady Hudson's proposed budget for clothes had been high enough to necessitate Monseigneur’s approval even before she broached the subject with the Wardrobe people, who ran the royal household funds.

Five minutes into the meeting, and Monseigneur would have wanted nothing more than to reach out and claw at the entire length of the table before him as he was forced to listen to the dear lady enumerating the various materials she would need to hand over to the tailors: bolts of linen, velvet, silk and taffeta; cloths of gold and silver, and trimmings of all sorts. For the evening entertainments alone, she and Molly would need at least four gowns each and that did not include the costumes for the masques yet—
"Molly. Who's Molly?" Monseigneur queried, nearly out of his mind with boredom and catching the name as it nearly flew past his attention.

"Oh, that would be Mary the Younger," answered Lady Hudson. "Don't you know she'd rather be called Molly nowadays? It's a sweet little name. John gave it to her, apparently."

"John?" Monseigneur repeated incredulously, sounding like he'd received an unexpected blow to the gut.

"Yes, John Watson. Well, it's true, what with six Marys in the household, it does get to be rather confusing..."

Lady Hudson prattled happily on, unaware of the tumult Monseigneur was suddenly in.

There it was. The name to unlock John's past, the name Monseigneur needed to know to realize his worst fears had just come true: he had a rival for John’s affections.

Mary. The name of John's dead wife.

The name of his pain was Mary.

Author's Notes: The Wardrobe, along with a chamberlain, made up the personal part of medieval English government known as the King's household. All expenditures incurred in housing, clothing and feeding royal personages and their people passed through this influential office. Originally the term was used to describe the room where the king's clothes, armour and treasure were stored, but over time, it was expanded to describe the department of clerks who ran it. The wardrobe treasure of gold and jewels, funded by but not under the control of the treasury (and therefore Parliament) enabled the king to make secret and rapid payments to fund his diplomatic and military operations.

(Source: Wikipedia)

On the subject of kings and princes with their male favorites, the notorious relationship between Piers Gaveston and Edward II came foremost to my mind. Mycroft circumvented the possible consequences by sending Lestrade away while Monseigneur has yet to show his hand when it comes to his relationship with John.
When Monseigneur was in a mood, everyone in the Lair trembled.

He was in a foul mood for no apparent cause and it went on and on for days with no end in sight. Eventually, even Lady Hudson lost some of her unflappable calm and openly wondered if something had come up between Monseigneur and the King to bring about this spectacular episode of the doldrums. A fraternal row was the only thing she could think of to instigate a sulk of this magnitude.

Nobody was exempt from it: from Lady Hudson down to Billy—anybody luckless enough to have to deal with Monseigneur was treated to a few choice words from the man that left each person smarting in a different way: Lady Hudson walked out of his insolent presence in a huff, all ruffled feathers, after he chided her for having no more sense than a magpie when it came to managing his household; Billy was a white-faced, trembling mess after Monseigneur was done with him over some minor hiccup in the execution of his errands; and poor Lady Molly was reduced to bitter tears when he threatened to give her away to the first traveling minstrel visiting the Lair after she tried to engage him in small talk and gently tease him out of his ill temper. Mike Stamford fared no better as he got blasted for mixing some formulation that Monseigneur pronounced unfit for human consumption. Lestrade, that lucky bastard, had removed himself just in time to avoid Monseigneur's verbal swipes, taking his soldiers with him as he headed back to the garrison. Witnessing his departure, John had not failed to notice that Lestrade seemed in a hurry to be away from the Lair, away from his master.

And then there was the music.

Monseigneur would shut himself up in his rooms for hours, not working, not letting anybody else in and making the darkest, most disturbingly sensual music John had ever heard on his vielle. John had seen Lady Hudson cross herself when she heard the sounds issuing from his apartments and knew that the unusual and deeply compelling notes that issued from Monseigneur's instrument were somehow forbidden, diabolical.

Whenever he was not making music of his own, Monseigneur surrounded himself with the company of the troubadours and minstrels who now came to the Lair with their songs and stories from far away, hoping for his royal patronage and largesse. Spring had now settled in fully and the Lair was alive with green, growing things in its gardens and courtyards, boldly clinging and creeping up its solid, venerable stone walls. During the afternoons and evenings, music and song would drift through the air, sometimes infused with Monseigneur's complex and ravishingly dissonant tones. It would have been a restful time, an idyllic time, but Monseigneur's foul disposition was casting a gloomy raincloud over everything.

After a few days of suffering his outrageous bad humor, everyone agreed that John should be the one to approach Monseigneur to snap him out of it. Now that Lestrade had gone, they said, nobody else could do it except John.

“Hold on a minute, what makes you think he’s not been extending me the same treatment?” demanded John as the small group huddled expectantly about him one evening during supper in the small dining room. To be expected, they had all been banished from Monseigneur’s presence during
mealtimes— if Monseigneur cared to eat at all, that was.

He’d never told them about his incident, but the truth was John had not been exempt from Monseigneur’s tongue lashing as well. He was new to this side of Monseigneur’s temperament and had not recognized the danger signs for what they were one evening while they were poring over some books in the library. Monseigneur had been unresponsive to John’s distracted musings and thinking he had merely slipped into his mind palace, John had finally looked up to see the man staring at him through narrowed eyes from across the table.

The words had died on John's lips as he took in the stormy look in Monseigneur's eyes.

Oh. Oh hell, what had he done now?

John had licked his lips and said carefully, "Sherlock, are you alright?"

"Oh, bravo, John," Monseigneur had replied sarcastically in a voice low and trembling slightly with suppressed emotion. "As ever your keen observational skills are quick to notice something’s amiss."

John had frowned. Definitely not alright, to judge from Monseigneur's rage that no mask could conceal.

"What's going on?" John had pressed on, still in that careful tone.

"As if you'd care," Monseigneur had spat out.

John had raised his brows at that. "I...maybe, yeah," he had found himself replying uncertainly. "If there's anything I can do to help, of course I’d—"

Monseigneur had scoffed as he shook his head dismissively. "Exactly! You can't do anything about it!" he had snapped. And, very strangely: "You've not been able to help yourself or anyone else so what makes you think you can help me? And anyway, it's not as if it has anything to do with me. I am fine. In fact, I've never been better. So why don't you just leave. Me. Alone!"

And John had. With his hands held up in front of him as if in surrender, he had stood up from his chair and very deliberately turned and walked away. It was only when he was standing outside the library doors that John had realized he was breathing heavily.

He had absolutely no idea what had just happened.

Lying awake that night on his divan long after Monseigneur had pointedly drawn the curtains around himself in his bed, John had let his fingers trail across his chest to settle above his racing heart, thinking in confused disbelief that it had only been mere days since Monseigneur had very tenderly touched him there with a whispered promise: "Soon."

And now, suddenly, this.

The only logical conclusion John could reach was that the man had gone mad.

So John stared at the anxious faces of the people gathered about him now and said, "I can't do it.”

"Oh, John, of course you can," said the Lady Molly entreatingly. "He listens to you. Remember that time when you and William were late for dinner? You managed beautifully to turn him around then."

"Yes, well, that was that. This is different," said John. Definitely, this was not one of Monseigneur’s usual little outbursts of petulance. Whatever this was, it was huge. And when he thought about it in
connection to Monseigneur's cryptic words and Lestrade's advice given to him several days ago, he began to worry.

"At least try to find out what's been eating at him," urged Lady Hudson. "I declare, I've not been able to make heads nor tails with that lad, and I've known him the longest among you."

“I don’t think he’s going to open up to me anymore than to any of you,” pressed John stubbornly. These people must be mad if they thought he’d suffer Monseigneur’s atrocious behavior gladly. “Maybe the best thing to do is to leave him be.”

There was a short silence as everyone exchanged glances. The looks were hooded, knowing. Taking in John's confused frown as he looked about him, Lady Hudson explained patiently, “John, dear, you have not been with us long enough to know that this can go on for weeks and weeks. The situation is simply not acceptable.”

Seeing that her words had failed to move him, Lady Hudson finally sighed in resignation. “Well, there’s nothing to be done then,” she said. “We will just have to leave this to the cards.”

By that, Lady Hudson meant the picture cards she always carried about her person. John knew about playing cards, of course, but Lady Hudson did not just employ hers for leisurely play. Her cards, she believed, had the special power to tell her things. They were old, their edges gilded in fading gold. They had been given to her by a gypsy who had entertained at various courts in Gondal and the lower countries years before who claimed that the cards had the ability to accurately tell fortunes. More than once, Lady Hudson had resolved vexing problems and household issues she knew not the answer to by putting them to the cards, though John had noticed she took care never to do so in front of Monseigneur.

Now, she took the cards out from the voluminous folds of her dress and started distributing them around the table, one card per person.

“Don’t worry, this is nothing more than a form of lottery,” reassured Lady Hudson as Billy peered suspiciously at his downturned card. “You know the rules: somebody calls out a particular picture and whoever draws the card is it. We keep drawing until there is a match. I’ll go first: La Pappese.”

Everybody turned over their cards. No match.

“Billy, give us a card, there’s a dear,” she urged.

And so it went on until the fourth try, when Molly was asked her choice of card. She said, “L'amoureux.” Easily her favorite.

“No match?” inquired Lady Hudson, peering anxiously at the cards that everyone had turned over. “John?”

John was staring at the card he had in his hand, his face like thunder. Without another word, he flipped it face-up on the table—a picture of two young lovers smiling at each other.

A little whoop went up around the small group.

“You’re it, John,” said Mike, half-relieved, half-commiserating.

Lady Hudson beamed. “So you see, John,” she announced, satisfied. “It is nothing short of fate.”

John shook his head and fought not to roll his eyes. This was absurd, but fair was fair. He could not imagine how the cards could be rigged. "I'll try but I can't promise anything," he told them, sighing.
After a few days Monseigneur roused himself to continue his work, although there was hardly any change in his recently altered state. His outburst with John was never repeated, and Monseigneur continued to give him instructions for his work with the antidote, albeit they were delivered in a glacial tone.

John knew that Monseigneur could be very effective in everything he chose to apply himself to, and now he was bent on mentally distancing himself away from everyone. In the course of those days, John would find himself occasionally within the man’s orbit yet he had not been able to breach the wall of silence that separated them. Any attempt on his part to begin a conversation was met either with stony silence or an occasional, monosyllabic growl when Monseigneur absolutely needed to reply to his queries. After a while, John gave up talking to him, refusing to be affected by the cold shoulder treatment and relegating his frustration to the back of his mind, along with myriad foul thoughts of the man. Two could play at this game of ignoring each other.

It had occurred to John at the very beginning of their acquaintance that he was not dealing with a normal adult when it came to Monseigneur, so he would just have to wait until Monseigneur was ready to approach or be approached by him.

And finally, he was.

Surprising John in the glass house early one morning, Monseigneur said, “Have you boiled the mushrooms as I’ve instructed?”

John silently handed over the extract he had prepared. He did not know what Monseigneur would want to do with an extract made from poisonous mushrooms, and he found that he did not want to know.

Monseigneur took it, eyes averted, then said, “The dungeons, later after supper.”

John knew that silence was probably the best recourse in the situation, but after days and days of enduring it, fuck silence.

“Oh, so we’re talking again now, are we?” he asked recklessly, his tone sullen and hands braced against the edge of the table before him as he looked sideways at Monseigneur.

Monseigneur refused to take the bait. He merely tucked the vial of extract away in the pocket of his cote-hardie and murmured, “Don’t be late.”

Having obtained what he came for, he turned around abruptly and left.

So now the man was not even going to look at John in the face. It was hopelessly confounding. John did not know why, and he would rather die than admit this to anyone, but Monseigneur’s sudden about-face with his treatment of him hurt. Yes, hurt. There was no other word to describe that tight, painful squeeze of his traitor-heart inside his chest. It had been years since he felt it last and the realization that he was still capable of feeling like this was not welcome.

All these weeks, he had thought he was finally coming to know the man, but the truth was that he knew almost nothing about him. Honestly, Monseigneur did not need the mask on his face to camouflage himself.

Something had occurred during the past few days to upset him terribly, but John could not think of what it could be. The only transgression that came to John’s mind was Monseigneur’s discovery of a mangled book in the library not long after the King’s visit. Clearly, it had been Baskerville’s work...
and it had irked Monseigneur considerably, but his annoyance had been more amusing than terrible and that episode had taken place more than a fortnight ago. No, this one was much more recent, the possible cause a much more serious offense.

And John still could not make sense of what Monseigneur had hurled at him: *It's not in your power to do anything...if you can't help yourself or anyone else how can you possibly help me?*

John found he did not like mysteries very much. Monseigneur was trying to tell him something, and he was going to find out what it was in one way or the other tonight.

John had supper with the others in the small dining room as usual, and afterwards made his way down the dungeons through the bookcases in the bed chamber.

He had steeled himself for whatever lay in store for him for the evening, yet despite his misgivings and the memory of his last encounter there, he actually found that a part of him— that morbid part that always thirsted for danger and excitement— was actually looking forward to seeing the dungeons again.

*Seeing Monseigneur again, and talking to him at length.*

Oh fuck, he didn't just think that. Really, he didn't.

He’d try to find out what was ailing him. That was all John was going to do. Under no circumstances was he going to acknowledge, even to himself, that he’d missed him.

The great iron door to Monseigneur’s work area was flung wide open when John reached the dungeons, and he stopped at the doorway, looking in. He’d learned his lesson; he was never going to set foot inside its premises again without being called in.

This time though, he caught sight of Monseigneur the moment he peeped in, seated behind one wide table, immersed in his experiments. He cleared his throat and waited.

“Don’t dawdle by the doorway, John,” Monseigneur said without looking up. “Come in.”

Well, there was no change in his sour mood that was for certain.

“And hello to you, too,” John muttered low beneath his breath. It was not inaudible though.

Monseigneur flicked a glance at his direction before looking away again.

Resentment flared through John as he caught the fleeting glance. “So why am I here?” he asked bluntly.

"I want you to see for yourself the effects of the antidote you've helped make," said Monseigneur. John tore his rapt gaze from the wall where he had been manacled into place previously and said, “I can’t believe this. You’ve really got a bloody, non-renovated torture chamber for your workroom.”

Monseigneur regarded him for a moment then very deliberately drawled, “Congratulations for stating the very obvious, John. Perhaps you would know by now that to me, what matters is the work. The rest is just transport. Now come here and tell me what you see.”

John would have wanted to say a whole lot more but he reined himself in. Somehow he knew he would never be able to bring Monseigneur to understand the horror of his choice of surroundings. He
took a few hesitant steps and stopped beside Monseigneur, looking at the glassware in front of them. There was some dark green fluid in a tube, held in place by an iron fixture as it was slowly heated by an oil lamp.

"You remember my detection kit to test poison. To judge from the dark green color elicited upon heating, that mushroom extract I've asked you to prepare can kill within seconds," said Monseigneur. "However, upon adding a few drops of the antidote we have developed thus far..."

He took out a small vial and proceeded to add a drop or two of fluid into the tube.

"It disappeared. The green color has disappeared," said John, leaning in to look closer at the tube whose fluid was rapidly turning clear and colorless.

"The poison has been neutralized," said Monseigneur, his voice soft and intense.

"The antidote is working then," said John, looking at Monseigneur with keen eyes.

"For poisoned mushrooms, deadly nightshade and its derivatives, and about a dozen other varieties of common poisons, yes," Monseigneur replied, eyes bright, mirroring the excited interest that John felt deep inside. "We've yet to discover its efficacy against the more exotic forms of toxins and we shall try them all, one by one. It's safe to say the antidote is now ready to be tested on a subject."

John’s eyes flared wide in surprise at Monseigneur’s words. “What…subject?” he asked uneasily, not quite able to control his impulse to scan the room for any signs of a prisoner. When he saw none, the look of sudden alarm in John’s eyes as the thought hit him was almost comical.

For the first time in days, a small smile twisted at a corner of Monseigneur’s mouth. “You will see soon enough,” he said. “And no, you’re not going to be the subject so you need not look at me like that.”

"Huh," said John, gaze dropping down once again to the clear liquid in the tube in front of him.

A lull in the conversation— now was his chance; he ought to seize it. "Your little tests appear to be working, and the antidote is coming along fine. Good for you. So why the long face these past few days?"

There was the slightest pause, and then Monseigneur looked away, his eyes suddenly hooded. "We're not here to discuss that," he said abruptly.

“Oh? I don’t see how we can discuss anything else without getting that out of the way first,” replied John implacably. "You’ve taken great pains to show your displeasure to everyone these past days, so why the hell can we not discuss it?"

"Because you're not ready," answered Monseigneur, his voice cold and hard and final. "You're not going to take kindly to what I have to say."

John clenched his jaw for a moment, then muttered, "Try me."

Monseigneur shook his head stubbornly. "No."

At that, something in John seemed to snap. He did not realize that he had grabbed hold of the front of Monseigneur's shirt until he felt the fabric twisting painfully against his fingers as he forced Monseigneur to turn to him. "This really has something to do with me then," he said, voice suddenly low and harsh as he fought a sudden swell of nameless panic deep inside him. "Why can't you just tell me what this is all about?"
"Let go, John," said Monseigneur, sighing, sounding as though the entire thing had become unbearably tedious. His long fingers reached out to clasp at John's fist on his shirt, attempting to pry John's hand away.

John stared at Monseigneur's averted face incredulously. Christ, even now, even now, he still refused to look at him!

"Look at me!" John did not recognize his own voice then, and it startled Monseigneur enough to turn his gaze back at him for a moment.

“What have I done to bring about such a change in you? What can possibly be the matter with you that you would think it fit to caress me one day and turn from me the next?” asked John, barely recognizing himself in the words that had come pouring out of his mouth.

Monseigneur said nothing, but John could see his lips thinning, his mouth setting into a grim, rigid line as he tried to bite something back. A strange, quivering tension was evident in every line of his body. John had never known Monseigneur to hold anything back— he’d never thought him capable of it— and he realized this must be very serious indeed if the man was trying to restrain himself from speaking, from doing something regrettable.

Right now, though, John was past all self-restraint himself. He needed to know what Monseigneur was holding back.

"You enjoy playing these games, don't you?" he continued through gritted teeth. He had never felt so angry, so hurt for such a long, long time. "You enjoy messing around with people’s hearts, toying with them, and then tearing them to shreds—"

"You don't understand, John!" Monseigneur's sudden, harsh cry was made all the more startling by the depth of misery John found there.

"Then make me understand," John urged, fist clenching even more insistently on Monseigneur's shirt as he gave him a hard shake. "If you can't tell me, then show me why—"

And Monseigneur did. Without warning, he launched himself at John, taking him by surprise, giving him no time to react, to step back, as Monseigneur caught the sides of his face with both hands and leaned in to kiss him with an open mouth.

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Author's notes: The **vielle** is a European bowed string instrument used in the Medieval ages, similar to the modern violin but with a somewhat longer and deeper body, five (rather than four) gut strings, and a leaf-shaped pegbox with frontal tuning pegs. The instrument was also known as a **fidel** or a **viuola**, although the French name for the instrument, **vielle**, is generally used. It was one of the most popular instruments of the period, and was used by troubadours and jongleurs from the 13th through the 15th centuries. (Source: Wikipedia)
Monseigneur’s dark and devilish music employs the use of the **tritone**, a musical phenomenon suppressed by the Church during the Medieval Ages. It is a musical interval that spans three whole tones, like the diminished fifth or augmented fourth. This interval, the gap between two notes played in succession or simultaneously, was branded **Diabolus in Musica** or the **Devil’s Interval** by medieval musicians. A rich mythology has grown up around it. Many believe that the Church wanted to eradicate the dissonant sounds from its music because it moved people “inappropriately” and invoked sexual feelings, or that it was genuinely the work of the Devil. The Devil's Interval enjoyed great popularity among composers in the 19th Century, when there were a lot of presentations of evil built around the tritone. Varied musical pieces ranging from Black Sabbath, Wagner's Gotterdammerung and West Side Story to the theme tune of the Simpsons all rely heavily on tritones. (From BBC News Magazine, “The Devil’s Music”)

Troubadours and minstrels played an important role in the medieval courts of Europe. As travelling composers and performers of songs dealing mainly with chivalry and courtly love, they also served as messengers of vital news from far places. If Monseigneur would need an equivalent of the homeless network or the Baker Street Irregulars during this period, the minstrels and troubadours would fit perfectly into the role as his eyes and ears from all over the kingdom and beyond.

Lady Hudson's deck of picture cards is lifted from the **Tarot**, composed of 78 cards grouped into the major and minor arcana. To be sure, the Tarot as a medium of divination became wildly popular much, much later, though it had its origins in the playing cards that first appeared around the Medieval ages in France. For the sake of some fortune telling to be incorporated into future chapters of the story, I've decided to adopt it here as we know the cards today. La Papesse is the card showing The High Priestess, and Les Amoureux (L’amoureux) is the card of The Lovers. In the earliest versions, the picture denotes a man surrounded by two women with Cupid hovering above him with his drawn bow.
Chapter 27

Special Thanks: To Sher_locked_up, for her wonderful beta, as always.

More author's notes at the end.

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John should have seen him coming.

Actually, he did, yet for some reason his normally sharp reflexes failed him at the very last moment. He had seen Monseigneur coming and known in a split second what he was about to do, but instead of swerving away, something froze within him as Monseigneur reached out to cup his face with both hands and leaned in to kiss him.

In that moment— no more than a blink of an eye— he could have stepped back, veered aside, or thrust out a hand to keep Monseigneur at bay. He could have done all these things and more, but instead, he did nothing. And before he knew it, he was being kissed. Hard. That beautiful, luscious mouth, so cruel with the lashing words it could utter entirely without mercy, was upon his— hot and open and insistent, allowing John no chance to think, to escape from its onslaught.

Monseigneur had kissed him before, but this felt different. This was no cool, calculated kiss. This was a thing raw and desperate, full of urgency and fear— as though Monseigneur were afraid of letting John go. John did not understand it— any of it. He tried to turn his head aside, to break the kiss, but Monseigneur merely slanted his mouth to claim John's lips more completely. The best that John could manage with his trapped mouth was a muffled, incoherent cry which could mean anything or nothing at all. It was no use trying to wrench away from the man’s grip; Monseigneur's hands were like iron bands on either side of his face, holding him still as Monseigneur boldly reached out with his tongue to lick the seam of John’s lips open.

A caressing sweep of Monseigneur's tongue, and John felt as though he had suddenly forgotten how to breathe. Finally, a great shuddering breath stole out from him as his eyes finally flitted closed and his mouth opened of its own accord, affording Monseigneur entrance at last. At the first touch of his tongue against his, John felt something abruptly give way deep inside him, like floodgates bursting. Suddenly, all thoughts of resisting seemed very far away as John fought not to drown in the deluge of want that swept through him.

Dimly, John realized this was what it meant to lose.

It felt nothing at all like losing.

As though sensing the change in John, the touch of Monseigneur’s mouth softened into a slow, sensual tease, coaxing John farther away from his doubts and his confusion, until the only thing that he could think of was how long it had been since he'd last felt this way— to be wanted, needed. It had been a very long time. John felt like a parched man, at last given the one thing he needed to slake his deadly thirst.

Soft. Everything was so soft. And warm, and wet. Everything felt and tasted incredibly good. He had not expected it. Indeed, he had not known what to expect in kissing another man. He had been worried about this, yet now that it was finally happening, he found it completely and surprisingly enjoyable. And sweet. So fucking sweet.
The moist, urgent sounds of their kiss and their heavy, panting breaths seemed loud in John's ears. From somewhere very near he could hear someone moaning low in his throat but for the life of him he could not tell who was making such an odd noise. John was sure the sounds would carry far in the quiet stillness of the dungeons, but right now, he could not bring himself to care. There was no revulsion, no embarrassment; there were no second thoughts.

If John could only bring himself to admit it, this was what he had wanted ever since Monseigneur had John on his bed, touching him with his lips, his hands, everywhere except where it really mattered. What John did not realize was that, ever since then, he was slowly going mad with wanting this man.

Still too many thoughts!

Resolutely casting them all aside, John did what would have been unthinkable only a few days ago: he kissed Monseigneur back, a slow, ungentle exploration of lips and tongue as he, too, started to take and not just give. He heard Monseigneur give a low growl of approval as the kiss deepened, turned scorching, as they lost themselves in that one moment of discovery.

For now, nothing mattered except this.

It was Monseigneur who finally broke away from the kiss, his breathing ragged. He touched his forehead to John's and sighed. "Yes," he said, his voice a low, deep rumble of thunder. "Yes, John. Forget. Just forget everything."

"Your face," John said hoarsely. "God, I need…"

Almost without conscious thought, his hand was on Monseigneur’s face, pushing back the mask with unsteady fingers to unveil his features. The other hand was in his hair, plunging into those dark curls so that John could see for himself if they were really as soft as they looked. For once, Monseigneur let John do as he pleased, leaning into John’s touch as his hand rested on the side of his face. Those pale eyes under the thick black brows were blown wide and dark, hungry.

"You want this, too," said Monseigneur, his tone tinged with wonder as he gazed down at John.

John’s voice caught in his throat so that he was unable, for a moment, to speak.

"Show me just how much you want this, John," breathed Monseigneur, nose brushing John’s as he angled his head to take John’s mouth once again. "Tell me you want me."

Hell, yes.

As soon as John got some answers to his questions.

He moved his mouth away from Monseigneur’s and murmured, "Tell me first why you're doing this. What do you mean by 'forget everything'?"

Monseigneur went still at John’s words. He drew away slightly to look into John’s eyes, hazy with lust, but not enough of it to drive out all rational thought. John’s hand was suddenly on his nape as he made to pull away.

"Why can’t you tell me?" cried John, anguished, his hand tightening at the back of Monseigneur’s head, not letting him go. "After all of this. Why?"

"I can’t!" Monseigneur cried, his voice edged with pain. “If I do so I will lose you. Lose you to her. And if that happens…I just…I can’t…!”
“What are you talking about?” asked John, aghast. But he knew. Suddenly, he knew exactly what Sherlock was talking about. How he managed to find out about her John did not know.

“Say it,” John said, surging ahead of the pain even as it started deep in his heart.

“No!”

“It makes no difference now,” hissed John. "Just say it and be done with it, Sherlock!”

A moment more of tense silence, their eyes locked, then Sherlock bit out, his voice low and rapid, “You’re a man with many mysteries attached to your past, John. You’re a stranger among your own people, but you’re no stranger to tragedy. You’ve encountered several, but I see the main one, the one that turned your life upside down and inside out: Mary. I see your wife, Mary, deep in the shadows of your eyes whenever you look at me. She died in childbirth, didn't she? When she went, she took with her your faith in God and in yourself as a healer. She took away your happiness. The child died, too. You were left with nothing; it was the end of your world as you knew it. It felt a lot like dying, didn’t it? So you went and sought death by becoming a soldier; and yet, meeting it face to face, you’ve vanquished it every time it reared itself in all the battles you ever fought. Fighting it afforded you a little satisfaction, a feeling of being alive, but it’s hollow. Deep down inside, the emptiness remains, and you think it can never be filled. That’s what it means to be haunted, John. She’s long dead yet she possesses your heart, and while she's there you can't be anyone else's. You can't—"!

Sherlock trailed off abruptly, biting down hard on his lip so that a band of white showed just below his mouth, and in his state of shock, John felt a moment of absolute calm as he wondered irrelevantly what Sherlock had meant to say: You can't—, what?

*You can't be free to love me*, Sherlock’s gaze told John accusingly. *You can't be mine.*

He took advantage of John's momentary lapse to twist himself away from John's grasp. John watched in stunned dismay as Sherlock struggled to pull himself together in front of him, gathering his composure back around him like a cloak. It took him only a moment. When he looked back at John, he was Monseigneur again, aloof and haughty, his eyes veiled.

"You demanded that I tell you," he reminded John, his voice cold, as though he were already steeling himself against John's reaction, whatever it may be.

John's mouth felt incredibly dry. "Sherlock..." he rasped.

"You don't need to say it," snapped Monseigneur, voice suddenly harsh. Pained. "It's obvious, isn’t it? I’ve lost. I’ve given it everything that I had but I can't compete with a ghost and a saint, John. It would be too much for me to ask you to let her go."

John shook his head. "I can't do that, Sherlock."

They stared at each other for a moment before Monseigneur gave a curt nod. “There’s nothing more to be said, is there?” he murmured.

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Early the next day, John found himself at the tower window overlooking the sea, allowing the soothing sound of the waves to engulf him.

He did not know how he had got here. Indeed, everything had been a blur since last night. He remembered he had begged Billy to put him up for the night in his room, several doors down
Monseigneur’s apartments. He must have looked ghastly, for Billy had taken one look at his face and let him in without another word. They had both lain awake on their pallets until early morning, not speaking, Billy obviously worried that Monseigneur might come charging in at any moment. But he never came, and Billy had finally drifted off, leaving John alone with his tortured thoughts.

So now he was, chin resting on his elbows on the cool stone ledge of the window, watching in bemused wonder as the waves gathered white foam and crashed against the rocky cliffs upon which the Lair was built, over and over.

If the waves were only alive and sentient, John would have wanted to ask them why they would do it—hurl themselves endlessly against a solid, indifferent crag of rock for centuries, even millennia. To what ultimate purpose would they expend so much energy on something so futile?

But it was a ridiculous thought. He was not thinking straight this morning. He had not slept a wink, and he was just so tired. He was not even angry at Sherlock, just curious in a detached way how he had managed to make his deductions.

John sighed wearily as he stared down at the breaking waves far below him.

He had never thought he would ever live this close to the sea. This had never figured in his plans at all. Years ago, he had thought he would grow old and die, surrounded by family—his wife, children and grandchildren—on the same patch of forest land that he had regarded as home for as long as he could remember, ever since he had been taken in by the gentle healer who lived there.

John had always known he came from somewhere else. Wherever it was, he could no longer remember. His fate was common enough. He had been one of countless children displaced by the brutal clan wars that raged perpetually in the Angrian Highlands. To this day, his childhood was a blank slate, completely erased from his consciousness.

He had been ten or eleven years old when the old woman (In Angria, the best healers were almost always women) had found him wandering near the edge of the forest, exhausted and lost, bleeding profusely from a head wound, obviously in shock and unable to recall what had happened to him. He had no idea where he came from or where he was headed. He could only remember his name: John Watson.

So the healer had taken him in, dressed his wound and, when he had recovered completely, told him quite kindly that he was free to leave whenever he wished. John had not wished it. His memories of his past life had never returned. Somehow, he had known that they would never return, and he had nowhere else to go. The days had stretched to weeks, months. John had made himself useful around the house by carrying water, chopping wood for the fire, and later, accompanying the woman on her rounds to collect ingredients from the forest to make into medicine. The healer had long been a widow, and childless. Living several hours away from the nearest village, the long, dark nights could be intensely lonely, the occasional wolves that emerged from the forest could be a serious nuisance, and it had been good to have somebody to talk to around a cheerful, blazing fire in the cold evenings. In time, John had taken to calling her Màthair, and she had taught him the minute details of her trade: the ancient healing arts of the forest, passed down from one generation of wise women to the next.

When John thought about it, he had been incredibly lucky to be given a chance to settle down to an ordinary life after the nameless upheavals that had uprooted him from his childhood. When he had met and fallen in love with Mary, a girl from the village whom he had treated for some minor ailment, he thought he had beaten the odds not once, but twice—a miracle. Truly, he had been blessed, and he had felt even more so when Mary had announced happily that she was with child not long after they had been married.
Fate, though, had other ideas. It always did.

Despite all their prayers for a safe and routine delivery, the birth had been difficult from the very start. The babe had not turned around properly during the pregnancy, and he had to be born feet first. Initially, John had not been that worried. He and Màthair had attended to breech deliveries before, but this one...Mary’s labor had drawn on and on and despite all the maneuvers the two healers had instituted to align him properly along his mother’s narrow passages, the babe had shown no sign of emerging.

By the end of the first day, they had known they were in serious trouble. By then John had learned to get past Mary’s agonized screams and his only thought had been to deliver the babe before he lost Mary as well. In the small hours of the next morning, John had finally managed to pull the little body out of Mary: a boy, fully formed and beautiful, still warm from his mother’s womb, but dead.

“It is God’s will,” Mary had whispered brokenly, tears trickling down her dim and tired eyes, and John had merely nodded, his mouth tight. He had baptized his son himself and prayed that this ordeal was now at an end.

But it had not ended there.

Exhausted beyond all endurance, Mary’s womb had refused to tighten around itself. Despite the pressure from John’s kneading fingers, despite Màthair’s herbal brews to force it to contract, the organ had remained lax, unresponsive, and Mary had bled. And bled. And bled. There had been so much blood on John’s hands and arms, on the floor, everywhere. Everwhere except inside Mary’s body.

In the end, no amount of wine, or medicine, or Màthair’s holy medals and their combined prayers had done the trick. John had lost his faith in holy charms and relics ever since. He had lost faith, pure and simple. To John, nothing seemed more cruel than to be the recipient of blessings which were going to be snatched from one at any given moment. If everything in life only amounted to that, then John didn’t need any more blessings coming from above.

The new day had broken just in time to find John with his arms around his dying wife, bending down to catch her last words, one last request.

"I can’t," he had said, shaking his head, unable to believe what she had just told him.

Mary had smiled. "You must."

One last, affectionate slide of her cool hand down his cheek, and then she had died.

It was odd, John thought now as he watched the waves break over the rocks below him, how grief could be so starkly devoid of all other emotion. Màthair had wept a little, but he was sure he had not. He could no longer recall the immediate aftermath, only that he had slept, and slept. Like one of the recent dead.

He had buried his wife and child a few days later, down by the edge of the forest.

Màthair had merely said, after the simple service was done, “I suppose it’s now time for you to leave, John. You need not worry about me. Sooner or later, I knew this day would come.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s time I’m going,” John had answered tonelessly. “It’s been long delayed.”

A few weeks later, he had gone to join the armies.
And that had been that.

It had been five years, and all this time, he had never been able to bring himself to weep. That was the anomaly of it. The chill in his heart had solidified to ice as time went on; it had become a perfectly cold, lifeless thing, leaving him unable to feel anything deeply ever again. He had thought it was a good thing. What use would it be for him to feel, if it would only hurt him?

And yet...

What was this he was feeling now? This deep-seated pain that had somehow been raked up along with his memories? Was this not hurt? Was he not hurting now, after just a few words from Monseigneur last night? Had he not been feeling this way for days now, and all because of Sherlock?

He could not believe it. He had not felt anything like this in five years, yet it had only taken Sherlock less than five minutes to penetrate through all the numbing layers of ice around that frozen thing inside his chest to reveal his heart, still intact— not lost, or dead. It was still there inside him, beating away, slowly turning warm as the ice around it melted. It was hurting like hell now, like a thing newly born— breaking like the waves below him and filled with a desperate urge to weep.

So he did.

Amid the sound of the crashing waves, John wept. He wept for Mary and his child. He wept for himself and even for Sherlock. And once he started, he found he could not stop.

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He jolted awake a few hours later to find the sun high in the sky and the song of the waves still in his ears. Absurdly, he had somehow cried himself to sleep, curled up in a corner of the tower landing like a child.

Blinking drowsily, John wondered if anyone had been looking for him. He did not think so. Otherwise, Billy would have thought to look for him here.

Slowly, he sat up against the cool stone wall and considered his situation.

He felt better. He really did. His mind was clear and his heart was lighter than it had felt in years. He’d finally managed to flush it out— years and years of pent-up anger, disappointment and pain, and found that the tears had cleansed away that tight, terrible feeling lurking within him since last night.

Who would have thought he would owe Sherlock this. Not that this was Sherlock’s real intention when he had kissed him, that was for certain, he thought wryly.

What had been the man’s intention then? John was not sure. Perhaps he had none. He did, after all, speak out only because John had told him to. That was a bit of a marvel, considering he had thought Sherlock incapable of holding anything back.

And yet he had. With this, Sherlock had held back, even when John knew he had been upset enough to want to trample on everything. How much had it cost him to do so? To reveal himself to John like this, his mental armor stripped away, leaving his emotions naked?

John remembered the kiss from last night with the objectivity of hindsight, as though it had happened years ago. He remembered Sherlock’s desperation, the flat despair in his voice when he murmured that there was nothing left to be said.
Was there really nothing more to be said?

A tired smile crept along John’s lips as he thought about Sherlock, struggling with his jealousy. Because that was, quite simply, what it was that had driven the git into his petulant rage these several days past. It was oddly touching.

Sherlock was being absurd, John thought, if he felt he had to compete with Mary. John knew him enough by now to understand that Sherlock was being his usual maddening self when he desperately needed to feel himself the master even of John's past. Trust the man to oversimplify the matter and consider it only in terms of winning or losing. If he’d only known that Mary had never entered John’s mind at all when he was snogging Sherlock last night. How would he count that? John wondered.

He knew he ought to feel horrified and guilty about it. Perhaps even offended. He had been, very briefly, last night. But now, strangely enough, he was not. It never occured to him before now that he was finally moving on.

And is that the moral of the story of the waves as well? He wondered. To go on and on, no matter how much one might feel its futility, because that is what life is all about? And the rocky cliffs are not entirely immune to the waves. Over the years, they get shaped by them, too.

All was not futile.

Outside the window, the ocean continued its ceaseless murmur. John remained where he was for a few minutes more, his mind blessedly blank, heart quiet, before he slowly hauled himself to his feet. It was time he was going.

He wasn’t sure what he should do now. He was not sure if he wanted to talk to Sherlock so soon. Perhaps he ought to give them some time and some space to sort out all their tangled feelings.

The problem was solved for him when he got down from the tower.

It seemed he really would not be talking to the man for now, because Monseigneur was gone.

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Author’s Notes: Maternal and infant mortality was notoriously high during the Medieval Ages. During that time, a third of all children died in early childhood. The average life expectancy of men was 35 years of age, and for women it was even less, given that many of them perished in childbed. (from Isabella, by Alison Weir)

At present, Mary’s condition (postpartum uterine atony) is still a major cause of early postpartum hemorrhage which may necessitate the surgical removal of the uterus if drugs cannot induce the uterus to contract properly. John would not have this option available to him in the time period set in the story.

Màthair: Scottish Gaelic for “mother”
“Monseigneur has gone to see his mother,” said Lady Hudson.

“His mother?” repeated John, completely nonplussed at the thoroughly reasonable answer that Lady Hudson had supplied. He had half-expected her to say she did not know where Monseigneur had gone off to.

Lady Hudson looked up from her cards, carefully arranged on the small table in front of her. “Oh, yes, dear,” she said. “The Queen Mother. Since her retirement from Court, she has taken an estate just a few hours away from here on horseback. And she has written time and again, saying Monseigneur does not visit her often enough.”

“Oh,” said John. “Right.”

Where had he thought Monseigneur had gone to? He had to admit that all sorts of scenarios had cropped up in his head, ranging anywhere from Court to some marshy bog for Monseigneur to drown himself in, if there was such a thing as a marshy bog out here in Gaaldine. The last thing he had ever expected was Lady Hudson’s reply.

“I know,” continued Lady Hudson with a weary shake of her head. “Just look at him, dashing off like that without a moment’s notice, with only Billy to accompany him. It’s not proper, but that’s just how he is. He has asked me to send everything else after him, as usual. Still, I imagine Her Majesty would be pleased to see him. He’s not paid her a visit in months, and he would not let me write to her regarding the…incident in the garrison. She’s not been well, you see, so he doesn’t want to worry her.”

John could find nothing to say to that, so he sank down in a seat across Lady Hudson and watched as she dealt patiently with the cards in front of her.

“How long will he be away?” He wanted to know.

“Oh, probably two or three days at most,” said Lady Hudson, distractedly. “He’s gone off for a bit of hunting, I suppose. I’m sure he will write if he plans to stay away longer than usual.”

She laid a new card over the pile before her and shook her head at some hidden meaning that the arcana provided expressly for her own understanding.

“What is she like, Sh— Monseigneur’s mother?” John asked after a while, his curiosity getting the upper hand, as usual. He had heard enough from Billy to know that Lady Hudson was very close to Sherlock’s mother, being one of her ladies-in-waiting first before she came into Monseigneur’s service, and to this day, the two kept in touch regularly through long letters.
Lady Hudson smiled. "Oh, Her Majesty is very beautiful. I dare say Monseigneur takes after her in terms of features. The cheekbones, especially. The King is the splitting image of their father, but Monseigneur is very much his mother’s son."

"Temperamentally as well?" John wanted to know.

At those words, Lady Hudson looked up at him. "No. At least, not in the way that Monseigneur is...severe."

John let out a soft snort— part amusement, part grudging admiration at Lady Hudson's tact. Severe was a tasteful way to describe the man. If John had his way, he'd say Monseigneur was abrasive as a hair shirt.

"He’s been giving you a hard time, hasn’t he?” Lady Hudson asked, full of sympathy. “Not to worry, dear, he does that to everyone. It’s just his way. It will pass.”

She turned over another card and continued, "He has to be hard, you know."

John blinked. "Does he?" he asked.

Lady Hudson shrugged. "He's royalty, and he lives by a different code of conduct and a different way of life," she said. "He is not, and can never be, one of us, my dear."

"And just because he is royalty, does it mean that he is beyond reproach?"

"Oh, never that," said Lady Hudson, smiling gently. "But, as his people, we must admit that we are at his mercy. There is no hiding the fact that he can be severe, but then what lord isn't? And I've known quite a few. It is a mistake to equate Monseigneur’s severity with unjustness or intentional cruelty. I can assure you that he is neither of those, and whatever he does is for good reason. Oh yes, you will laugh, John, as others before you have laughed. We live in an age where the code of chivalry cloaks a man in a genteel facade, but underneath it, a Prince must be hard. He must be watchful of opportunity. He has to be strong, for our sake. In many ways he is the only one standing between us and the world, which can be a very cruel place to the unprotected and defenseless. A Prince cannot be weak without that weakness becoming a detriment to his people. Monseigneur was raised with this foremost in mind, and the lessons he was forced to learn at a tender age were especially harsh."

John crossed his arms over his chest and looked down contemplatively at the cards laid out before Lady Hudson. "I understand that," he finally said. "I really do. I'm a soldier, after all. I'm used to harshness, and harsh lords. Only, I need time to get used to all of this, submitting to somebody for the rest of my life."

Lady Hudson's gaze suddenly turned pitying. "Oh, John," she said. "Is that really how you see it?"

John stared at her. "In what other way can we view this relationship that we have with him?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose it will sound strange," she said. "Of course, you're bound to look at it in a different way, but the way I see it, it's more like a pact between husband and wife. There is a level of trust, a kind of devotion involved here that elevates this from the mere ties that bind a lord and his servant. We've sworn our lives to Monseigneur, and he, in turn, is bound to protect and provide for us. And though he may not show it most of the time, he does know how to look after what's his."

John gave her a brittle smile. "Yes, well," he said, "I'm not used to having anyone looking after me."
"Of course not. You're a soldier," replied Lady Hudson, not unkindly. "But you haven't been to Court yet. Trust me, love, you will need his protection when you get there."

John stared at her for a moment. Was it really that bad? He wondered.

"You don’t miss Court life then," he observed.

“Oh, not one bit,” said Lady Hudson cheerfully.

John shook his head and looked away. "He is so different from anyone I've ever known," he found himself murmuring. "He's arrogant and difficult and not an easy man to grasp."

And he's just fucking brilliant...

Lady Hudson’s smile widened. "No, he's not easy to grasp, but then I suppose we wouldn't want him to be anything otherwise, would we?" she said before turning her attention back to the cards.

With Monseigneur gone, everyone at the Lair seemed to let out a collective breath.

The next day saw John drawn into a carole— a group dance, with the Lady Molly and a few maids she had managed to waylay for a while from their duties. The minstrels that Monseigneur had left behind provided the music— a fast, jaunty tune that had all the dancers skipping briskly through their moves, incurring one mistake after the other until they lost the rhythm of the dance completely and the little circle finally broke apart, laughing.

"So that's the carole," explained Molly, breathlessly. "It's called a ronde in Gondalian and it's a popular court dance. It's one of the more proper dances, anyway."

"Wait, hold on," interjected John, intrigued. "One of the more proper dances? Are there any to the contrary?"

Molly giggled. "There are, but I'm not supposed to know anything about them," she said enigmatically.

John shook his head wonderingly. "You never cease to amaze me, my lady. And pray where does one encounter such improper dances? In the streets, I suppose?"

"Yes, in the streets during festivals and celebrations, and in the late-night masquerade balls held in several of the palaces," replied Molly, lowering her voice so as not to be overheard. "There will be many such affairs during the week before and after the royal wedding. It's originally a Gondalian tradition. They are very exclusive, and I am certain I shall not be allowed to attend."

"Private masquerade balls?" echoed John, interested despite himself.

Molly nodded, and a dimple suddenly showed in her cheek. "They say one can encounter just about anyone there, from the King down to the lowliest courtier and lady of rank," she whispered confidentially. "They also say you can get to dance with anyone. Anyone. Not in a group dance, but just the two of you. You'll never know who you're dancing with unless your partners would choose to reveal themselves to you. So you see, they are highly improper, and so very romantic."

"I see," murmured John, wondering, as was his habit lately, if Monseigneur ever attended these gatherings. Somehow he doubted it.
"I’m sure Lady Hudson won’t be giving me her permission," said Molly wistfully. "I’ve never been to one before. I’ve only ever heard of them."

"And where on earth did you even get wind of this?" demanded John with mock severity. "What would Monseigneur say if he finds out?"

"I’m not telling," said Molly with a laugh. "And you did not hear this from me."

"Fair enough," said John, smiling.

“Only, just imagine,” continued Molly, eyes shining, “how it would be if one got to dance with Monseigneur in one of those soirees.”

John’s lips thinned and he asked quite casually, “Does he ever attend these things?”

Molly shook her head regretfully and said, “Even if he does, what difference would it make? We won’t be there to see him.”

“There is that,” said John softly, “so why even trouble ourselves with it?”

Molly sighed. “Oh, John,” she said, her tone half amused, half complaining. “You can at least allow a girl her fantasies.”

“He’d be a handful,” John found himself saying, not necessarily to Molly, “whoever’s going to be saddled with him is deserving of pity more than anything else.”

Molly tilted her head. “Not unless he cares for her,” she replied.

“Is he even capable of that?”

“Yes,” said Molly with quiet and absolute conviction.

Before John could think to press her further, Lady Hudson appeared, looking harried.

"Good heavens, what are you doing, all of you?" she burst out, stopping abruptly in front of them. To the maids, she said, "’Tis barely midday; get back to work, the three of you. John, you will need to pack at least two days' worth of clothes. Make sure you include something presentable. Get one of the maids to help you select your garments. Oh, and before you do so, can you please run this message to Eustace for me? Tell him Monseigneur wants Azrail ready as soon as possible for the journey to his mother's castle. Goodness, I'm all in a tizzy from the letters I've just received. Molly, I shall leave you to take care of things here for a day or so. You need not worry, I've already given Mary Turner my instructions for the kitchens for the next few days, and Dimmock will be here to take care of Monseigneur's affairs."

"My lady?" said Molly incredulously, not sure she had heard right.

“We’ll just be away for a night, two at most,” said Lady Hudson. “The Queen Mother has summoned me and John for a visit.”

Eustace, Monseigneur's chief falcon-bearer, was a big, jolly man with a no-nonsense attitude about him that had struck a chord with John almost from the very start of their acquaintance. Now, as always, he did not mince words as he said, “Sorry, mate. I’m afraid I can’t oblige with Monseigneur's request. Azrail is ill.”
John frowned as he turned to stare at Azrail sitting on her perch. Well, now that Eustace mentioned it, Azrail did seem a bit listless, her usually haughty mien altered by a slightly drooping head.

“It’s nothing alarming, to be sure,” Eustace said easily, “but she’s not been herself since yesterday. If I don’t know any better, I’d say she’s pining for Monseigneur. It’s been a while since he’s last taken her outdoors, and now may not be the right time for it. I will need to keep her under observation.”

“Do they even do that?” asked John, intrigued.

“Do what?”

“Pine for their masters.”

“You know what, John?” said Eustace. “I’ve once had a bird who nearly killed himself climbing a flight of stairs as a fledgling just to be near me. Once you’ve been in this profession long enough, you’re bound to see everything.”

They were ready within the hour, and after an early dinner they set off, minus Azrail.

John was on horseback, accompanying the small carriage that carried Lady Hudson along with their trunks, and gifts for Monseigneur’s mother: pipes of wine, baskets of fresh fruit and sea bream, sweetmeats and other delicacies.

In the fine weather, the journey was a short one, yet it did carry them away from the coast and into woodland territory. The Queen Mother’s estate was situated in one the finest hunting grounds in all of Gaaldine, and even as he caught his first glimpse of the pretty, turreted castle, as from a scene in a fairy tale, John could already appreciate that the dowager queen was a passionate gardener: the neatly kept grounds of the castle stretched out before them, filled with flower beds. At this time of the year, the roses were in full bloom, and their perfume wafted toward John, heady with a voluptuous fragrance.

Somebody came running up to them as John was helping Lady Hudson down from the carriage. Amid the grooms taking charge of the horses and the carriage, Billy appeared, grinning.

“We didn’t know you were coming!” he said in surprised delight.

“Hi,” returned John, smiling. “We didn’t know either until a few hours ago.”

“Monseigneur must be informed then,” Billy said. “We just came back from a morning hunt. Where’s Azrail?”

As Billy looked about him for any sign of the hawk, John said a bit dryly, “She can’t come because she’s ill. Eustace has sent one of Monseigneur's falcons instead.”

Billy’s face fell. “Oh?” he said anxiously.

“Nothing serious,” said John, shrugging it off. “Tell Monseigneur he’s left his heart behind and now she’s pining for him.”

They were taken directly to see the dowager queen in her private apartments.

Amid the splendid tapestries lining her chamber, the Queen Mother stood, regally straight and attired
almost completely in white. She was a tall woman, willowy with dark hair turning to a dignified grey
tucked away in an elegant headdress. Her features were locked behind a slim mask, snow white and
almost indistinguishable from the color of her alabaster skin.

She accepted Lady Hudson’s deep curtsey, followed by a brief embrace that managed to convey an
abundance of affection despite the brevity of the gesture. “Ma chère sœur.” Her voice was deep, her
accent a rolling, musical wave of sound clearly originating from other shores. “I trust the journey has
not been very tiring?”

“Oh, not at all, Madame,” answered Lady Hudson in glad tones. She turned to John. “This is John
Watson, Your Majesty. He is Monseigneur’s healer from the Angrian Highlands.”

The Queen Mother extended a white, still hand and John bent over it as he had been instructed by
Lady Hudson. When he straightened up, he saw that the woman’s eyes—a deeper blue compared to
Monseigneur’s but no less piercing—were on his person. What she saw evidently satisfied her, for
she said, “Sit, please.”

They sat on plush, richly upholstered stools. “We shall wait for my son to arrive,” said the Queen
Mother calmly. “I trust his page would have informed him of your presence here by now.”

Lady Hudson said worriedly, “I am not sure if it was wise to have kept our visit from him.”

“Nonsense, Mary,” said Monseigneur’s mother, her tone suddenly chilly and incisive. “I shall answer
for it. My little surprise is nothing compared to his. Do you know how my fair son greeted me when
he arrived yesterday? He embraced me. For nearly ten minutes. There were no words, but he was
trembling all over. Thank God he waited until we were alone so there was nobody to see it. Ten
minutes, Mary.”

"Oh?" Lady Hudson said very faintly, her eyes wide and round with dismay. "I never even noticed
that he was upset. Of course, he had gone off so early yesterday. John, do you know anything about
this?"

John shook his head woodenly, aware that the Queen Mother's gaze was boring into him.

"Since then," the Queen Mother continued, never taking her eyes off John, "he has persisted in
denying that anything is amiss. It is most distressing. As he has refused to divulge the matter to me,
he certainly has no grounds in objecting to my asking you both over to satisfy my curiosity.”

“Oh,” said Lady Hudson, flustered. “I don’t even know what would have upset him so. He’s really
not told you anything, Madame?”

“Not a word,” said the Queen Mother. “And if the King had not written to me weeks ago, I should
not have heard of the existence of John Watson at all.”

John watched as Lady Hudson twisted her hands haplessly in front of her. “Forgive me for not
writing to you about John, Your Majesty. Monseigneur has told me that he shall be informing you
about John himself,” she said.

“Perhaps he will,” Her Majesty replied, “for here he is now.”

The doors were thrown open even as she spoke, and in strode Monseigneur, still in his hunting
clothes. John wondered when he was ever going to get used to the sight of the man suddenly
appearing before him like this, superbly dressed in black silk and leather. But Monseigneur did not
even so much as glance at his direction. He strode over to his mother and stopped to kiss the hand
held up languidly before him, bowing from the waist and keeping his entire upper body straight as he
did so. It was quite beautiful.

“Je n’avais pas réalisé que nous aurions de la compagnie, Mère,” said Monseigneur as he straightened up.

What with John’s elementary grasp of Gondalian, the rapid words slipped by him easily without registering much.

Monseigneur’s mother replied quite pleasantly, “Ah bien. Maintenant tu le sais, mon Chéri. Je n’avais pas eu la chance de parler directement à Dame Hudson depuis si longtemps et j’ai cru comprendre que John Watson serait un de vos nouveaux amis. Comme tu le sais, je souhaite de faire connaissance avec tous tes amis.”

“Ce ne sont que mes hommes, Mère.” The words were spoken softly, yet they carried a hint of hardness within them.

“Oui, ils le sont et maintenant, ils sont aussi mes invités.”

John could barely understand the conversation, but it was quite clear that mother and son were having a very polite argument in front of them right now. It was also quite clear to John that Monseigneur’s mother was a formidable woman who could thoroughly unnerve Monseigneur with a few calm words.

“Vous auriez pu me le demander et je les aurais fait venir par moi-même,” said Monseigneur, voice tightly controlled.

“L’aurais-tu vraiment fait, bel fitz?” returned his mother, pleased. “Étrangement, je ne le crois pas, mais dorénavant je me rappellerai de te le demander. Pour l’instant, laisse moi seule avec John Watson.”

Monseigneur turned away from her abruptly, his face unreadable. It was clear that he had lost the argument. John stared as Lady Hudson awkwardly got to her feet and curtseyed to the Queen Mother, murmuring her excuses.

“I can imagine that my dear friend will find some rest before supper to be beneficial,” the Queen Mother explained to John on Lady Hudson’s behalf. “She’s got a hip, and so have I.”

John looked up to see Monseigneur’s pale gaze fixed upon him for the first time. Go ahead then. Tell her and break her heart, his gaze seemed to say.

Then Monseigneur turned away and headed out the door with Lady Hudson in tow.

“You must excuse my son’s behavior,” said the Queen Mother, a tremor in her voice belying her look of outward calm. “I find it exceedingly puzzling myself. It seems the older he gets, the worse his conduct becomes. He was not like this, as a boy. He’d never think to keep a secret from me. Sometimes I do not know what sort of creature he’s turned out to be.”

John turned to her in surprise, but it seemed the Queen Mother had recovered from her momentary lapse.

“My son, the King, has written to me of your service to Monseigneur,” she continued. “The King said you helped rid Monseigneur of a fever. Tell me, is that all there is to it?”

“No,” said John at length. “That’s not all. He could not tell you, and the King could not tell you, because they fear it would upset you greatly.”
He saw her gather herself in. “If they cannot, then you must tell me,” she insisted.

John licked his lips and began the story just as he had for the King, so many weeks before. Carefully, he said, “Monseigneur was poisoned.”

The Queen Mother held up her hand. “I already know everything about that,” she said, her lips compressed in a thin, harsh line. “The King had thought to inform me of everything, and had implored me to keep quiet about it as you work at a plan with Monseigneur to capture whoever is responsible.

"You must not think that I am not deeply in your debt, John Watson, for saving my son's life. I pray that you will forgive this one last intrusion into your patience and charity. I think you will agree with me when I say that my son's erratic behavior from yesterday was not due to anything related to the attempt on his life. I think it has more to do with you."

John swallowed around the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat and said nothing. Truly formidable, he thought. She had effortlessly seen through his planned evasion of the subject.

"I know him, you see," she said. "I know when he's deeply into one of his infatuations. I knew it immediately when he refused to look at you the entire time he was here."

John forced himself to continue looking at her steadily. It was apparent that Monseigneur took after her not just in looks.

"We will not be discussing the right or wrong of it. Experience has shown me that it is quite useless arguing with my son about it. My only question is, what do you want from him in return, John?" she asked. "Forgive me if I may seem direct. Let us not fool ourselves. There had been others before you, and all of them, without exception, had wanted something from Monseigneur: money, power, prestige, his royal patronage or perhaps all of these. I can assure you now that none of his previous suitors had been able to take advantage of him. Perhaps we can avoid the painful aftermath now if you are to tell me quite plainly what it is you desire from him."

God, the artful brutality of the woman’s words. No wonder she could bring even Monseigneur to heel so effortlessly. John could feel the hairs on his nape stand on end even as he felt a coil of anger deep inside him.

"I..."

What did he want? That was easy enough to answer now. He knew what he wanted, but could he bring himself to say it?

*I don’t want anything from your son, Your Majesty. I just want him.*

John wondered briefly what Monseigneur’s mother would say to that.

But of course he could not say it. And he knew he could not be angry with a woman who was only trying to protect her son.

John cleared his throat, tried again, and the words that eventually came out of his mouth astonished even himself, "I’m not a suitor, and it's not a question of what I want, Your Majesty. It's more to do with what I don't want."

"Oh? Pray what is that?"

"I don't want him to come to any harm," said John evenly. "I don't want him to die."
A long minute of silence elapsed. The woman before him was so still that John half-thought she had turned to marble. Finally, she said, quite simply, "I see. That is all I want to know. Thank you."

“There is one more thing,” said John.

The Queen Mother turned her gaze back at him.

“Your little boy,” continued John, ‘he’s still there, deep down inside the man Monseigneur has become. Back when he was delirious with fever from the poison, he called for you. Nobody but you.”

She continued to gaze at him silently, her eyes filling, yet the tears never spilled.

An amazing woman, thought John.

After she had recovered herself sufficiently, the Queen Mother said, “Give me your arm, John, and let us go down to supper."

They had a small, intimate supper in the ornate dining hall. Through it all, Monseigneur’s mother kept up the conversation as though nothing had happened; she spoke to Lady Hudson of concerns for the King’s upcoming wedding and of the meeting with her future daughter-in-law. Turning to John, she asked graciously if he would need anything from her gardens. Her roses were much sought after in the making of perfumes and medicine and, indeed, had formed part of their meal as well. John enjoyed the rose petal bread very much.

Monseigneur, who received nothing from his mother other than a curt, “I will need to see you after supper”, stared at John with inscrutable eyes and a slight tilt of his mouth as his mother touched John lightly on the arm to ask him if he knew of a good remedy for troublesome hips.

It seemed John had passed his mother’s interview with flying colors. Monseigneur ought to have known the outcome of any situation thrust upon his John would be favorable. He had to admit he had been a little bit worried.

Everything was coming along according to plan, then.
John was shown to his room after supper, and for a moment, he simply stood there in the comfortably furnished room contemplating what to do for the rest of the evening. After his talk with Monseigneur's mother, there was no chance he'd be able to sleep early tonight. He'd be sure to go over their conversation again and again in his head.

Oh, but wait.

He had been given a sumptuous room with an outdoor terrace overlooking the rose gardens. Wonderful. Opening the terrace door, he stepped out and breathed in the sweetly scented night air.

Almost to be expected, the view outside was perfectly breathtaking.

If only Molly were here to see this, he thought, glancing about him bemusedly. This was more along her idea of a romantic setting, complete with a full moon and a sea of stars overhead, with fragrant roses and a terrace with creeping vines along the walls for a lover to scale. In fact, the only thing missing from the scenario was a Prince Charming—
Just then, a figure passed just below his balcony, heading toward the gardens, and John felt his heart begin to beat stiflingly in his chest as he realized who it was. It was too dark for John to make out his features, but he would know the man’s stride anywhere.

He thought Monseigneur would be holed up in his mother’s apartments for hours, answering endless questions, but no. Here he was, passing below John’s terrace and heading toward the gardens, his usual pace slowed to a graceful stroll.

John watched him go by, half thinking of calling out, but his voice was locked deep inside his throat. Despite all alarm bells sounding within his mind, he knew he would not be able to hold himself back from following him.

Climbing down the wall was easy enough, and before he knew it, John was following silently a decent distance behind as Monseigneur made his way leisurely to the gardens.

Monseigneur did not seem to have a particular route in mind. He passed several trimmed rose bushes before stopping abruptly, contemplating nothing in particular. John paused a few feet away, partially hidden in the shadows of an alcove.

“It’s no use hiding, John,” drawled Monseigneur. “I know it’s you.”

After a moment more, John emerged rather sheepishly from his hiding place.

"Well now," said Monseigneur as he turned around to face John, his voice coolly sardonic. "No matter how far away we may be, it seems as though we are forever running into each other. What can it possibly all mean?"

John strained to see Sherlock’s features, but the moon was behind him, throwing his face into shadow. Anyway, that damned mask would probably be in the way.

We're not far away enough from each other, he thought indistinctly. Perhaps from now on no amount of distance can ever truly separate us. We’ll end up finding each other, whether we like it or not.

It was a mad thought, treacherous and perhaps deeply unfortunate if it should ever come true, but it was a beautiful, moonlit night, the scent of the roses was getting to him, and John was already past caring.

“I thought you were with your mother,” said John.

Monseigneur gave a small but eloquent shrug. “Apparently you did such a good job explaining things to her that she merely gave me an embrace,” he said, “and wonderful though that may be, it can’t last more than a few minutes. I suppose I should thank you for making it so much easier on me. So what did you tell her?”

“There wasn’t much to tell. She already knew of the attempt on your life,” replied John.

“I meant about us, John.”

“Is there anything between us that warrants telling?”

“You tell me,” said Monseigneur dryly.

John ignored the barbed comment and abruptly changed course. “Why did you leave like that?” he asked softly.
A pause, then Monseigneur said, voice weary, "Oh, I see. What do you want me to say, John? Do you want some ringing confession to the effect that I left because I can't stand the thought of seeing you in the clear light of day as belonging to someone else? That’s a tad overdramatic, don’t you think?"

"Not as dramatic as being dragged out here to talk to your mother. I don't know how it all came about though I won’t be surprised if you’ve somehow arranged for it to be so.”

This was met with abrupt silence from Monseigneur.

John tilted his head. "What you just said. Did you really think that?"

“There’s nothing more to be said, John.”

"No."

John shook his head as though to clear it, feeling as though everything was unreal, part of a dream. God, they weren’t making any sense, both of them. John felt as though any control he had of the situation was gradually slipping, melting away in the soft moonlight.

"Then why have you followed me here, John?" a slight edge in Monseigneur’s voice now.

"It’s certainly not through any conscious design of mine," said John. "Perhaps it's fate. At least, I think Lady Hudson might say it's so."

A sneer in Monseigneur's voice: "I shudder to think so."

_There will be more coming from that mouth_, thought John with the same reckless resignation. John knew that Sherlock was pre-empting him, cutting him off before the hurt became too much to bear. John knew he was an inch away from a verbal lashing. Perhaps he even knew what Sherlock was going to say.

And John would have to stop him, to shut Sherlock up before he could wreak further damage.

So John did just that.

“I’ve already conceded defeat, what _more_ do you want—” was all Monseigneur could say before John was suddenly there in front of him, filling his vision, crowding into his personal space. Before he could jerk away, John’s hand was on the side of his face, another sliding to catch at his nape.

“Enough,” John whispered roughly before he leaned in to claim Monseigneur’s lips with his own.

John’s kiss was simple, chaste— his lips firm against Monseigneur's mouth, gone soft with surprise — yet it carried with it that special realization that something irreversible had happened at last.

It lasted only a few seconds, and John drew away to look carefully at Monseigneur’s stunned face. “Oh,” breathed Monseigneur and fell silent. For the first time in a long, long while, he had nothing else to say.

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**Author’s Notes:** A _cilice_ was originally a garment or undergarment made of coarse cloth or animal hair (_hair shirt_) worn close to the skin to "mortify the flesh". It was used in some religious traditions to induce discomfort or pain as a sign of repentance and atonement. In contact with skin, the stiff
bristles of animal hair can break off, irritating the skin and inducing sores. (Source: Wikipedia)

Sources for an understanding of dance in Europe during the Middle Ages are limited and fragmentary, being composed of some interesting depictions in paintings, a few musical examples of what may be dances, and scattered allusions in literary texts. The carole, or ronde, is the most documented form of dance for the period. (Source: Wikipedia)

The recipe for rose petal bread (which uses rose water simmered from the petals) can be found at Wind Rose Fiber Studio. There is an interesting entry in this blog, explaining the origin of the term "upper crust". Today we often use it to refer to socially important people. In medieval feasts, the first course served was a loaf of artfully decorated bread. The decorated top crust of the bread was carved off first and served to the most important noble at the high table.

Lady Hudson’s conversation about Princes is lifted from a detail in Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall.

Yes, we know, we know. Sher_locked_up and I discussed this at length. There are some points in Lady Hudson’s and the Queen Mother’s words which may make us modern-day ladies cringe, but let’s bear in mind that almost a thousand years separate us from the people in this story. Their life and times were different from ours; their words and thoughts would have to be different as well.

Translations:

Ma chère sœur— my dear sister

Mummy and Sherlock’s conversation:

Sherlock: Je n’avais pas réalisé que nous aurions de la compagnie, Mère.
(I did not realize we will be having company, Mother.)

Mummy: Ah bien. Maintenant tu le sais, mon Chéri. Je n’avais pas eu la chance de parler directement à Dame Hudson depuis si longtemps et j’ai cru comprendre que John Watson serait un de vos nouveaux amis. Comme tu le sais, je souhaite de faire connaissance avec tous tes amis.
(Ah, well. Now you know, dearest. I’ve not spoken directly to Lady Hudson for such a long time, and John Watson, I’ve been made to understand, is a new friend of yours. As you know, I wish to be acquainted with all your friends.)

S: Ce ne sont que mes hommes, Mère.
(They're my people, Mother.)

Mummy: Oui, ils le sont et maintenant, ils sont aussi mes invités.
(Yes, they are, and now they are also my guests.)

S: Vous auriez pu me le demander et je les aurais fait venir par moi-même.
(You could have asked me and I could have sent for them myself.)

Mummy: L’aurais-tu vraiment fait, bel fitz? Étrangement, je ne le crois pas, mais dorénavant je me rappellerai de te le demander. Pour l’instant, laisse moi seule avec John Watson.
(Would you have, fair son? Somehow, I thought not, but I shall remember to ask you in future. For now, leave me with John Watson.)
During Medieval times, royal parents usually address their male children as *bel fitz*, meaning “fair son”. Fair, in this case, was used in the context of being good looking, not blond. (Source: Isabella, by Alison Weir)

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**Personal note**: I have been receiving inquiries regarding an incident which occurred in the Korean translation of my fic, Possession. I just want to say that the incident is now closed. I have written a full account of it at tumblr, which can be accessed [here](#) and I would be grateful if we can just leave it at this. Thanks very much for your kind understanding.

Jan. 26, 2014 Update: Captive Hearts is now being translated once again into Korean by Kay. Enjoy!
Chapter 29

This chapter is dedicated to **Fallen-SaintSam**, entirely beloved friend and truly an inspiration.

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**Special Thanks:** To Sher_locked_up, my Beta extraordinaire.

More author’s notes at the end.

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And if I've built this fortress around your heart,
Encircled you in trenches and barbed wire,
Then let me build a bridge, for I cannot fill the chasm,
And let me set the battlements on fire.

--Sting, "Fortress Around Your Heart"

~~~~~@~~~~~

"Oh," breathed Monseigneur.

John licked his lips. "Sherlock, I—"

He got no farther than that before Monseigneur's mouth was upon his in a bruising kiss. Those lips crushed against his felt lush, familiar. Welcome.

A low moan— his or Sherlock's?— and John surrendered his mouth to Monseigneur's questing tongue.

Oh God, this.

John had never realized how much he'd missed this slow plundering of mouths; an ungentle, wordless battle waged by tongues. Until now, he'd never really known how much he'd craved for this.

In the quiet stillness of the Queen Mother's rose gardens, with the moon as sole witness, a moment of magic.

It could not have been more than a minute, yet they were both panting when they broke apart, as though the kiss had made them forget how to breathe.

"John." Monseigneur's voice was a low rumble of sound, thick with emotion. "You've chosen me then. After everything that's happened. And all the while I thought you’d fly from me."

"Oh, like the way you did?" John said, laughter in his voice. "Anyway, does this look like I'm running from you?"

"You've run after me," said Monseigneur. His face was in shadow, but John could detect a subtle change in his voice. What it meant, he wasn't sure.

Not knowing how to answer Monseigneur's question, John asked one of his own, "How did you know her name was Mary? I don't think I ever mentioned it to anyone."
A pause as Monseigneur tilted his head, then he said, "No, you didn't. And your unwillingness to say the name was what gave it all away. It may not have been an entirely conscious act on your part, but in a household with six Marys, you've successfully managed to evade ever calling anyone by that name. Lady Hudson is easy enough to circumvent, and you've taken to calling Mary Turner "antaidh" if you needed to address her at all, but Mary the Younger. Now there's your challenge. Of course you could have called her Lady Hooper as befitting her station, but nobody ever calls her that. Your reasons for giving Molly her nickname were both chivalrous and purely personal, the personal aspect easily overlooked in favor of your obvious gallantry. Nobody realized what the name meant to you, but then nobody was looking for that one clue to your person except me."

John bit his lower lip as he gazed at the enigma before him. "Amazing," he finally said. "Just bloody amazing."

Monseigneur said nothing, although John thought he detected a faint twitch of the man's lips to indicate that he smiled. Monseigneur dipped his head fractionally until their foreheads touched, but John kept his head down.

"The answer is no, by the way," said John softly. He suppressed a smile of his own as he felt Monseigneur freeze ever so minutely.

"No," John repeated, carefully. "You can't ask me to cut Mary out of my heart. She's there to stay. She's a part of me, Sherlock. You'll just have to deal with it."

"Now why would I ask you to do that?" said Monseigneur, voice was so soft it seemed almost on the point of melting. "I don't care who peoples your heart so long as you acknowledge me to be its rightful sovereign."

The kiss that followed was different: forceful, possessive. It was exactly the type that John had found alarming; exactly the type that he couldn't get enough of, now. He felt hands, sliding down his chest, his back.

"Sherlock—!" a startled groan of protest as John felt Monseigneur's hand brush lightly against the hardness between his legs. Now this felt different. Entirely different from everything that came before. He made to push that maddening hand away but Monseigneur merely flattened his palm against John's developing erection, the better to feel him. All of him.

"Now," said Monseigneur, reveling in the sudden hitch in John's breathing. "You're ready for me now, aren't you, John?"

Mouth only a scant inch from John's ear, Monseigneur said in a voice low and rough with renewed authority, "We can't risk anyone coming upon us like this, can we? Certainly not one of my mother's people. Back to your room then, John. You will unlock your door, and then you will undress and wait for me in bed. Go now."

With a final brush of his lips against John's ear, Monseigneur pushed him away, leaving John to make his way slowly back to his room, his steps staggering, a bit uneven, as though he were drunk. When he paused to look behind him uncertainly, Monseigneur was gone.

He could not remember climbing back to the terrace of his room, but he must have done so. Next thing he knew, he was doing exactly what he was told: sliding the deadbolt from his door. His hands were shaking.

He couldn't believe this.
He couldn't believe that this was actually, finally happening. Excitement warred with the usual crippling uncertainty as he took to pacing in front of his bed, the covers neatly turned down for the night.

God, he couldn't deny that he wanted this. He'd known somehow that this was going to happen, the natural endpoint of his arrival here. Had he not felt it the entire time? The delicious sense of anticipation, of satisfaction that bordered on triumph at seeing Monseigneur again after he’d left him at the Lair.

Journeys end with lovers meeting.

John glanced at the open, inviting bed, heaped with pillows, and saw his nightshift lying there, waiting for him.

Undress. Right.

He had to…

He shivered as he pulled his shirt off over his head and felt gooseflesh start over the skin of his arms. It was not even cold in the room. The enormity of what he was going to do, of what Monseigneur was planning to do with him, finally sank in as he took off his trousers.

Oh God.

For a moment, John sat on the edge of his bed, stunned as he stared at his bare thighs, his legs; coarse, ungainly things that they were.

What was he doing?

What was he thinking?

He shivered again as though somebody had doused him with cold water. He thought about diving back into his discarded clothes then and finally decided to don his nightshift instead. Meanwhile, his panicked mind assaulted him with arguments.

Jesus Christ, John, seriously. What the hell? One mad moment in a rose garden with that man and you've fallen right under his spell like a young whelp bewitched for the first time.

John bit his lip hard and tried to shut out the voice of reason, but it wasn’t quite finished with him yet.

Now that you think of it, everything just fits too perfectly, doesn't it, John? Right down to the roses. Oh God, the roses ought to have been the giveaway. He does love to be dramatic, doesn’t he? How wet behind the ears can you be to fail to see right through his act? He's led you by the nose all along, all the way here. He's whetted your appetite by all that drama to the point that he has but to snap his fingers and you'll come flying to him without a single thought that this—all of this—may very well be a trap…

John looked up sharply at the sound of the door opening. He'd forgotten the door.

He watched, aghast, as the door opened a fraction and Monseigneur slid into the room, noiseless as a dark shadow. Monseigneur closed the door and slid the bolt home, then turned to rest his back against it for a moment, his gaze already proprietary, gloating as it settled on John who continued to sit, seemingly paralyzed, on the edge of the bed.
Monseigneur stalked over to him the moment he caught the look on John's face. He said firmly, "It's too late now, John. There's no going back. You've already made the decision to be mine."

Before John could think to move, Monseigneur was upon him, leaning his weight into John as he pressed against him, between his legs. One hand was on his shoulder to restrain him, the other sliding to catch at the back of John's head, roughly tilting his face up for Monseigneur's mouth, as though that was the solution to everything.

John broke away from the kiss to gasp, "Wait. Sherlock, just. Wait. Hold on for a bit—"

"No," growled Monseigneur. "We've tarried long enough. This is the longest I've ever waited for anyone and I am done waiting, John. I am done. This thing between us, it's now or never."

"Answer me this first," said John, drawing in breath raggedly, the light in his eyes clear and fierce. "This. All of this. It's pure textbook romance, isn't it?"

Monseigneur said nothing and merely stared down at John, his fingers still bunched into John's hair at the back of his head.

"The promise of love, the pain of loss, the joy of redemption," continued John, betrayal gradually seeping into his voice. "Kisses in a rose garden in the moonlight. Everything has been planned down to the smallest detail—layer upon layer of your schemes—until you have me wrapped around your finger. How much of this is real, Sherlock?"

Monseigneur's smile, when it finally came, was an unexpected, warm caress. "Well done, John," he said softly. "Oh, well done."

He bent to capture John's mouth again with his, and when John turned away, outraged, disgusted, hands clenching tight against Monseigneur's chest, Monseigneur said, "So you saw through it all at the very last moment. Congratulations. I was wondering whether you'd be this easy to win over, and once again you've proven me wrong. You're definitely worth it, John. Worth the wait. Worth all the planning."

"Sherlock," grated John in warning. Soon he would be furious. Already, his hands were turning to hard fists against Monseigneur's chest, ready to throw him off, to pound into him. "You're playing dirty. You're not being fair!"

"My dear John," said Monseigneur, restraining John as best he could. "Make no mistake: everything is fair in love and war."

"Get off me!"

"Except you've got it wrong," continued Monseigneur, his words clear, incisive. "You've got it all wrong, John."

He felt John's fists waver ever so slightly against his chest. "Wrong, how?" John bit out.

"Manipulation was there, certainly," conceded Monseigneur, "except you've mistaken my motives. This isn't just a ploy to get you to submit, John. This is courtship. Hasn't anyone ever made love to you before, you idiot?"

Monseigneur stared down at John's wide eyes and murmured, "Apparently not."

"You…you're…what?" said John, dumbfounded, unable to believe his ears.
"Ah, my poor innocent," said Monseigneur, shaking his head. "Do you mean to say that all this time, it's never even occurred to you that I was courting you?"

John’s mouth worked silently for a few seconds. He had been struck speechless by Monseigneur’s declaration. Monseigneur watched him for a moment in silent amusement, feeling John’s fists loosen in irresolution on his chest before he finally took pity and claimed John’s mouth with his, softly now, as he felt the last of John’s resolve fall away like a discarded garment.

Ah, to be able to taste the very first, real moment of John’s surrender. Exquisite.

"This is all real, John. Everything that I feel for you," murmured Monseigneur against his mouth.

Never easily convinced, John turned his mouth away and asked, "Why are you doing this? Courting me?"

Monseigneur leveled him a look; this stubborn, delicious man. "Haven't I made myself clear in the dungeons, or have you forgotten already what I’ve told you?" he asked. "I want your heart, John. It's mine."

John’s mouth thinned ominously. "My captive heart, so you said. What do you plan to do with it?"

_The answer is easy enough, John thought bitterly. He’ll cut it out of my chest and throw it away, or crush it to a million little pieces and dabble with the bits the way he does with things for his damnable experiments—_

Monseigneur’s answer came as a complete surprise to John yet again: "I've been reliably informed that I don't have one. Yours will just have to do for me, then. Mon cœur."

The words took Monseigneur by surprise as well. It was only after he voiced his declaration that Monseigneur realized that perhaps he meant every word of it, too.

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John, half sitting, half lying down on the bed, was cushioned against the small mountain of feather pillows as Monseigneur leaned over him, telling him impossible things. He told John about how he had waited for him, time and again throughout these past weeks: that first time, when Donovan had knocked John out with her boomerang, a very close call. Monseigneur, with the poison already starting its slow, deadly work deep inside his body, had gone personally to see John in the tent that held him and his Angrian compatriot. Such disappointment to find him still unconscious, and a deep-seated worry that Sally's boomerang might have inflicted a far graver injury to John than initially thought.

Then there was that time Monseigneur was recovering, when John had insisted on his honoring Lestrade's promise to set him free. That one-hour ultimatum Monseigneur had set for John to think things over had seemed more like an eternity as Monseigneur sat in his tent, a book propped before him and unable to read a single word from it.

After that, the episode in the dungeons— those endless minutes when John had stood at the threshold of the door, merely looking in and not making the mistake of entering...yet. And now, after another bout of agonized waiting, when Monseigneur was fairly certain that he’d lost John, here they were, suddenly. Finally. Could John really not understand the torture he’d put Monseigneur through all these weeks?

Monseigneur could see John about to lose the fight and give in; still, he clung tenaciously to a thread of doubt as he said, "You made your mother summon me here, after scaring her like that with
your terrifyingly long embrace. That didn't look at all like you're admitting defeat."

"Believe you me, I did, but I wasn't going down without a fight," said Monseigneur. "I made you chase me, John; I made myself the lure. I wasn't sure you'd bite though. But at that point, I was desperate enough to try anything. I figured I had nothing left to lose, if I'd lost you already."

There was silence for a time.

"You're an idiot, do you know that?" John said rather tentatively, and Monseigneur knew then.

He knew that the fight was gone from John.

"A brilliant one," amended Monseigneur, moving in swiftly now to claim what was his.

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It was a night for kisses, this time deep and harsh from Monseigneur, allowing no further resistance. He broke the hungry kiss long enough to growl, "Disobedient to the last, aren't we? I told you to undress, John."

"Yes, well, this...this is one way of undressing," said John, sounding a bit breathless, dazed, looking down at his nightshift, in hopeless disarray. His eyes looked dilated and dark in the soft candlelight of the room, his thin mouth red and swollen from Monseigneur’s kisses. He looked perfect.

"And cheeky as ever," observed Monseigneur, lips trailing down to nip lightly at the junction between John's ear and jaw. "Do you enjoy my punishments so much that you’re always inviting them upon your head?"

A scoffing laugh from John, quickly turning into a soft, incoherent cry as he felt the first, sharp graze of teeth against his skin. He arched his neck, a clear invitation, even as his hands tightened on Monseigneur's back, his nape. Monseigneur smiled a secret smile against John's neck, licking away the small hurt he had inflicted. He'd never realized John could be so responsive when he wasn't fighting him. Monseigneur could hardly hold back his excitement at finally having this man beneath him, pliant and unresisting, welcoming.

John shuddered as he felt Monseigneur run the tip of his tongue down the length of his neck, pausing to suck a sharp kiss at the junction of neck and shoulder.

*There will be marks there tomorrow*, John thought indistinctly. *He's marking me as his. All over. God.*

Those beautiful, hard hands roaming over his nightshift now clenched themselves into the soft material, and John felt the cloth giving way, buttons unpopping from their loops, as Monseigneur dragged the shift roughly up and over his head. Except for his linen braies covering his loins, John would be completely naked.

"Off," Monseigneur whispered before he leaned down to trail his mouth over the newly exposed skin of John's chest; so unexpectedly soft, that mouth, and eager.

"People would say this is wrong," John said, breath shuddering out of him as Monseigneur’s mouth moved lower down to his chest.

“This is between us, John,” Monseigneur said, undeterred as he moved over John’s body, smoothly serpentine. “What does this have to do with other people? However…”
A sharp gasp from John as Monseigneur suckled at a nipple until it pebbled roughly in his mouth, feeling John's body heave under his as the first, faint tremors started deep in John's body.

“Does any of this feel wrong to you, John?” whispered Monseigneur, withdrawing his mouth from John’s moist, heated skin. “Tell me to stop, and I will.”

A groan from John, desperate, lost. “No,” he finally said, closing his eyes.

“No, what?”

_Fucking tease…!_

“Don’t stop,” said John hoarsely, hands catching at Monseigneur’s head, bringing it down once again onto his chest. “I want…I want…”

Yes, John, Monseigneur thought with deep satisfaction. _Want me. Always. Nobody but me._

Monseigneur could feel his own body tightening as it reacted to John's needy responses, could feel the heavy hardness down in his loins. Soon. For now, his own needs would have to be voluptuously deferred as he gradually took possession of this man, so wild at heart, so full of need for him that could no longer be hidden.

Of a sudden, John's hands came to life as they clasped hard around Monseigneur's body. Monseigneur realized just in time what John planned to do and resisted the savage pull of that compact, muscular body as it sought to pin him underneath John. They tussled on the bed for a moment, their breathing heavy, the only sound in the silent room.

"I want to see you," said John, panting.

"Soon," purred Monseigneur.

“Now,” insisted John, his voice hard, demanding.

Monseigneur realized that John meant to have his way. There was no denying that the stubborn man would end up getting anything he wanted if he bent his mind to it. He was scared, unsure of things, and he was trying to compensate by taking control of the situation; overcompensating, in fact.

And Monseigneur could not let him have his way. Not this time.

There was a heavy grunt of surprise as John felt Monseigneur slide a hand to cup his erection firmly through his braies and squeeze. Hard. Instantly, John froze, not daring to move another muscle. There was no telling what that hand would do next, what it was capable of.

"Patience, John," Monseigneur murmured darkly, hand unrelenting as it started to rub slowly, tantalizingly, over that hot bulge of flesh. "You first. I want to see all of you. Lie back down, that's my good John."

John swallowed hard, his face flushed, as he subsided reluctantly back on the pillows, body still tense. Face burning and eyes fixed firmly on the canopied ceiling of the bed, he made no attempt to stop Monseigneur from sliding the linen braies down his thighs, his legs. God, it felt good, and it was frightening. Absurdly, he felt like a virgin bride on her wedding night, anticipation mingling with something very much like terror.

"Oh, John."
Monseigneur's rapt intonation finally sent John's eyes snapping back to Monseigneur's face. The mask did much to conceal the expression of his eyes, but Monseigneur's mouth was another matter entirely: he was smiling in pure delight as he gazed down at that part of John he had just uncovered. John's erection was fully hard by then; shorter, perhaps, than Monseigneur's, but thick and rosy.

"Beautiful," breathed Monseigneur, and John felt shy pleasure and something ridiculously close to pride mingle deep inside him. He'd never thought of himself as that before and yet something in Monseigneur's captivated demeanor told John that he meant what he said.

Monseigneur lifted a hand to glide experimentally along that thick shaft, from base to tip, sending a jolt through John. Reflexively, his hand shot out to close around Monseigneur's, but it carried with it no opposition, was not even aware it had a mission.

"Show me how you like it," whispered Monseigneur. It was really a bit too much, that dark, sinful voice. Almost before he knew what was happening, John found his hand guiding Monseigneur's over his length — the clinging touch of five fingers that he liked best, wrapped around his cock, a slow slide at first, gradually speeding up; the little squeeze near the tip.

"Yeah, like that," John said a little breathlessly after just a few strokes as Monseigneur quickly caught on. "God, just like that."

"John." Monseigneur was not as unaffected as he seemed, for his voice had slurred just a little, so that John's name came out all soft, like a rush of wind: Zhuhn.

Just like that very first time they'd talked to each other in the tent, after Monseigneur's fever had subsided. Just his name on Monseigneur's lips, and John felt close to coming.

Monseigneur must have sensed it too, for he quickly pulled his hand away from John's hardness.

"Too soon," he murmured. "I've not even undressed yet."

John flushed, staring as Monseigneur reached out with a hand to unbutton his cote-hardie, as he peeled off layer after layer of clothing right there in front of John. Those clever fingers worked impatiently over the rich fabrics, tossing them carelessly from him. All the while, Monseigneur's pale gaze never quite left John's face. Watch me, John, his shielded eyes seemed to say. Only me.

Candelight bathed Monseigneur's pale flesh, turning it into shades of flickering gold, as he did away with his purple silk shirt. John felt himself stir as he watched those long, supple fingers glide down the length of that lithely muscular body to work on black trousers.

John had seen him naked before; he knew what Monseigneur's body looked like. The man had, after all, bared himself to John in one memorable occasion, but he'd never seen it like this, never when Monseigneur was aroused. John looked at him now and felt his mouth go dry, felt all his earlier fears return with a vengeance.

Monseigneur caught his look and said indulgently, "You need not worry, John. Let me handle this for now. There will be nothing uncomfortable for you this first time, I promise."

After a moment, John nodded, reassured. He looked away from that hard length and slipped his hand against Monseigneur's nape as the man bent down to kiss him lightly on the mouth. Back to familiar territory. Against Monseigneur's lips, John said, "You've not finished undressing yet."
He meant the mask of course, but Monseigneur stayed his hand as John reached up to strip him of his last garment.

"No," said Monseigneur, voice almost a growl as he moved his face away.

"But—"

"That shall be your punishment for failing to heed my order to undress," said Monseigneur, lips stretched wide in a wolfish smile.

"You bad man," muttered John, beginning to smile himself. "You enjoy inflicting your punishments, don't you?"

"As much as you enjoy taking them," said Monseigneur. "And I know you find the mask… irresistible. A challenge. It arouses you, does it not?"

John reached out to touch the black velvet around Monseigneur's eyes. "Yes," he found himself saying.

A long, white finger on his lips. "Enough talk," murmured Monseigneur. "I'm going to kiss you now."

John stared at him blankly, a little uncertainly. Hadn't Monseigneur been kissing him since this entire exercise began?

Monseigneur began to laugh quietly. Could the man really be this innocent? "Oh, John," he said. "Adorable John. Not on your mouth, of course."

Oh. Oh.

John's body tensed right away as the realization finally hit him. "Sherlock, wait—"

But Monseigneur's mouth was already on his stomach, smearing a hot, wet line down his navel. John only had time to put a restraining hand on Monseigneur's curls before he felt that talented tongue on his cock, licking at the crown before Monseigneur took the broad head into his warm, waiting mouth and sucked.

God, the delicious sensation of that wet heat engulfing him was new, incredible. John's head slammed back into the pillows as his hips bucked up instinctively, a wordless, strangled cry forced from his throat as all thoughts of protesting disappeared from his mind, to be replaced by more. Oh, more!

Monseigneur splayed a hand on John's stomach and held him down as the other hand wrapped itself on the base of John's cock, fingers working a slow slide up and down, just as John liked it, in time with the movements of Monseigneur's mouth on the very tip of John's shaft. God, those lips, wrapped around him, that cruel, velvet mouth, lined with sin. One sharp suck and that tongue gently rubbing against the underside of his prick, and it became too much, too quickly.

Barely five minutes into this alien kiss, and John was going to come. What would Monseigneur think?

"Sherlock—!"

The choked entreaty made Monseigneur look up from his ministrations. The warning signs were all there— on John's face, his rigid, trembling body. It had been a long time for him; he was unused to
this. With a few more strokes, he was really going to lose it.

Monseigneur immediately removed his mouth from John and tightened his hold for a moment over the base of his shaft, pinching off the sensations.

"John," Monseigneur said, rising over him, dark as the night outside. John felt Monseigneur's fingers card through his hair, heard his softly murmured "hush" as John let out a small sound, perilously close to a whimper.

"Look at me, John."

His breathing rapid, uneven, John shifted his gaze back to Monseigneur, at that delicious mouth.

"You're worried," observed Monseigneur, the tone of his voice odd. "Worried about disappointing me. Oh, John."

The feel of those lips on John's, tongue licking into his mouth to tease his, and John tasted his own flavor and musk for the first time.

"You need not worry," whispered Monseigneur against his mouth. "It's going to be so good. It's all you'll ever want, all you'll be asking for."

At those words, John felt Monseigneur shift his weight, moving to straddle him.

"So good," promised Monseigneur, breaking the kiss and aligning himself against John's straining erection. "Here. Now."

It started out as one slow, lingering glide, then another. A hiss of pleasure, issuing from John's clenched mouth, as sensation flooded him.

"Can you feel it, John?" a quiver in Monseigneur's voice as his movements gathered speed and force, as the easy slide gradually took the form of shorter, harder thrusts. "Do you feel us, together?"

"Oh God," was all John could think to say. It did feel incredible. He could not seem to take his eyes from the sight of their cocks rubbing together in an urgent rhythm, held together by Monseigneur's hand.

"Look at us, John," whispered Monseigneur. "How we belong together."

The urge to thrust back came naturally enough, and John did, slowly at first, then gaining momentum as his confidence increased.

"I knew it," said Monseigneur, forehead bent so low that it was touching John's. "That first time I ever saw you, John, I knew immediately that we belonged."

John was already well past listening at this point. He lifted his head, took Monseigneur's mouth roughly with his, a play of tongues that mimicked the urgency of their lovemaking.

"Christ," choked John, feeling his body gathering itself in, coiling tightly as it reached that pinnacle of sensation. Monseigneur was already beyond words, forehead against John's, lips curled back in a snarl as he watched him with eyes dilated to midnight black, both of them not capable of anything other than feeling as they thrust and ground against each other, all restraint gone. At that moment, everything fell away and there was just the two of them, mindless of anything other than the man in front of him and the shared pleasure, brutally wonderful. Completion was just a heartbeat away.
Then everything shattered.

A sharp cry echoed in the still room at the first burst of ecstasy, answered by a deep growl of satisfaction. Different sounds from different throats as wave after fiery wave of release burned through them. A deep, cleansing flame, it felt to John, razing him to ashes so that he may be reborn, renewed— whole and unbroken.

After what seemed a long while, John came back to himself to find Monseigneur collapsed on top of him, face tucked against his shoulder, his breathing harsh. Everything in the room seemed as before, only John knew something had changed forever between him and the man who'd taken him as his lover.

"John." There was movement at last from Monseigneur. He turned his wet, masked face to look at John. "Extraordinary John."

John smiled at him, a sense of deep, quiet contentment filling that empty place in his heart even as it raced away in his chest. He licked his dry lips and said, "You...couldn't have known all this about us, back when we first met. How could you?"

Monseigneur gave a tired shrug. "I did," he said simply.

"We were fighting when we first laid eyes on each other. You told me to surrender or die."

"And I knew the moment you knocked my sword out of my hands that I had to have you, one way or another."

"Why?"

Monseigneur said, "Because of what I saw in your eyes. What I see in them now."

John raised his brows as he stared at Monseigneur quizzically.

"How can I possibly resist, John," murmured Monseigneur, tracing an affectionate finger down the side of John’s face, "when you look at me like that, with so much wonder?"

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Author's Notes: The rose’s many meanings and symbolisms date back to antiquity. Apart from its classical associations denoting love and beauty, ancient Romans placed a wild rose on the door of a room where secret or confidential matters were discussed. The phrase sub rosa, or "under the rose", means to keep a secret — derived from this ancient Roman practice.

In the postscript of his novel, "The Name of the Rose", Umberto Eco said he chose the title for his book "because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left". (Source: Wikipedia). There is also a Medieval poem on courtly love called La Roman de la Rose (Romance of the Rose), again with themes portraying the intricacies of love and the object of that love (the lady was portrayed as a rose). I thought the rose and its allusion to the possibility of many meanings or of nebulous meaning also very aptly reflects Monseigneur's person and why he’d choose to woo John in a rose garden— the secrecy and the multi-layered, labyrinthine puzzle that constitute the man and his plans. Even the mask he wears is an allusion to the mystery surrounding him— how certain parts of him are closed off and inaccessible to others.

The phrase, “All is fair in love and war”, is not a Medieval saying. It came much later, and can be traced to John Lyly's 'Euphues' (1578). The quote was "The rules of fair play do not apply in love
and war.” John Lyly was a Renaissance English poet and playwright. (Source: Wiki Answers)

Details of Medieval dress (Monseigneur's, especially) can be found in chapter 10. Linen braies would be the equivalent of men’s underwear or undergarments during that time. Buttons were already in existence, but there were no buttonholes in clothes. Rather, loops were crafted into the clothing to hold buttons in place. (Sources: Wikipedia and Myths About the Middle Ages)

Antaidh— Scottish Gaelic for "aunt"

Mon cœur— French for "my heart"

Personal Note (June 30, 2013): Thanks so much for all the lovely reviews and messages of concern, my dears. Rest assured, the story is not going to be abandoned. Real life just intruded (and intruded really hard) for the past month or so. I hope to finish the next chapter really soon. For updates, please check my tumblr.
Thank you so much for your kind concern and inquiries during the entire month I've not been able to update this story. Your messages made me smile very much. Real life has been demanding, but things are now settling down and hopefully I can start updating regularly again. Now on with the story!

**Special Thanks:** To Sher_locked_up, my Beta extraordinaire.

And to PlumpPushu, my French Connection.

More author’s notes at the end.

When the warrior took me in his arms I felt the fire of pleasure.

-- *The Anglo-Saxon Elegy (VIII century)*

John did not know how long he slept, but it felt wonderful — the feeling of being immersed in the deep, dark oblivion of complete rest, sweet and rare. He first became aware of movement behind him, that long, warm body spooned along the length of his back gradually stirring. He smiled, eyes shut, mind still hazy with sleep as he felt long fingers gliding slowly, teasingly over his shoulder and down his arm.

"Zhuhn." A mere breath of sound in the softly enclosing darkness of the curtained bed, whispered right beside his ear.

John drowsily turned his head a fraction, blindly seeking the feel of lips that must be so near his skin. Instantly, a pair of arms wound their way gently around his body, preventing him from turning around.


He must still be asleep and dreaming, John decided after a moment. Monseigneur had never thought to talk to him in Gondalian before, and what was even more surprising was John's realization that somehow he could understand what Monseigneur was saying, the way dreaming people could be omniscient of foreign languages.

ZHUHN— his name in Gondalian. Jean.

The sound of his name on Monseigneur's tongue was ravishingly beautiful.

"I must still be dreaming," John heard himself say out loud.

*Or perhaps not,* he thought, feeling a *frisson* of pleasure go through him as Monseigneur, cat-like, rubbed his faintly stubbled cheek against John's nape affectionately.

There was a smile in Monseigneur's soft voice as it purred, "Rêves-tu de moi? J'aimerais bien ça."

John felt soft lips brush lightly at his temple at last as he began to drift off once again.
"Rendormir," repeated that soft, hypnotic voice.

When he next opened his eyes, John found the sun had definitely risen, slicing a clear ray of early morning light onto his sheets through a slit in the closely drawn bed curtains around him.

And Monseigneur was definitely gone.

John turned his gaze away from the empty pillow beside him and sighed. It was useless asking himself if last night had been a dream, considering the overwhelming evidence to the contrary: the indentation of another head on the pillow next to him; the faint musky scent of arousal and fulfillment that teased his nostrils in the closed confines of the bed; his nakedness and the delicious feeling of the sheets against his skin. Stretching languorously, John yawned and found that he was actually wearing a broad grin and very little else.

Stop that, cried that portion of his mind that was still capable of caution.

The swell of happiness gradually ebbed away and John closed his eyes, for a moment allowing himself to simply, quietly breathe in and out, taking in the warm scent of the sheets that smelled of him and remembering what had transpired between them last night. He waited for the doubts to start surfacing.

Instead: God, last night was incredible.

Oh, this was not good, if that was all he could think of the situation, if he could not even bring himself to feel anything other than immense satisfaction over what had happened. He’d come a long way with Monseigneur these past few weeks.

John lay there, eyes closed, a hand folded on his chest over his heart, its beat quiet and untroubled, as he remembered Monseigneur’s long, clever fingers which could be cruel or gentle depending on their owner’s whims, never failing to arouse him as they had touched and stroked and caressed him in a deeply sensual exploration.

Look at us, John…how we belong together…

John turned and burrowed his burning cheek deeper into his pillow as he remembered that moment, and the moments that had followed when they had lain together, tired and contented, and quietly talked.

Something was deeply wrong with him, he decided, if he could think back on those moments when he’d finally given in to Monseigneur, when they had unraveled together, pitching headlong into sweet, dark disaster, without feeling the slightest trace of regret or revulsion.

Something was deeply wrong with him, John realized, if he could not bring himself to feel ashamed for surrendering to the man even now.

Because now…

All he wanted to do right now was to get up and go to him. To see how Monseigneur would look in the clear light of day after last night, when their relationship had been transformed forever. Would he be altered by their encounter the way John had felt himself changed by it? Would he be nervous? Would he— John swallowed hard— would he think it was all a mistake?

There was only one way to find out. John got up and began to get dressed.
It was still early when John ventured out, not encountering a soul until he reached the outer stone courtyard that led to the gardens where he found Billy tending to Monseigneur’s peregrine falcon, the one Eustace had made John take along in place of the sick Azrail.

And standing a few paces away from Billy, with his back to John, stood Monseigneur.

John was too far away to catch what Monseigneur was saying to the boy, but he caught the inflections in that deep, drawling voice which was enough to enable him to arrive at his own conclusions. Poor Billy. What must it be like for the lad, to be serving such a man as Monseigneur? Doubtless he was terrified of him, but it was evident to John that Billy also genuinely admired, even adored his master. John had to marvel at the many contradictory feelings that Monseigneur alone could excite in people.

Now John was close enough to hear what Monseigneur had to say: “You must always remember to keep your head up, no matter what the circumstances. You have a distressing habit of hanging your head whenever you are praised, which is rather odd.”

Without thinking, John opened his mouth and said, “I know just the solution for that.”

He watched with immense satisfaction as Monseigneur went still for a brief second. Startled, Billy looked up and blurted out, “John, sir.”

“Have you, indeed?” drawled Monseigneur as he finally turned around to face John. His masked visage gave nothing away, though John thought he saw a smile flickering in the depths of those pale eyes.

“Praise him more often,” John suggested, stopping a few feet away from Monseigneur, "until he gets used to it. God only knows he deserves it.”

Monseigneur said nothing, merely regarded John with cool amusement as his eyes raked over John’s face, searching-- for what? Hesitation? Second thoughts? Finding none, it was as though a veil had suddenly lifted from Monseigneur's shuttered features.

John cleared his throat and glanced away, suddenly aware that he was staring at Monseigneur for just a moment too long. “You’re…hanging your head again,” he said with a smile, indicating Billy, who turned beet-red and jerked his chin up just as Monseigneur turned to regard him with a piercing eye.

Monseigneur sighed in exasperated resignation and said to the boy, “We’re leaving first thing after dinner. You’ll have a lot of packing to do so I suggest you start going about it right now.”

“My lord. Sir,” said Billy, smiling as he was dismissed, bowing briefly in front of the two men.

“Good morning,” John said carefully when Billy was finally out of earshot.

“There’s no need to state the obvious, John,” drawled Monseigneur even as a corner of his mouth tilted up ever so slightly. “But if you will insist upon a bit of courteous small talk as part of the morning-after scene, I shall not disoblige you.”

John’s mouth twitched and for a moment he was not sure whether he ought to scowl or laugh, but a chuckle finally escaped him. “You’re really too hard on him, you know,” he said. “A kind word and a bit of patience would do wonders with Billy.”

“We don’t have time for kind words and patience, John,” replied Monseigneur, his tone clipped.
At those words, John raised his brows and said nothing. Just what Monseigneur meant by that, he was not sure.

“Anyway, as his master I do have certain responsibilities toward the boy’s training,” continued Monseigneur, his tone turning haughty.

John shrugged and still said nothing as he regarded Monseigneur with a bland expression.

“And I don’t see why I ought to justify myself to you at all,” snapped Monseigneur, finally finding John’s continued silence unnerving.

John shook his head, unperturbed. “Nah,” he said agreeably. “Why should you?”

They stared at each other for a moment longer before they burst into soft, reluctant laughter.

“You look exceedingly well-rested,” Monseigneur murmured, his gaze more tender than John had ever seen it as it alighted once again on John’s face. “Breakfast?”

John’s smile widened. “Starving.”

Turning around, they strolled back toward the castle in amicable silence, keeping a suitable distance between them except when their fingers would occasionally, accidentally graze against each other as they walked side by side. Except when Monseigneur’s long fingers deliberately lingered against John’s own the next time they touched, trailing up to tease his palm in the lightest of touches, as they entered the threshold of the castle.

The Queen Mother apparently did not eat breakfast, although she did ask to see them after they had taken theirs. She had received some urgent news: Sir Bruce, the King’s private secretary, would be arriving soon to convey a matter of the greatest importance to them.

Monseigneur rolled his eyes upon hearing it. “Don’t tell me the King has had a change of heart and the wedding is now off,” he said flatly.

It was worse than that, it seemed.

Sir Partington arrived punctually at midday in a flurry of red and yellow robes. In no time at all, he was bowing, feathered hat in hand, in front of the Queen Mother and Monseigneur.

“Monseigneur. Madame,” he started to say and stared uncertainly at Lady Hudson and John who were seated unobtrusively farther away.

“They’re my people, you may talk freely in front of them,” declared Monseigneur, his voice firm, “though not in Gondalian.”

“Certainly, Your Highness,” replied Sir Bruce smoothly even as he managed to inject the tiniest sliver of doubt into his tone.

A *highly skilled, very slick courtier*, John thought; the kind that Monseigneur very obviously disliked.

“His Majesty sends his excuses in not being able to be here personally to relay the news to you,” Sir Bruce continued as he produced two rolls of parchment with the King’s red seal prominently displayed upon them and presented these to the Queen Mother and Monseigneur.

John watched, dismayed, as Monseigneur gave a sneer and tossed his papers away after going over
them briefly. “Impossible,” he said. “I cannot just go off to Glasstown now to dance attendance upon the King, not when I still have so many things to do. His Majesty overestimates that woman’s importance.”

Lady Hudson and John exchanged confused glances.

“The woman’s plans cannot possibly succeed,” declared the Queen Mother, her voice ice-cold. “Who does she think she is?”

“If I may, I can assure Your Highness that we have assessed the situation involving the Exinian princess,” cut in Sir Bruce, “and His Majesty regrets that there is a basis to take the princess in all earnest. Thus, His Majesty has deemed it of paramount importance that your Highness fulfill your obligation toward your betrothed—”

A soft, horrified gasp from Lady Hudson as full comprehension dawned on her at last. John stared at Monseigneur incredulously, feeling as though the air had been punched out of him. Was he even hearing this right?

“We have an agreement,” growled Monseigneur, rounding on Sir Bruce, who very calmly and infuriatingly refused to back down.

“Then it is the perfect time for Your Highness to act on the agreement made with His Majesty,” Sir Bruce corrected himself with perfect suavity, “although His Majesty is of the opinion that Monseigneur will find it more expedient to just marry the girl. Those are His Majesty’s words, exactly. That is all I have been asked to convey, along with the information that His Majesty expects the pleasure of Your Highness’s company in Glasstown within a fortnight.”

“John, my Lady Hudson, you may leave the room,” said Monseigneur tersely without even looking at them.

They made quickly to obey.

The doors were made of good oak, heavy and thick, but not thick enough to drown out Monseigneur’s shouting completely.

Lady Hudson paced for a while in the rose gardens while John sat stonily on a wooden bench, staring away at nothing.

“Oh,” muttered Lady Hudson, wringing her hands in distress. “And I thought Monseigneur’s match with the princess of Exinia is long dead and buried.”

John turned to look at her. “So he’s engaged to be married,” he said slowly. “I…didn’t misunderstand that bit, then.”

“It was arranged when they were children,” Lady Hudson answered distractedly. “The two kings had an understanding. But there was never a confirmation ceremony, not even by proxy. It was repeatedly pushed off, first when Monseigneur left Court for Elderidge. The subsequent meeting between the two children had not been a success, and then Exinia itself descended into chaos not long afterward when the king died. It was a complicated affair and the princess was not allowed to succeed as queen. But really, I thought they’ve already broken it off, or else why wait this long to bring up the marriage pact again? Besides, the Exinian princess’ reputation does not warrant contemplation.”
John licked his lips and said, “I’m not quite sure I follow.”

“Oh, John,” said Lady Hudson, shaking her head. “You have not seen the Princess Irene yet. Word has it she is exceedingly beautiful and clever, perhaps too beautiful and clever for her own good, but her reputation! Why, Monseigneur could use that as an excuse to call everything off and I am sure nobody would raise any objection.”

“I doubt if she can rival that of Monseigneur,” John quipped.

“Oh, John. Pray do not joke about such a thing,” admonished Lady Hudson. “Through the years, the woman has been linked to one scandal after another in Exinia and beyond—nothing concrete, as far as I can make out, but the rumors, John! If they are even remotely true then she is certainly most wicked.”

John stared at Lady Hudson and waited for her to elaborate.

“I can’t!” she said helplessly after a moment. “It is too distressing. Delicacy forbids me to divulge the details, but she is known to be entirely wild and shameless and she has…she is known to have certain exotic tastes.”

John’s brows shot up at this. He was intrigued in spite himself, but before he could press Lady Hudson further, Monseigneur’s deep voice sounded across the rose hedges: “I shall need to find out who has been debasing your ears in such a manner, my Lady Hudson.”

A small squeak issued from Lady Hudson as they whipped around to see Monseigneur standing a few feet away, hands behind his back. “We’ll be leaving after dinner as planned,” he said, perfectly composed. “I’m sure my Lady has her packing to attend to.”

After Lady Hudson's hasty retreat, Monseigneur turned to John and said, “Come along, John, my mother wishes to see you before we leave. I’m sure she will be presenting you with gifts—medicines and salves mostly. Make sure to ask for additional bottles of her excellent rose oil, we will need as much as—”

“When do you plan on telling me about your engagement to the Princess of Exinia?” John burst out. Monseigneur's nonchalance was the last straw to break his fragile patience.

A cool silence descended before Monseigneur turned his back abruptly on John and began walking away from him.

Undeterred, John called after him, “If at all?

“You weren’t planning on telling me at all, were you?” accused John as he caught up with Monseigneur. The pain and bewildered disappointment starting deep inside his chest were appalling, and his realization that he was powerless to rein in these feelings was even more so.

“Why should I? It’s boring and certainly does not warrant much attention,” declared Monseigneur, his tone clearly indicating he had no wish to pursue the matter. “Besides, it does not concern us in any way.”

“It does not—?” John could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You’re engaged to be married!”

“Boring,” repeated Monseigneur. “Let us hear no more of it. Now don’t forget what I told you about my mother’s oil.”

“Wait!” John’s hand bit down on Monseigneur’s wrist, encased in its sleeve of black silk. His tone
had thinned out, turned breathy with frustration and beginning rage. They weren’t done yet. They were far from done.

Monseigneur paused, then turned slowly back to face John, his eyes hooded and filled with unmistakable warning: Not here. Not in broad daylight.

John let out a shaky breath and released his grip as reason returned, belated. He watched as Monseigneur turned from him and walked away.

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“‘It is a pity,’” the Queen Mother said with a sigh, “‘that Monseigneur has chosen to return to Elderidge this very afternoon. Given the King’s urgent communications though, I can imagine he will need to make wise use of his time to prepare for what is to come.’”

She glanced at John and, when he made no comment, pointed to the bottles of medicines on the table before them as she continued, “‘I hope these liniments and salves will be of use to you.’”

John roused himself with some effort and said, “‘Yes, they are going to be extremely useful. I am grateful to your Majesty.’”

Something in his tone made the Queen Mother’s gaze linger on him for a moment longer before she murmured softly: “‘Ma pauvre John.’”

When John raised his head to look at her in alarm, she said, “‘You found Sir Bruce’s announcement a shock, no? I can see you are new to this, new to my son’s ways. Yet I wonder whether it is really possible that it has never occurred to you that my son will marry, sooner or later. My sons, after all, have yet to fulfill a most important royal obligation to the country by producing children. I have some advice to offer you, John. It is not for me to disapprove of your…friendship with my son, but for your own sake, do not be so transparent with your affections for him. Especially not at Court. It pains me to have to say it, but I hope you realize that it is kindly meant.’”

John swallowed hard and looked away, mortified at being so easily read by this woman.

The Queen Mother’s tone turned quietly pleading as she continued, “‘I love my fair son. To be truthful, I love him above all else, as I very nearly lost him, not once but twice. As a healer, I think you will understand how I feel as a mother. But my son is headstrong, and in his way, he is incredibly naïve. Therefore, I must ask you to think not just for yourself, but for him as well. If you really care for him, you will do it.’”

John was not sure what to make of her words, and finally he said, “‘Your Majesty may rest assured that I’m not going to make a spectacle of myself over Monseigneur.’”

“I know you won’t,” said the Queen Mother, breaking into a gentle smile. “‘You are far too sensible a person for that, I think. It’s my son I’m worried about.’”

John broke into a soft chuckle at her words. The Queen Mother’s smile turned wistful as she said, “‘If there is nothing else, I believe the next time we meet will be at Court, John Watson.’”

John thought briefly about Monseigneur’s request but finally said, “‘There is nothing else, your Majesty.’”

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Monseigneur took one look at him when they were preparing to mount their horses and said shortly,
“You didn’t get the oil.”

“I forgot,” said John blithely.

“You did nothing of the kind,” said Monseigneur, voice dark with accusation.

“Look, why is it so important to you?” said John, exasperated. “I can probably make some at the Lair, if you need it that badly for your experiments.”

“You deliberately disobeyed me.”

John turned to him and said in a calm, measured tone, “It’s not a catastrophe. Like I said, I can make some medicinal oil for you if you need it. People can’t always meet your expectations. Get used to it.”

“No,” said Monseigneur, shaking his head. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you not meeting my expectations. This has something to do with news of that woman—”

“You know what?” said John as he brought his whip down on his horse’s flank. “We’re done talking.”

Of course, John thought bitterly, it had everything to do with that woman— that princess. John had never met anyone from Exinia before, but he had heard about the legendary beauty of Exinian women who were dark of hair and eyes, voluptuous and sensual, passionate and hot-tempered. He’d also heard that some Exinian women were notorious witches. Could their princess be a match for the demon prince of Gaaldine, after all?

The mere thought was enough to turn his stomach. John thought back on the Queen Mother’s words and shrank from the memory of his momentary loss of control as he grabbed at Monseigneur in the rose gardens. In those few stunned moments, he had quite forgotten himself. The Queen Mother was right. He would need to be more careful.

Ahead of him, John had never seen Monseigneur ride the Beast so hard. It was obvious from the way he was manning the poor brute that Monseigneur was working himself up into a black rage just in time for their arrival at the Lair. Which was fine. It was more than fine for John, but it would not be good for Molly, or anyone else who got in Monseigneur's way.

They were the first to reach the Lair, and as they dismounted in the courtyard, John had enough time to warn Monseigneur, "take this out on Molly, and I swear I will punch you right here, right now, for everyone to see."

"Make haste for the dungeons then, John," Monseigneur said, teeth bared in a fierce smile. "Let’s have it out there."

With that, he turned and strode into the Lair just as the Lady Molly was coming out.

The man was just impossible, fumed John as he descended the stairs that led to the dungeons. In the bustle and din of their arrival, it had not been easy to slip away unnoticed yet John managed, after speaking briefly to Molly, reassuring her that everything was all right.

Of course, everything was not all right, but he would have to deal with this, with Monseigneur, all by
himself.

Monseigneur was waiting inside his workroom, perched against one of his tables as John entered. "Finally," he growled. "Come along, then. Bring your torch with you."

Monseigneur was heedless of John's protests: "Where are we going? Look, we can talk easily right over there, there's no need for us to go anywhere else..."

John had never been this far into the dungeons before. They entered a dark, narrow doorway, leaving Monseigneur's workroom behind. As they walked on, John suddenly remembered Mike's account of how he had gotten lost down here and felt the hairs on his nape rise.

Surely, Monseigneur would not think of murdering him or worse, shutting him in down here, where he'd never see the light of day ever again, just because he'd pissed him off a day after they'd made love. Would he?

Well, fuck him, John decided. He'd have to get at me first.

A turn in the narrow corridor led them to a small, circular room, bare of any furniture and the dust thick on the ground.

Monseigneur gestured at an empty sconce on the wall for John to hang his torch, and John found himself unwilling to let Monseigneur out of his sight for a single moment lest the man pounce on him. Wasn't it why they were here? To fight?

Yet Monseigneur's next words surprised John. "Well, let's get this over with quickly," said Monseigneur, his tone curt. "Punch me in the face."

John froze. Breathing out an incredulous laugh, he said, "What?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Said Monseigneur impatiently, obligingly turning a cheek towards John. "I said, punch me in the face."

Well, John did hear him loud and clear the first time around. As far as he was concerned he always heard "punch me in the face" whenever Monseigneur was speaking, although it was usually subtext. "I— no."

"Don't be daft, John. Just do it."

John shook his head. "Look, there's no need to make this more dramatic than it al—"

"Oh for God's sake," cried Monseigneur exasperatedly, swinging at John with a closed fist.

John had not seen it coming, and he staggered back, ears ringing, numbness giving way to the first tendrils of pain blooming across his right cheek as he finally registered that Monseigneur had punched him.

The bloody, batshit-crazy bastard!

Without thinking, John hit back, giving as good as he got. His blow sent Monseigneur sprawling back to fall in an ungraceful heap on the dusty ground, but he was far from finished with the bastard.

It was an ungainly scuffle, with Monseigneur proving to be quite skillful with his fists. It took John a few minutes to subdue the man in a headlock before he felt Monseigneur begin to give way beneath
"John, I think we're done now," Monseigneur finally choked out, hands around the unyielding band of iron that was John's arm.

Breathing in ragged gasps, John growled, "You'll want to remember, Sherlock, I was a soldier. I killed people."

"You're a healer," gasped Monseigneur.

"I've had bad days!" With that, John abruptly let go of the man's neck and Monseigneur sank to his knees, coughing.

John was not through with him yet. He had things to say as soon as his mouth could form the words. His hands were trembling as he grabbed at the man's rumpled collar and jerked Monseigneur around to face him. A red splotch surrounded the small cut on his cheekbone where John's fist had connected with his face earlier. Soon it was going to turn into an ugly, mottled purple.

"You...fucking...!" John's breath hissed out through clenched teeth. He was still so angry. So angry he could hardly breathe or think.

And through it all, the bastard was grinning, laughing that dark, rich laugh, low and soft.

"Yes," said Monseigneur, verdigris eyes wide, fixed on John's rigid face. "Go ahead, John. I know you want to. Punish me. Punish me with kisses."

"Bastard!" snarled John, yet he could not help himself as the words sent a rush of heat to pool in his loins. He grabbed at Monseigneur's curls, roughly tilting his face up to receive John's bruising kisses.

"John!" A soft sigh escaped from Monseigneur, quickly dissolving into a moan as John thrust his tongue into Monseigneur's mouth to lick and taste and claim.

Desire flared within John, potent, dangerously out of control, as he broke the kiss to run his open mouth against the sweat-slicked column of Monseigneur's throat, tasting the salt on his skin, breathing him in. He never remembered kneeling, but he found himself-- both of them-- there, on their knees with his hands in Monseigneur's hair and Monseigneur's skin against his mouth-- so hot, moist with sweat, as though he were burning with fever all over again. As though he'd burn John along with him.

"Yes," growled Monseigneur, fisting his hands into the back of John's shirt, made dirty and damp from John's exertions before dragging them lower, cupping and kneading John's arse and moving to rid John of his trousers.

"Mine," John panted as he sank his teeth in the hollow of Monseigneur's throat, frantic hands already tearing aside Monseigneur's cote hardie, his underlying silk shirt. John felt intensely gratified as he heard Monseigneur hiss in a sharp breath, arching his neck beneath John's mouth as John felt him through the rich fabric of his clothes.

"Have me then, John," Monseigneur whispered savagely against John's ear before turning his mouth to kiss and nip and bite even as his long fingers closed around John's aching shaft.

"Oh, God."

The feel of Monseigneur's hard length in John's palm was a revelation. He licked into Sherlock's mouth as their hands unerringly found a rhythm against their bodies— fast and harsh, urgent, full of
"Yes, harder. Oh, just like that," whispered Monseigneur, cheek pressed against John's forehead as he thrust into John's hand. "Oh, John!"

John could not utter a sound, impervious to anything but the brutal pleasure that coiled and coiled tightly before spilling, spilling fast from him as he shuddered into his orgasm with a hoarse shout.

They lay on the hard, dusty floor for long minutes, winded, with John still half-draped over Monseigneur's still form, his arms around him.

"When the warrior took me in his arms, I felt the fire of pleasure," Monseigneur intoned breathlessly, speaking to nobody in particular.

"Fuck," John could only croak, chest still rising and falling rapidly.

From somewhere quite far away, John heard Monseigneur's voice: "You're jealous of that woman. How ridiculous of you, John."

"You should have told me you were betrothed," said John, unable to keep the resentment from his voice.

"What would you have done then?" asked Monseigneur, sounding interested. "Would you have been able to keep away from me?"

"Sherlock..." growled John in warning as he raised his head to glare at him.

"A betrothal does not necessarily mean marriage," said Monseigneur. "She means nothing to me. The last time we met she was a spoiled, little wench barely ten years old, with an insufferable sense of self-entitlement and an inclination to make threats that involve taking holy orders and being shut in a convent. Her fortunes have since taken a drastic turn and now she's reduced to making mischief against my brother on the eve of his second wedding. She's not that important to warrant my brother's full attention, yet her threats are of an intensely private nature, enough so that the King has resolved to make it my responsibility to deal with her as I see fit. So as you can see, John, it's hardly a situation that will end in wedding bells pealing on my behalf."

John swallowed. "So, you're..."

"She's reputed to be very clever, yet I have to wonder just how clever she might be if she chooses to engage in a power play with the most powerful family in Gaaldine," murmured Monseigneur. "I shall destroy her."

He turned to face John. "Don't tell me you're still envious of her, John," he said softly.

"Well now," said John resignedly. "Since you've put it that way..."

After a while, he lifted a hand to touch Monseigneur lightly on his bruised cheek.

“One of these days, I want to be inside you when I come,” he said, quite daringly.

Monseigneur's lips stretched into a wide, wide smile. “My thoughts exactly,” he said. “It’s too bad you didn’t get the oil like I asked you to. That was what it was intended for.”

They visited the mews early the next day.
John watched, startled and fascinated with the way Azrail, now fully recovered, greeted her master upon his return. He had never seen her so agitated, flapping her wings and screaming a thin, shrill cry of affront and—it seemed to John—gladness as Monseigneur spoke to her in a gentle murmur, coaxing her onto his gloved hand. If Azrail had not been a hawk in those moments, she would have been in tears.

"Tout va bien, mon coeur. Je suis là maintenant. Tout va bien aller." Monseigneur's voice was a warm caress as Azrail finally consented to sit on his fist.

In his waking moments, John still had a long way to go with his Gondalian, but the language was finally beginning to make sense—bits and pieces, anyway.

He thought he understood what Monseigneur said just then, and he found himself wishing, hoping, it were true.

Author's Notes: I must confess that I have taken certain liberties with the way I portrayed Monseigneur's betrothal to the Princess Irene. Medieval royal marriages were highly complicated affairs. Deeply political and economic in nature, a royal marriage agreement was very much like an extensive business contract involving not just the acquisition of a spouse, but of land, money, goods, gifts, dowry, and sometimes entire armies as well. Prestige and the all-important alliance to be gained by countries as well as the continued acquisition of wealth were the most important goals of a royal marriage.

An "understanding" was usually formed by the royal parents and their courtiers when the royal bride and groom were children. Typically, courtiers were dispatched to inspect the future couple as extensive negotiations between countries further strengthened the understanding into a betrothal, which may be formal or non-formal. A betrothal may not necessarily lead to marriage and could be broken off for various reasons. What the groom or bride thought of each other accounted for very little in the outcome of these arranged marriages. If the negotiations were favorable, the marriage could first take place by proxy before the bride (usually a child ranging in age from 8 to 12 years old) finally left her parents and her homeland for her husband’s country and the formal wedding celebrations.

(Sources: Royal Marriage in the Medieval Period--Sexuality Through the Ages; Isabella (Alison Weir); Wikipedia)

Translations:

Monseigneur: Jean, il est encore bien trop tôt, tu peux te rendormir. Mon cher Jean.

(John, it's still early, go back to sleep. My dear Jean.)

M: Rêves-tu de moi? J'aimerais bien ça.

(Are you dreaming of me? I'd like that.)

~@~

Queen Mum: Ma pauvre John.

(My poor John)

~@~
Monseigneur to Azrail: Tout va bien, mon coeur. Je suis là maintenant. Tout va bien aller.
(It's all right, my heart. I'm here now. Everything is going to be all right.)

~~~~~@~~~~~

Special thanks to Snogandagrope, for suggesting almond oil! ^_^
Chapter 31
Special Thanks: To my lovely Beta, wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up), for knocking this chapter into fantastic shape. Writing sexyness is always a bit like torture for me—there is a very fine line between what is good stuff and what is plain ridiculous. Thanks so much for keeping things away from the latter category.

And to Snogandagrope, for suggesting almond oil!

More author’s notes at the end.

~~~~~@~~~~~

The King could not be swayed.

No matter how many missives Monseigneur wrote, no matter how reasonable his arguments or how forceful his expostulations that his work with the antidote was not yet finished, the King refused to postpone his summons for Monseigneur to appear before him at Court in a fortnight’s time.

In a confidential memorandum that constituted his reply to Monseigneur, the King laid down the facts: he was due to receive the Angrian Queen and her vast entourage within the week. The wedding was still weeks away, yet the Princess Irene had somehow managed to get wind of the Angrian Queen’s scheduled arrival. The King’s spies had most reliably reported to him that already, the contingent from Exinia had set sail, and not withstanding ill weather and rough seas, would set foot on Gaaldinian soil in a fortnight. There could be little doubt as to the woman’s designs. A whiff of the scandal she promised to unleash, and the Angrian marriage—so painstakingly and laboriously negotiated—would be off. The King had yet to meet his bride in person; there were signs (naturally enough, considering how he had wooed her) that the Queen of Angria viewed him with mistrust and
apprehension. He would need time to win her over personally, and he could not possibly do so if another woman were to barge in on the scene and wreak havoc on his carefully nurtured plans. A woman— may the King remind Monseigneur— who was actually betrothed, not to him, but to his younger brother.

“Considering your vested interest in the success of my marriage, I trust you, dear brother, to keep your word and fulfill your end of the bargain by taking care of the Woman before she transforms this most important of weddings into a travesty, or worse, prevent it from taking place at all,” Monseigneur read out the last of his brother’s letter for John to hear before tossing the offensive document away in disgust.

“Hold on a minute,” said John, who was hugely interested in the proceedings, “your ‘vested interest’?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” drawled Monseigneur. “The King’s first marriage ended without issue. Until my brother marries again and bears the necessary offspring, I will not be able to rid myself of the responsibility of marrying and bearing children of my own for the Crown.”

“You…don’t wish to be king,” observed John slowly as he took in Monseigneur’s palpable distaste at the mention of the word *crown* and its attendant hereditary obligations.

Monseigneur gave him a withering look, the one usually reserved for such idiots as Anderson. “Do you think I’m suitable for the job, John?”

“Well…” said John.

Of course, being the man he was, Monseigneur had a point. Still, John could not imagine any ordinary man, possessing the normal amount of ambition, to refuse a crown when it was so easily within his reach.

But then he ought to have learned by now that Monseigneur was no ordinary man.

“And this woman, the Princess Irene—”

“Sorry, John. I’m under oath not to divulge the details of her, shall we say, involvement with the King,” cut in Monseigneur quickly.

John smiled. “I wasn’t going to ask you to do that,” he said. “But you have to hand it to her, she’s got guts.”

“She’s desperate,” said Monseigneur shortly. “She was an only child for the first fifteen years of her life. Her mother had died early and her doting father had spoiled her rotten. All her life she was groomed to succeed him as ruler of Exinia, never dreaming that he would marry again in his old age and— alas!—finally bear a male heir almost at the very last minute.”

A smile flitted briefly across Monseigneur’s lips as he glanced up to find John entranced by his narrative. “You can imagine what kind of special hell her existence has become since. The worst blow came around two years ago, when her father died quite suddenly and left the crown to his toddler son. Since then, the stepmother, a wily creature in her own right, has ruled for the woman’s young stepbrother as regent. So now the woman’s position has been reduced to that of a useless royal appendage. It is almost certain that her stepmother views her as a dangerous rival for her brother’s crown. You can imagine to what great lengths her country’s councilmen have gone to marry her off, but it is too late. Nobody would have her now. Our betrothal aside, there were other interested parties when she was younger, but she squandered her chances by toying with all and
committing to none. In the meantime, she acquired an unsavory reputation that did not help with her marriage prospects at all.

"My brother expressed an intention to terminate the betrothal when our father passed away a few years ago. There was not much advantage for Gaaldine to be united with Exinia to begin with. The Exinians tried every diplomatic trick to stall the process, but it is my brother's own fault that he let the unsatisfactory affair continue for so long— he will never admit to it, and he’s never had an opportunity to wield it against me, but I am certain he intended it as a kind of leverage to help keep me in line. Most tedious. Now it's come around to bite him in his plump posterior and suddenly he is all for immediate action to resolve the issue. I have no doubt that the woman is coming to demand the fulfillment of a promise that is as good as broken off, but here she exceeds herself by wanting to marry— not me— but the King of Gaaldine himself!"

John’s smile widened to a delighted grin at the drama that promised to unfold at Court. “Like I said, she’s got guts,” he remarked.

“Obviously she has not planned on having to deal with me,” said Monseigneur with aloof hauteur.

"But I am a little confused,” John said. “Why would the King think to foist her on you and not his councilmen? Surely she should be their problem, not yours?"

“The King is nothing if not subtle,” replied Monseigneur. “To pass this on for parliament to decide would be to acknowledge it as an international incident. That would have been a small victory for the Woman. But do not let this little subterfuge mislead you into thinking my brother is soft. He means to teach this woman a lesson, and he believes I will do a more thorough job than any courtier in the realm. He has decided to throw her to the wolves, and I shall enjoy this little game of annihilation.”

John said nothing upon hearing this, merely tucked his chin down as he stared at Monseigneur a little reproachfully.

“What?” demanded Monseigneur, catching John’s frown. “Don’t say you actually feel sorry for her.”

“No, it’s just…” John trailed off. Then: “Well, yes, I do. In a way. Nobody can listen to that kind of story and not feel for her. Besides, annihilation is too strong a word, wouldn’t you say? After all, she’s a lady, and a highly born one at that—”

“Don’t let her sex get in the way of an issue that is actually quite simple, John,” said Monseigneur, his tone clear and incisive as a shard of ice. “She is a person with a ruthless talent for embarking on some astounding feats of social mountaineering and who has made it quite plain that she is a danger to Gaaldinian interests.”

John sighed gently in resignation. Seeing how it may be the reason behind his vehemence, perhaps it would not do to ask Monseigneur what he thought or felt about being shunted aside by this daring, uppity woman as she proceeded with her outrageously ambitious scheme of getting the King of Gaaldine to marry her. Not that Monseigneur felt anything but contempt for the woman. That much was clear to John, at least. He refused to dwell on his feeling of relief and reassurance at the thought.

“Well then, I see you’ve made up your mind,” John finally murmured. “I don’t suppose anything I say will help you change it.”

Monseigneur stared at him from across his work table. “You need not worry about things that are beyond you, John,” he said. “Rather, focus on the tasks given to you. Time is not on our side, and we have yet to test the antidote. And then there’s the oil.”
Monseigneur’s gaze changed, turned palpable as a caress even as it continued to bore into John. “We have only a fortnight left before I leave,” he said, voice deepening ever so slightly, “and it usually takes my mother’s people that amount of time to produce her rose oil. I would suggest you hurry up with yours.”

John swallowed around the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. “There are faster ways to turn out a good medicinal oil,” was all he could think to say.

“Just make sure it’s also palatable,” said Monseigneur before he turned his attention back to his experiments, leaving John slack-mouthed as he realized the full import of Monseigneur’s words.

It took John a while to get it done.

The easiest way to make medicinal oil was to add in whatever ingredient one needed and let it sit in the jar of oil, under the sun, for at least two weeks. But they didn’t have time for that, so John would have to create his medicinal oil by heating its components. It would take at least an entire afternoon.

At first, his other chores kept him from working on it immediately. There were always other things to take care of first: other people’s illnesses to look into, other people’s medicines to make. Even for a royal household as small as Monseigneur’s (his people numbered less than a hundred), there was always somebody who needed John’s attention, something that took him away from this particular chore. And knowing what it was going to be used for, John could not bring himself to ask Mike to help make it for him.

It was only a day or two later, when John realized that Monseigneur was waiting for it before he would consent to do anything with John in bed, that John finally settled down to make the oil.

Of all the things that John ought to have known about Monseigneur, this must surely be the first and foremost: it was never a good thing to keep Monseigneur waiting. For anything.

“You still don’t have it, then,” said Monseigneur flatly just as they prepared for bed one night.

John cleared his throat and after an uncomfortable pause, said, “We…we need to talk.”

Monseigneur’s tone was lethargically bored as he asked, “Talk about what?”

You know what, John wanted to say crossly.

It.

The thing they were about to engage in. The S-word. The act universally condemned as immoral, sinful; the very same one that had condemned the inhabitants of two notorious biblical towns to fire and brimstone from a wrathful God. Gaaldinian society might be far more permissive than its Angrian counterpart, but surely, even Gaaldinians would think to draw the line here.

But may God have mercy on his soul, this was not the problem plaguing John; not exactly, anyway. No matter what his upbringing would lead him to believe, no matter how much he himself might think it wrong or sinful, he wanted it with this man as he had never wanted it with anyone else; but they needed to discuss the particulars. Because even though he’d already informed Monseigneur of his preference, it did not look as though Monseigneur was the type of man who would quietly give in and let John have his way with him.

Or would he?
All this went through John’s mind in less than a second, but Monseigneur seemed to have read his thoughts in his eyes and, as always, caught the gist of the problem.

“You need not worry about any ideas I might entertain about forcing myself on you,” drawled Monseigneur. “I won’t have to; at the end of this particular exercise, it is more likely that I’ll have you begging for it. Begging for me.”

John swallowed hard as Monseigneur’s words licked through him like tongues of flame, stoking the need that lay like smoldering embers in his loins.

“Really? You’ll have me begging?” said John, brows raised, trying desperately for nonchalance. It was the best that he could do, considering that he was very nearly at a loss for words.

“You will enjoy it, John,” promised Monseigneur, his voice like black silk. "I will be sure to make you love it."

Damn it, how had the man come up so close? John had not really noticed Monseigneur’s gradual advance, but he was here now, standing just in front of John, head bent forward so that he would only need to tilt it ever so slightly for a kiss. He was so close, a hair’s breadth away from touching John, but not quite.

“It’s going to feel so good,” murmured Monseigneur, lips a scant inch away from John’s as he gazed down at him, “that I will have you screaming for more.”

John was beyond words now, not quite in control of his breathing, much less his thoughts, as his gaze fixed itself upon that mouth with its perfect cupid’s bow upper lip and a tender, generous lower lip that hovered so near and yet was tantalizingly just out of John’s reach.

John would have wanted to capture that mouth with his, but he was afraid Monseigneur—with his ability to elevate the act of torture into an exquisite art form—might withhold it from him.

So John held his breath and waited. Any moment now…

But true to John’s suspicions, Monseigneur had other plans. All of a sudden, his voice changed, grew matter-of-fact as he stepped away and said quite regretfully, “But without the oil everything is pure conjecture. What’s the point of dwelling over something that we can’t actually engage in right now? We will resume this conversation once you’re able to deliver the goods. For now, I see your divan beckons you. Good night, John.”

Fuck him, thought John as he remembered that scene from the previous night with a shake of his head and a rueful smile. Fuck him if he knew all too well how to push John's buttons. Fuck him if the man could oh, so skillfully whet John’s appetite with a few choice words and then leave him hanging.

And fuck him if he, John, did not fall for it hook, line and sinker. He would be lying if he said he did not want Monseigneur now.

So now here he was, inside Mike’s little workroom just behind the glass house where Mike cooked his medicines. Letting out a deep, shaky sigh to calm himself, John turned his attention back to the bowl of almonds he was crushing before him with a mortar and pestle.

He had just placed the small pot containing the mixture of sallet oil and almond paste over the hearth when the Lady Molly came in, dragging Billy by the wrist.

“He’s ill and he doesn’t even want you to know about it,” said Molly plaintively, coming straight to
"It's just a little fever," protested Billy, the pink flush on his cheeks darkening to a deep wine red. "It's nothing, really."

"It could be nothing, it could be something," John replied. "How long has it been going on?"

"Just a few hours," replied Billy reluctantly as he slumped tiredly into a chair beside John.

"Hmm. Well, Molly was right to bring you in," said John, placing a hand on Billy's forehead to feel his temperature. "We wouldn't want you to be sick just when you're about to leave for Glasstown with Monseigneur."

Billy looked discomfited. Molly said, in a tone filled with I told you so, "I'll be in the glass house. I need to ask Mike for some of that powder he made for Lady Hudson the other day. Then I'm coming back for you. Don't think about leaving without me."

Billy seemed to deflate the moment they were alone.

"It's no good, John, sir," he said, anguished. "Do you see how she regards me? I'm no more than a brother to her. A younger brother."

John sighed. Indeed, the road had not been smooth ever since he had decided to delve into the youth's attachment to the Lady Molly, obvious to everyone except the lady herself.

Upon their return to the Lair, John took pity when he saw the boy reduced to his usual state of blushing incoherence after Molly had favored him with a few words of welcome. He pulled Billy aside and said, "So. When are you going to tell her something of your feelings?"

It took Billy a while to recover from his surprise, but he finally managed to pull enough words together to inquire very shyly, "Has she...has she said anything to you about me?"

"No," John admitted. "But that doesn't mean she doesn't feel anything for you. You will have to be the one to coax the words and the feelings out from her."

For a moment, he feared he had been a little too forward with his suggestion. If Billy were to stick to his strict upbringing as a knight-in-training, he would insist on the chivalric ideal of worshipping his lady love from afar.

Instead, he said resignedly, "I know she does not care for me. She already has someone else in her heart—someone far worthier of her regard and affections. She is blameless in her choice. She doesn't even see me."

And that was what John was afraid of. That "someone" was the reason why he had started this entire campaign— to steer Molly away from what was sure to be inevitable heartbreak. Monseigneur did not care for hearts so freely given to him; he wanted them plundered—surrendered to him after he'd successfully laid siege on their hapless owners.

So John replied, "She sees you. She just doesn't know what's going on with you. You'll have to show her."

And now this.

John looked at Billy as he drooped in his chair like a wilted flower and said, "Well, of course she's going to try to be an older sister to you if you haven't more sense than she does. Why didn't you tell
me you're not feeling well?"

Billy shook his head obstinately. "It's really nothing, sir. It will pass."

John nodded. "I will mix you a tonic, and then I want you to lie down for the rest of the afternoon. Don't worry about your chores. I will tell Mon—"

"No."

John stared at Billy, at the vehemence of that single uttered word. After a moment, Billy continued, voice quietly beseeching, "Please don't tell him."

Seeing the boy's genuine distress, John let the matter drop; for now.

"The tonic. Then bed," he said.

~~~~~~~~@~~~~~~~~

"The antidote is amazing, John," said Monseigneur as he paced about the bedchamber that night. "Poisoned mushrooms, deadly nightshade, hemlock, even wolfsbane— everything just clears away the moment the antidote is introduced."

John watched him and said nothing, merely giving a noncommittal grunt. He could feel his heart rate picking up as he gripped the vial of fresh oil in one hand, partially hidden away from view by his nightshirt.

"Of course, we will need to try it on live subjects," continued Monseigneur, oblivious as John gingerly made his way over to stand beside the bed. "I will need Eustace to—"

The flow of words from Monseigneur's mouth came to an abrupt end when John tossed the slender vial of oil onto the middle of the bed, with its pristine, snow-white sheets.

There was absolute silence as time slowly trickled away, moment by moment, while Monseigneur gazed at the delicate glass vial in front of him in deep thought and John stared at Monseigneur's shuttered features, his heart slamming wildly away in his chest.

"I-It's…" John stuttered as he watched Monseigneur finally stretch out a steady, unhurried hand towards the bottle. "It's umm…you said…and I—"

John's mouth suddenly seemed too dry for speech and he thought it best to stop talking altogether. He cleared his throat roughly, gulping the rest of his words down before he made a complete and obviously nervous fool of himself.

"Almond," remarked Monseigneur softly, having uncorked the bottle and tipped some of its contents onto the back of his hand. This he lifted to his nose as he sniffed delicately at the oil.

John swallowed. "You…you said something about making it palatable," he said, voice so faint that it was almost a whisper.

"Indeed I did," agreed Monseigneur, surveying John with a sly smile. "What are you waiting for, then? Lie down, John, and let's see just how good you've made this oil to be."

John took in a huge breath and let it out slowly. "Right," he said. "About that…"

"What is it this time?" Monseigneur asked, the first tones of impatience etching into his voice at last — impatience echoed in his movements as he started to undress before John.
John was finding it increasingly difficult to focus as Monseigneur gradually bared himself to John's scrutiny without even so much as batting an eyelash, but he pressed on valiantly, "Yes, well, things are not as clear as I'd want them to be in certain—"

John stopped abruptly as Monseigneur reached out a hand to start unbuttoning John's nightshirt.

Monseigneur's smirk widened, voice pitched so low it was almost a purr. "You were saying?"


"You won't need this," murmured Monseigneur as he peeled the nightshirt off John. "Now, to bed with you."

"Sherlock—"

Monseigneur cut off John's protest as he said softly, "Do you trust me, John?"

Did he? He found himself giving Monseigneur a brief nod even as his mind wrestled with the question.

"On the bed. Now."

John resisted the urge to roll his eyes heavenward and quietly got into bed.

"Turn over."

*Oh God.*

"Sherlock—"

"John." Monseigneur leveled him a look: *Obey me.*

John let out a nervous huff and did as he was told, turning so that he was lying on his stomach. Lord, the feel of the crisp sheets beneath him, against his stirring cock. The friction was delicious. It was all he could do not to rub himself against the sheets. He turned his head to the side, away from Monseigneur, breath hitching as he felt the mattress dip, taking in Monseigneur’s weight.

Then, for a while: nothing. John resisted the urge to bring his burning face up and look at Monseigneur. He held his breath, body tense, waiting, wondering: what's wrong...? Why—

“Ah!”

The cool trickle of smooth oil, poured onto the middle of his back, took him by surprise. Immediately, he felt Monseigneur’s hand, with flat palm and five adept fingers, gliding over him, stroking the oil into his skin.

“Why so tense, John?” murmured Monseigneur as his other hand joined in on his languid ministrations. "It’s just a massage."

It took some effort for John to snort out a laugh. He would have wanted to say something witty or caustic, but his thoughts were rapidly deserting him. Instead, he heard himself muttering, “Ohh. That’s good. Christ, that’s good.”

“John.” Monseigneur’s voice was a low ripple of sound—hushed, reverent. “Marvellous John.”

John’s eyes flitted closed as he took in the warm, subtle smell of the oil that was the fruit of his labors
for an entire afternoon. He thought about telling Monseigneur that he ought to be the one massaging him, but his thoughts were dim and half-formed, flitting inconsequentially in his head as his body took over, responding instinctively to Monseigneur’s hypnotic touch.

Gradually, he started to relax beneath Monseigneur’s skilled hands that knew how to squeeze and knead and stroke. He let Monseigneur explore for a while, willing his flesh to go pliant underneath his touch, until Monseigneur’s hands grew bolder, until they glided down to cup the globes of John’s arse.

John tensed immediately, and he would have made to rise if Monseigneur had not bent down to kiss him low on his sacrum.

“Sherlock, no—” John’s voice held a thin, sharp edge of panic.

“Hush.” Monseigneur’s lips moved against John’s oil-slicked skin even as his hands started to knead the firm flesh of John’s buttocks.

John gave an audible gulp, clenching fistfuls of the sheets as he felt Monseigneur's open-mouthed kisses trailing dangerously farther down.

He could do this.

Yes, he could. He was a soldier; he’d faced down burly opponents almost twice his size, opponents who would have had no compunction in driving their sharp swords into him. What was Monseigneur’s sensual invasion of his body compared to that?

He just needed to relax and take whatever Monseigneur was willing to give him.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he felt himself start to tremble, to shake his head from side to side as he felt Monseigneur gently parting his firm flesh, felt his breath warm and moist on the newly exposed crevice.

Oh God, no.

He couldn’t submit to this.

In a flash, John was up and pulling away from Monseigneur’s grasp. “I’m…I’m sorry,” he gasped. “I can’t.”

Surprisingly enough, Monseigneur did not attempt to restrain him. He stayed where he was, kneeling in front of John, shoulders tense and hunched, looking as though he might launch himself at John any moment, or throw him off his bed. He did neither. Instead, he devoured John with a silent, hungry look.

Well fuck, thought John, completely mortified. Now he'd disappointed him, and they hadn't even begun yet.

“You promised you wouldn’t force yourself,” he whispered.

“So I did,” said Monseigneur at last.

“I don’t want you to stop,” said John hurriedly, a little wildly, words tumbling out of his mouth as he tried to rein in the panic that had been set loose in his mind like a weasel in a chicken coop. “It’s just...this is just too much, too soon, and I—”
“John.” Monseigneur’s voice broke into his verbal hemorrhage.

John swallowed his words as he forced himself to look at Monseigneur. “Yeah?”

“Shut up,” said Monseigneur darkly as he leaned in to take John’s mouth with his own in a wet, molten caress.

John gave a heavy sigh of relief as he let Monseigneur take possession of his mouth. This. Yes, this. This was something he could work with, something with which he was familiar. So was the feeling of Monseigneur’s body draping over his.

There were no more protests as Monseigneur kissed his way down the arch of John’s throat, lingering to bathe his nipples with saliva before he sat up to pour more oil on John’s chest.

“Good?” breathed Monseigneur.

His voice was close to failing him, so John merely bit his lip and nodded.

“I want you to have faith in me, John,” whispered Monseigneur as he bent down to trail his lips along the same path his hands had just taken, avoiding John’s arousal with ruthless discipline. “You realize you can trust me completely, don’t you? Don’t you?”

Wordlessly, John nodded. He was not sure if he really meant it, but at this point, John was ready to agree with Monseigneur on everything save the act he had in mind.

“We shall see. I shall bring you to the test soon. But right now…” Monseigneur sat back, spreading John’s legs apart as he bent to kiss the inside of one muscular, quivering thigh. “Tell me what you want, John.”

A gusty exhalation that was almost a moan, and John said in a voice that was not quite his own, “I want to be inside you. Let me fuck you, Sherlock.”

He stopped just short of saying please, but Monseigneur smiled all the same at his tone, desperate and breathy with need, already almost begging.

“My John certainly has a way with words,” intoned Monseigneur as he lifted the vial of almond oil, now reduced to nearly half, and tipped a generous helping onto John’s shaft, achingly erect and flushed with arousal.

John could not help but toss his head back, hissing in a breath of delight as Monseigneur slicked the oil onto his cock, the motion of his fingers efficient and precise. Monseigneur poured a dollop more onto his fingers and reached behind to prepare himself. He made to stop John from rising and taking him in his arms, and a frisson went through John as he suddenly realized that Monseigneur meant to ride him.

“Ready,” whispered Monseigneur as he moved to straddle John, muscular legs gripping John’s hips on either side securely as he took John in hand and guided himself slowly down over John’s straining erection.

A wave of deep, sensual pleasure rippled through John as he felt Monseigneur’s body accepting him inch by slow, delicious inch; the slick, warm tightness gradually encasing his shaft was incredible. John found his hands tightening on the firm flesh of Monseigneur’s hips. Still, Monseigneur continued to take him in, sinking down, down until John was buried within his warm, waiting body to the hilt. Then and only then did he stop moving.
Panting breathlessly, John blinked up at Monseigneur and found him to be far from unaffected: a
delicate blush colored Monseigneur’s chest, his neck and his masked face as John felt that long, lean
body trembling ever so minutely against his, all around him.

“John…” Monseigneur’s voice was no longer cool and composed. The tortured bliss of a man
impaled was in those deep, guttural tones. His breathing was not quite steady. “…You’re inside
me…oh, John.”

John licked his lips, his voice edged with urgency as he whispered, “Can I move?”

Monseigneur shook his head: Not yet…

“Sherlock…” breathed John, feeling Monseigneur clench his inner muscles around him as he settled
more fully into position. “God, so beautiful…fuck—!”

John drew in a startled breath as Monseigneur started a small, experimental, grinding motion with his
hips, like the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tides just outside the window of the tower overlooking the
sea.

“Do you feel that?” Monseigneur’s voice was soft as a lullaby.

“Yes. God, so good.”

The rhythm gradually picked up, turned into a gentle, rocking movement while Monseigneur’s body
gradually acclimated to his lover’s flesh as it pierced him. Placing both hands on John’s chest,
Monseigneur leaned down to tease John’s slightly open mouth with his.

“Now,” he whispered against John’s lips. “Now, John.”

John needed no further encouragement; he gripped Sherlock by his hips and thrust up savagely.

They quickly established a rhythm, fast and hard, full of delicious unexpected pauses that merely
brought their shared need into sharper focus. Monseigneur took John’s hand to his cock, encasing
himself in John’s solid grip even as he took John’s flesh deep inside him, utterly without mercy to
himself or his lover.

The pleasure intensified as Monseigneur’s initial hesitation quickly dispelled and he came to riding
John with the same masterful assurance as he would ride the Beast.

“Beautiful, so goddamn beautiful,” John muttered, eyes locked onto Monseigneur’s own even as his
lips curled back in a feral snarl. And it was then that John first saw it—a clear, steady light behind
Monseigneur’s gaze even as it blazed blue and hot like hellfire. But what it meant was beyond John
for the moment; he could no longer make sense of anything other than the savage urgency building
between them, swiftly escalating until it was beyond their control.

Until the moment was suddenly upon them.

“John!” Monseigneur shouted as he threw his head back, his body arching in unconscious, splendid
grace as he strained over John.

John felt the warm splatter of his lover’s semen on his chest, felt his body’s rhythm shatter at
Monseigneur’s release—the spasms, everywhere: deep within his lover’s body, against his entire
length, within himself, bursting forth in a blinding rush of pure sensation so that he never even
remembered shouting as he came, and came, and came.
John recovered soon enough to find Monseigneur’s hand still clamped loosely over his mouth.

“I told you I’d make you scream,” said Monseigneur, his voice a deep, exhausted rumble as he took his hand away and settled down in John’s arms.

“It was one of those moments,” conceded John. “You’ve not been able to make me beg though.”

A tilt of Monseigneur’s lips as he replied, “I will. Soon.”

There was a quiet, contented pause.

“Although you were right,” sighed John. “I did enjoy it.”

“Just admit it: you loved it,” said Monseigneur.

“But it’s a sin,” said John, his gaze turning grave as it met Monseigneur’s unrepentant eyes. “That’s wicked, forbidden sex right there.”

“My dear John,” said Monseigneur, trying his best for a nonchalant drawl. “The unique and supreme pleasure of love is the certainty that one is doing evil.”

John stared at Monseigneur for a moment. Is that what this is? He wanted to ask. Is this love?

Try as he might, he could not bring himself to say his thoughts out loud for fear that Monseigneur might deny it and take it all back. Suddenly, reluctantly, he remembered that look in Monseigneur's eyes once again just when he had been about to come— that tiny gleam of clarity that belied the state of a man on the edge of mindless orgasm.

Sin or not, this— what they had right now— was so new, so fragile, that John was afraid of even closing his fingers around it lest it should break and crumble into pieces in his hand. He wanted to hold onto it a bit longer before subjecting it to any kind of inspection.

Monseigneur's words broke into his thoughts.

“Does it bother you?” Monseigneur was saying, casting John a searching glance.

After a moment, John shook his head. No.

He was starting to mean it too, and that was the most frightening thing of all.

Monseigneur gazed at John for a moment longer, his thoughts running along quite different lines from those of his lover.

His task with John was almost done. He'd very nearly tamed his Highlander— John was almost entirely his. Just a day or two more, and he'd have John's heart on a platter if he so wished. His conquest was so very nearly complete; and not a moment too soon.

Just a day or two more, and John would let him into his body, into very his soul.

That, Monseigneur would later realize, was the first mistake he'd ever made concerning John. And no matter how much he turned this incident over in his mind in hindsight, he was left with the conclusion that there had been no way to anticipate its near-disastrous consequences.

But all of that lay in the future.
For now, Monseigneur glided two fingers down John’s wet, glistening chest before lifting them to John’s lips to anoint him with oil and his desire.

“My powerful warrior,” Monseigneur said.

Author's Notes: There are two methods of making medicinal oil: the cold infusion method which is quite easy but involves a long waiting period as described above, or the hot-infusion method employed by John, which takes just a few hours but would involve more work, as care must be exercised to prevent the oil (sallet oil which was probably olive oil during Medieval times) from burning while it is being gently heated in a water bath with the herbs and other materials used. There is an excellent webpage where we can read more on how to make Medieval style scented oils and waters. (article by Jadwiga Zajaczkowa)

I will not be able to accurately reflect the true state of religious morality as it existed during Medieval times in this story. However, some description of Medieval views on faith and sin would be necessary as we focus on the influence of religion and the almighty (and very political) Church on people’s lives during that time.

Sodomy, the S-word, that sin of all sins, has a very long history that stretches to biblical times. Today, it's used to pertain more specifically to anal sex, but in olden times, it was an umbrella term that covered a wide range of sexual activities that "deviated" from normal penile-vaginal intercourse (e.g. anal, oral sex, bestiality, etc.), and various societies and religions have dealt with it in various ways, mostly in overwhelmingly negative terms because of its perceived departure from the "natural order" of things.

During Medieval times, when the only Church-sanctioned sexual position was the missionary one and sexual intercourse was riddled with a minefield of rules and swathed in layer after layer of taboo (i.e. to be performed strictly for procreational purposes without much pleasure involved), the act of sodomy, of "wicked and forbidden sex", carried extremely harsh punishments which will be discussed in the story in future chapters. I have yet to decide just how faithfully I would want to replicate Medieval mores here, but definitely, I will need to veer off a bit from the actual state and make Gaaldinian society and culture more permissive and morally flexible, if we are to have the fun and angst that I have in mind for future chapters (and I promise there will be lots of those in store).

The two notorious biblical towns mentioned in this chapter are, of course, Sodom and Gomorrah, although they were not the only towns destroyed for their wickedness. In Abrahamic traditions, Sodom and Gomorrah have become synonymous with impenitent sin, and their fall with a proverbial manifestation of God's wrath. (Source: Wikipedia)
Chapter 32

Special Thanks: To wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up) for her excellent beta, as always. Thanks so much for keeping the action in line, dear!

Trigger warning for cruelty to animals (rats, in this case)— for science. Also, please check updated tags.

More author’s notes at the end.

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What was a fortnight? John wondered.

It was nothing but two weeks, or fourteen days. Fourteen short, extremely busy days to cram in everything that needed to be accomplished before Monseigneur was summoned to Court. Fourteen days that seemed like mere moments as each day sped by— brilliant, evanescent moments forever etched into the mind as a series of memories. John would look back on them as some of the most interesting episodes of his life because he was starting to really know Monseigneur.

Of course, the work did not get any easier. Monseigneur remained as demanding as ever, his overbearing nature severely testing John’s patience on more than one occasion, beginning with that episode concerning Billy and his mysterious little fevers.

What first aroused John’s suspicion was the timing of Billy’s “illness.” After John had first dosed him with a tonic made from Southernwood, Billy would be well in the mornings, but then a touch of fever would grip him sometime after midday and would leave him just as suddenly by late afternoon.

John had never seen anything like it. For a while, he worried that it might be an early manifestation of something serious, like the intermittent, wasting fevers brought about by the bad air found in swampy marshlands. Yet John felt this was altogether something different. After the third day of this strange phenomenon, not to mention a certain evasiveness in Billy’s actions that only served to sharpen John’s suspicions, he decided a bit of aggressive snooping was in order.

For one thing, Billy would not drink John’s tonic in his presence, citing one excuse or another and promising he would drink the preparation after his tasks were done. He always presented the empty cup to John afterward but John was having none of it.

This time around, John set the goblet of freshly prepared medicine down in front of Billy and left him without a word, closing the door carefully behind him and counting one, two, three, four and then five seconds before he abruptly launched himself back into the room just in time to find Billy emptying the goblet outside the nearest window.

Billy’s wide-eyed and slack-jawed look of complete surprise would have been funny if John had not been so dismayed, even a little angry. Wordlessly, he made a small, sweeping gesture at the window with his hand: What are you doing?

“J-John, sir…” the youth stammered out. “I-It’s not what you think—”

“Oh? What am I supposed to think when I find you throwing your medicine out the window?” John wanted to know.

Billy hung his head, a flush rising to his cheeks.
“Either you tell me what’s going on now, or we’re taking this to Monseigneur,” said John, frowning, his tone harsher than any he had ever used when addressing Billy.

Billy merely continued to stand there, petrified. After a moment, John shook his head and turned on his heel. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he already knew.

He just knew Monseigneur had something to do with this.

John was deaf to Billy’s pleas as they went down to the dungeons in search of the master culprit. “You’re never disobedient without good reason,” said John when Billy asked why Monseigneur should be dragged into the situation. “You would never throw away the medicine I gave you unless you’ve received specific orders from someone to do so, and God only knows who that might be.”

Strangely enough, the huge iron door that led to Monseigneur’s underground workplace was closed, although it was not bolted from the inside.

John shoved the door open, and that was when he first saw them.

The live subjects.

At least a dozen pairs of black, beady eyes glowered at John from behind their prisons. The thin, high squeaks and screeches pierced the ear and echoed through the hollow chambers of the dungeons as the unfortunate things scrabbled around madly in their cages, uselessly seeking any means of escape.

Monseigneur raised his head from a dissected body in front of him and said quite calmly, “don’t you ever knock?”

“What the hell are you doing!” exclaimed John as he peered at the caged rats in front of him incredulously.

“The subjects, John,” said Monseigneur. “They arrived this morning courtesy of Eustace.”

“Subjects!” John could feel the blood rushing to his head at the word as something—a hideous realization—suddenly came to mind. For a moment he was too overcome to say anything.

Monseigneur flicked a glance from John to Billy and merely said, “I see. You may go, Billy.”

After Billy’s departure, Monseigneur turned to John and said, “all right. You have questions.”

John shook his head and tried to control his breathing. Finally, he ground out, “why?”

“Why what?” Monseigneur’s pale gaze was coolly amused as it fixed on John’s face, red with accusation and furious bewilderment. “I’d advise you to choose your words very carefully, John. Strive to ask the right question, yes?”

John bit his lip hard as he reined himself in, then said, “I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Now where did you get that idea?” replied Monseigneur softly.

John stabbed a finger at the door. “Is Billy your subject, too?” he asked bluntly.

Monseigneur’s gaze remained steady. “Is that what this looked like to you?”

“His fevers are too regularly timed for them to be natural,” argued John. “They were induced. You’ve been giving him…something.”
“Good,” murmured Monseigneur encouragingly, maddeningly. “Go on.”

John could not bring himself to say the word, exactly. So he asked instead, “What are you giving him?”

“No poison, if that’s what you cannot bring yourself to say out loud,” Monseigneur said, “but close. More of a seven part solution of an extremely weak mixture extracted from a combination of poisons. And yes, you heard right, so there is no need for you to make me repeat myself by saying ‘what?? —’”

John bit back the very word and rephrased his question. “Why?”

“Because I’ve given Billy a task at which he cannot fail,” said Monseigneur in a tone that chided John for failing to arrive at this conclusion by himself. “There are grave risks attached to it and he must be protected as early as now.”

Protected?

John stared at Monseigneur incredulously for a moment. “So you weren’t…experimenting on him?” he said hesitantly.

Monseigneur’s eyes flitted closed as he gave an exaggerated sigh. “You’ve never heard of the concept of poison conditioning before, John? By giving daily, miniscule doses of a specially extracted poison we are actually conditioning the body to better resist—”

“We do have our own methods at…poison conditioning, if that’s what you call it,” interrupted John brusquely, his face a dull red.

“Ah, now you’re embarrassed,” observed Monseigneur as he gave John a narrow look. “You actually thought I’m capable of poisoning my own page to suit my needs.”

John looked away, unsure of what to say, because yes, the thought did occur to him.

Monseigneur spared him from answering as he continued quite gently, “It’s a perfectly sound analysis, given what you had to work with, although you still arrived at the wrong conclusion. You ought to have revised your opinion the moment you saw the real subjects. You need not worry about offending me by giving voice to it though. I can assure you that I am indeed capable of many things of which you may not approve.”

John stared at him open-mouthed before another thought hit him. “Wait,” he said. “You. That time you were poisoned in the camp. You’ve been taking these daily doses as well, haven’t you? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have recovered so fast from Nightshade poisoning, not even with my antidote. I wondered about that.”

“Yes.” Monseigneur smiled, keen pleasure lighting his eyes at John’s little deduction.

John stared at him— this intriguingly contradictory creature before him— and felt, not for the first time, that strangely disturbing tug around his heart.

“Although that little incident in the garrison has left some important questions as to my would-be assassin’s true intentions,” said Monseigneur.

“Oh?”

“Why would anyone choose a poison as obvious as Nightshade?”
“It wasn’t obvious, initially,” John pointed out. “Certainly not to Lestrade or Anderson.”

“But it was, to an experienced healer such as yourself. The effects were slow, dramatic and unmistakable. Why choose something so easily detectable when we can have any number of subtle poisons that will kill far more quickly and efficiently?”

John shook his head, at a loss. “You’re saying he doesn’t want to kill you?” he ventured.

Monseigneur tilted his head. “Of course he does,” he said dryly. “But not then.”

“So what was that, then?” John wanted to know. “A warning?”

Monseigneur’s smile widened. “A flirtation,” he said softly.

John frowned, but Monseigneur had already moved on. “You need not worry about Billy. His body will adjust to my formula in a few days and the fever will go away. Now tell me about your methods of poison conditioning,” he said, resuming his dissection.

So John told him how they used certain poisonous and medicinal mushrooms to bolster weak constitutions, and to treat melancholia and sleeplessness. In olden days, the wise women had used them in rituals to induce hallucinations. He told Monseigneur about the need to make sure the preparations were just right.

“There are some mushrooms which can induce a sleep state so profound that it can very easily be mistaken for death,” said John.

“And would you be able to make such a preparation if I asked you to?” said Monseigneur.

John grinned. “I already dosed you with a very weak draught of it, back when you were still recovering in the garrison, remember?” he said.

Monseigneur grinned back, a little devil dancing appreciatively in the pale blue depths of his eyes.

And all of a sudden, it was all John could do not to picture having this man here, spread out beneath him on one of the worktables. He did not know how it came to be, but lately, he could not stop himself from thinking of Monseigneur in these terms whenever they were together.

John cleared his throat as he hastily bundled away that disturbing, unclean thought and nodded at the experiment in front of him. “So this is how you’re testing the antidote,” he said. “What have you found out so far?”

“All good things to those who wait,” promised Monseigneur.

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“Tell me.”

Whenever John looked back on those fourteen days, he would remember those two words that almost always presaged the exchanges between Monseigneur and himself.

“Tell me,” urged Monseigneur very late one night as he had John writhing on the bed, bringing him to the edge of orgasm with nothing but his mouth and hands. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Hot,” gasped John, unable to be more articulate as Monseigneur took him into his mouth once more. “Your mouth. So wet. Uhn, fuck, just like that. Faster. Oh. Ohhhh God, yes…!”
And afterward, when they lay tired and spent, Monseigneur said, seemingly out of the blue, “tell me about your childhood, John.”

John shook his head. “It’s…it’s all a blank. I don’t remember anything from that time,” he said, voice gone gravelly, his breathing still erratic.

He told Monseigneur about his earliest surviving memory, of being tired, frightened and hungry, blood running down the side of his face from a head wound as he walked, dazed, along the edge of the Highland forest. He could not remember anything else before that.

“I probably wouldn’t have lasted long if I did not stumble across Mathair,” he said. “The rest I think you already know. It’s not much of a life story.”

“Oh, but I think it is,” said Monseigneur. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that at the very least, you’re probably from a well-to-do, even a noble, family? You barely escaped some nameless tragedy early in your life, but while your mind has shut down and utterly refused to remember it, your past remains very much with you.”

John gaped at him. “How can you possibly know all that about me?” he said.

“Because you can read,” said Monseigneur.

There was a short, stunned silence as John took that very simple fact in. “Yes…I can,” he said very slowly.

He had never thought about it before. Life in the Highlands and in the Angrian armies had not given him many opportunities to exercise that skill, and yet here, in Monseigneur’s household, he had taken to books the way a fish would take to water and he had never really even noticed it.

It was most disturbing.

He felt Monseigneur watching him. “Aren’t you curious to find out where you’re really from, John?”

There was something about Monseigneur’s gaze just then that gave John pause before he answered quite truthfully, “no. Not really.”

Strangely, that seemed to satisfy Monseigneur.

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“Tell me.”

It was John this time.

He stared in amused puzzlement as Monseigneur gave a low, full-throated chuckle after having read a letter from the King.

“His Majesty has met his bride,” announced Monseigneur, his tone unmistakably carrying more than just a touch of *schadenfreude*.

“And?” John prompted.

“He’s got his work cut out for him,” said Monseigneur. “The Angrian contingent arrived safely in Glasstown a few days ago. Your queen and all her noble ladies came in wearing heavy veils on their faces, to the consternation of everyone at Court. It has become the main topic of conversation in town.”
John was intrigued. “Why would they wear veils over their faces? It’s not the custom of our ladies to do so.”

“Exactly,” said Monseigneur. “When pressed, the queen replied that she would only show her face if her future husband would deign to show her his first.”

“And did he?”

“It’s too late to cancel the wedding celebrations and send her back to Angria now just because of one tiny tiff, so of course he did,” answered Monseigneur gleefully. “He had to meet her privately in a secluded room, just the two of them, to bare their faces to each other. It was, he said, a most uncomfortable moment. She asked him about our quaint custom of going around with our faces covered, her only experience of masks being the charming Angrian practice of locking women’s faces up in Scold’s Bridles. As you can see, the culture shock is already out in full force.”

John grimaced as he thought about the Scold’s Bridle. “That’s rather provocative,” he said. “So how did the King take it?”

“The King is prepared to be amused by his bride. What with her sizeable dowry and the whole of Angria thrown into the bargain, I daresay it will take more than that to shake him off,” said Monseigneur. “At any rate, your queen has managed to capture his interest. We must admit that is rather ingenious of her.”

John frowned but forbore to comment on Monseigneur’s words. Instead, he said, “will she be required to wear a mask after she’s married?”

Monseigneur was already growing bored with the subject. “That is for the King to decide.”

“You’re staring again, John.” Monseigneur did not even trouble to lift his head from his letter.

“Your mother wears a mask,” John pointed out.

“That is different. Gondal and Gaaldine have long been marrying into each other’s royal houses. We have many similar customs and traditions. The wearing of masks among royalty actually originated from Gondal.”

John said nothing, imagining what it must have been like for the Queen Mother on her wedding, more than three decades ago. It must have been a frightening experience to be removed from one’s family and country at such a tender age and married off to a man one had never seen before in one’s entire life. In the case of the Queen Mother, at least her marriage had been a happy one. It was common knowledge that the late King, for all his eccentricities, had adored her, and she, in turn, had fulfilled her obligations by producing an heir and a spare for the realm.

And now the entire process was to begin all over again with another royal wedding.

John looked at Monseigneur thoughtfully as he bent over a piece of parchment. A full minute passed before he realized he was openly studying Monseigneur’s profile, marveling at the bold, imperious lines of his features and wondering what Monseigneur would say if he, John, were to ask him to take his mask off.

Just for him.

“You’re staring again, John.” Monseigneur did not even trouble to lift his head from his letter.

John attempted a nonchalant shrug as he roused himself from his reverie. “Why? Don’t you like people looking at you?” he said.
This time, Monseigneur lifted his gaze to meet John’s squarely. “No,” he said.

“Show me.”

They were in the dungeons after Monseigneur had wrapped up his experiments with the rats. The antidote was a success, as far as Monseigneur could ascertain. He had only a few drops of it to spare, and so he had tested the worst of the poisons on the hapless prisoners.

And they had all lived—all the rats given the antidote.

All the untreated rats that had died of the various poisons had been dissected, their innards prodded carefully and inspected for the poisons’ effects before they were discarded. John, grim of face and tight of lip, had not said anything when Monseigneur had cut those bodies up. He continued not to say anything as he brought in a needle and some thread and proceeded to sew them all up before they were taken away.

Monseigneur took one look at his solemn activity and said, “Your abounding sentiment is truly overwhelming, John, although one wonders what the point of this futile exercise is?”

John lifted his head and gazed at Monseigneur levelly. “You’re not the one tasked to get rid of these creatures,” he said. “Eustace is. Have some thought for the poor man. Does he really need to dispatch these creatures with their entrails hanging all over the place?”

Monseigneur’s lips twitched, but no words emerged from his mouth. Instead, he gave a small grunt and settled himself down beside John.

“You can sew,” said Monseigneur, an odd note in his voice, and John remembered that “proper” Gaaldiniaan doctors considered surgery as a practice best left to barbers and butchers. That kind of class snobbery among medical men was downright foolish, as far as John was concerned.

“Yeah, well, we don’t really have much choice in the battlefield, do we?” said John.

Monseigneur was silent for a moment as he watched John at work. Then he said, “Show me.”

“What? You want to learn how to sew up wounds?”

Monseigneur nodded.

So John showed him.

“There’s really nothing to it,” said John as he let Monseigneur do a few stitches on his own. “There, you see? That’s actually very neat work right there.”

It was strange, John would think later, that he had not seen it coming then. The needle trembling in Monseigneur’s usually adroit fingers ought to have told him something was wrong. John stared, bewildered, as Monseigneur suddenly let it go.

“You’re right,” Monseigneur said as he stood up abruptly, voice unaccountably tight. “What’s the point of my learning it when I have you around to do it? It’s not as if you’re going anywhere.”

John gaped at him and waited for an explanation that did not come.

“Tell Eustace to exercise due caution when handling the beasts,” Monseigneur said. “Make sure he
burns them.”

With that, he left.

Something was definitely wrong with Monseigneur. His frayed temper got steadily worse and more erratic as the days went by. He refused to say what was bothering him, though John had his suspicions.

Time was simply running out for the man. True to his word, he had not forced himself on John, but John knew it was only a matter of time before Monseigneur would try to claim him.

It was hardly surprising. What astonished John were his own feelings towards that inevitable encounter— how they had gradually changed during the past few days. He could not stop thinking about it during his idle moments.

It had a lot to do with Monseigneur giving himself to John first. That particular act of intimacy was never repeated between them, but it had moved John profoundly. Could he bring himself to return the gesture? Could he allow Monseigneur to claim him at last? He did not know how to feel about it, but he realized perhaps he was now ready to face it.

Face him.

Of course, when the time finally came, it was preceded by a fight between them in the private confines of Moneigneur’s bedchamber. It was not just unsurprising, it was almost predictable. John thought ruefully that they were becoming quite an act.

“Tell me,” John demanded, bristling. “Why did you have to light into Molly like that? She was only trying to teach me how to dance.”

“As a properly brought up young lady she ought not to possess this kind of knowledge,” Monseigneur growled.

“It was just a group dance. There’s nothing improper about it at all,” John argued. “I asked her to teach me. Suppose someone were to ask me to dance at Court—”

“You’re not going to do any dancing at Court,” Monseigneur snapped.

“Why not?”

“Because I won’t allow it!”

John shook his head, undeterred. “Why not?” he prodded.

“Because it displeases me,” said Monseigneur coldly. “You shall not dance with anyone. If I have my way, I will make sure that nobody gets to see you at all.”

Oh.

And just like that, everything fell into place for John.

So this was what it was all about— the light behind Monseigneur’s gaze, his erratic behavior of late; his strange jealousies.
Somewhere along the way, without their realizing it, the tables had turned.

It was so singular, so ridiculous that John had to laugh, and between one breath and the next, the anger inside him vanished, to be replaced by something far more potent. “You bloody little hypocrite,” he found himself saying. “Why don’t you just say it out loud?”

Monseigneur drew away a little, taken aback by the sudden change in John’s tone of voice, his words. “What…did you just say to me?”

“You heard me,” said John as he slowly advanced towards Monseigneur. “Just say what you really want to say.”

“John—”

“I won’t be dancing with anyone,” John said slowly, “unless it happens to be you.”

He stopped just in front of Monseigneur. He shrugged. “Show me, then.”

Monseigneur could not believe his ears. “What?”

“Dance with me. Show me how it’s done when it’s just us.”

Monseigneur sounded appalled: “No.”

“Come on,” coaxed John, smiling. “How hard can it be?”

“In case you haven’t figured it out yet, we won’t be able to have the occasion to dance together at Court, John. So why even make the attempt to learn it?”

“Because,” John said softly, patiently, “I want to dance with you. If we’re not to have a chance at Court, wouldn’t you agree we’d better do it now?”

Monseigneur stared at him as though he had suddenly gone mad. John could not deny the strangeness of this sudden reversal of their usual roles, but he liked it.

He liked it a lot.

He looked down and threaded the fingers of one hand into Monseigneur’s. His other hand he placed lightly on Monseigneur’s shoulder.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Just this once.”

He’d half expected Monseigneur to explode, to shove him away and exclaim that this was farcical to the extreme. Instead, after a very long pause, Monseigneur gave a small, barely perceptible nod.

It was strange to finally get the man to do something, anything, John marveled as they began a small, awkward shuffle in place.

It was strange that they would know each other so intimately and yet be so shy around each other like this; as if they really did not know each other at all until now.

John let Monseigneur take the lead, showing him a simple set of footwork, the way to extend their arms out, hands clasped together even as Monseigneur rested his other hand lightly on John’s back near his waist.

“Swing a little as you step to your side, John,” Monseigneur murmured. “Yes, that’s it.”
John had never danced with anyone like this before, with bodies pressed so close together and his head against Monseigneur’s shoulder. It was not so much a dance as an embrace. John could see why it was so improper, as only Gaaldinian dances could be, yet he wished it would never end.

At last, the movement of their bodies slowed to a stop, yet Monseigneur did not let go. Instead, he lifted his hand from John’s waist to cradle the side of John’s face. John felt Monseigneur’s rough cheek against his for a moment before he felt warm, firm lips graze the side of his mouth.

“John:” a quiet plea.

“Yes. Kiss me,” John breathed as he turned his mouth blindly to meet Monseigneur’s.

Monseigneur did. What started out as a chaste press of lips changed and all the gentleness disappeared as the kiss very quickly intensified. John let Monseigneur plunder his mouth, forcing himself to remain still even as the hunger, held so carefully in check, flared to life deep inside his own body.

He did not know how they got to the bed, only that they were there upon it, and there was nothing but warm, naked flesh beneath eager hands and mouths.

“Now,” murmured Monseigneur against John’s neck. “You will give yourself to me now, John.”

“Yes,” John said, firmly keeping his mounting panic in check. He could do this. He would do this just to see Monseigneur’s face and finally know what he really felt.

Monseigneur did not waste time. “On your knees,” he commanded.

Trembling, John obeyed. He was shaking by the time he felt Monseigneur mouth open kisses down his spine, felt those hard, graceful hands on the flesh of his arse, parting him.

*Relax, just relax,* he frantically told himself as his breathing turned ragged.

The sensation of Monseigneur’s wet tongue against his hole was so unexpected that John gasped out loud.

“Good?” he heard Monseigneur murmur from behind.

“Strange,” he gasped back, willing himself to let go of all the tension holding his body rigid.

Monseigneur must have sensed his efforts, for he said, “That’s it, John. Just let go,” he said. “Let it happen.”

John took a deep breath and then another as he kept still, feeling Monseigneur kiss him slowly open. Pleasure began to uncoil within him, mixing with the sense of strangeness, of residual shame and embarrassment to produce an emotion altogether new, arousing.

At last, he heard Monseigneur say, “I will put a finger in. It might be uncomfortable at first, but don’t fight it.”

John held his breath as he felt a long, oil-slicked digit tease his entrance before it slid into him slowly. Oh, ever so slowly.

Laughter, soft and dark and warm as the night outside, was in Monseigneur’s voice as he said, “breathe, John.”

John’s breath was punched out of him as he felt that finger move slowly in and out. So slow, so
“Christ,” he said, resisting the urge to touch himself, to move against that exploring finger.

He felt Monseigneur withdraw, and then he grunted in surprise and caught the sheets beneath him with his teeth as he felt another finger join the first in its slide back into his body.

God, those long, sensual fingers made John burn in a place so deep as they teased and stroked him open. He should not be feeling such tortured pleasure from their ministrations, yet he did. Breathlessly, he waited for his body to get used to the sensations, but instead of subsiding, they only grew and turned into something more. Oh, so much more, and John could not keep silent any longer.

He moaned out loud.

Monseigneur heard the broken sounds escaping from John’s throat and smiled.

At last.

He had finally broken through the last of John’s defenses.

“Yes,” he murmured as he felt John’s body reacting instinctively to the slow, rhythmic slide of his fingers. John was finally responding to Monseigneur, pushing against his hand as he stealthily rubbed himself against the sheets beneath him. Monseigneur twisted his hand abruptly and his fingers grazed against the small gland inside John; he delighted in the strangled sound of pleasure escaping from his lover’s lips as John bucked hard against him.

“Turn over, John.”

Panting, John eased himself onto his back, groaning as he realized that Monseigneur’s fingers were still buried deep inside him; all this time, he’d never let him go.

“You never realized it would be so good, did you?” whispered Monseigneur tauntingly. “Think how much better it would feel if I were inside you right now.”

Monseigneur watched hungrily as John swallowed and licked his lips. “Do it, then,” he rasped. “Fuck me.”

Monseigneur shook his head. John was not going to have it easy. After he had defied and goaded Monseigneur at every turn all these months, the man was never going to have it easy from him. Monseigneur still had one promise to fulfill.

“Beg for it, John,” he urged.

At those words, John threw his head back, his hands clenching the sheets tightly, the tendons standing out in his neck in bold relief as he tried in vain to writhe away from Monseigneur’s hand. Monseigneur watched as John shook his head violently; Monseigneur could see his mouth straining, working a series of silent words: *Fuck*, most definitely, and what may very well be *bastard*.

But never *please*.

“Beg!” Monseigneur growled as he brought his mouth down to touch the very tip of John’s aching cock, licking the clear moisture that had gathered there.

It was intensely moving to hear John shout. A most delicious sound, made all the more delicious by
the fact that Monseigneur was the cause of it, the only one capable of eliciting such a sound from John, never mind that he tried to muffle it with the back of his hand.

Monseigneur lifted his head from John’s cock and breathed, “Yes. Go ahead, John. I want to hear you say it.”

“Sherlock,” John said hoarsely, his breathing ragged. “I’m going to come. Oh God, I swear I’m going to—”

Muttering a low oath, Monseigneur quickly removed his fingers and his mouth from John. A choking sensation of rage and frustration filled him as all at once he realized he had just reached breaking point when it came to this stubborn, stubborn man.

“John,” he ground out, a world of violence in that single syllable of sound.

John stretched out a hand to him. “Come,” he said.

Monseigneur stared at John and felt everything else recede into insignificance.

“Come and have me now, Sherlock,” John whispered.

Those words, like liquid fire running through Monseigneur’s veins. It wasn’t begging, but it was fucking close. It was enough. At present, Monseigneur could not be bothered with technicalities. Nothing mattered except for a need so primal that Monseigneur found himself powerless to turn away from it, to refuse John when he was finally willing to give himself up.

He had wanted this man for so long. He would have John Watson now or else he would die trying to have him.

With a low growl, Monseigneur complied.

Time seemed to stop, then lurch forward several minutes.

The slick of oil over his cock, the first push into John’s waiting body, the way John threw back his head and hissed in pained pleasure at Monseigneur’s slow yet relentless invasion—all quickly became a thing of the recent past. All he knew was that he was finally inside John’s powerful, compact body, joined at last to this wild, wonderful man.

There was no mistaking the fear, the sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness, the discomfort in John’s eyes. They were all there, yet they were eclipsed by something else.

Resolution. John was resolved. He was afraid, even terrified, but he wanted this, and his eyes told Monseigneur he was going to brave it out.

His brave John.

Perhaps that was what made him throw caution to the wind, Monseigneur would decide, much, much later.

But right now: finally, incredibly, he was inside John, taking him; such a tight, perfect fit. There was no repulsion; instead, there was the feel of John’s arms and legs closing around him, like a tender prison, as he began to thrust and ground against the warm tightness of John, all around him.

John, who was no longer fighting him but accepting him, cherishing him.

The mounting pleasure was excruciating, a thing alive and with a will of its own as Monseigneur felt
John’s clinging walls straining to accommodate him. He wanted— needed— more.

“More,” Sherlock heard John say, as if he had read his mind, as though their thoughts were linked as well. “Harder. Don’t stop.”

How could the man retain the ability to talk at this point? Monseigneur himself had gone silent save for his panting breaths, his face a cruel, rigid mask of lust and abandon, his mind locked in a groove and capable of repeating only one word: More. More. More.

Too late he realized he’d lost himself completely in John Watson.

He couldn’t look away from John’s eyes, dilated now so that they appeared dark in the faint candlelight of the room. John’s look was so open, trusting in a way Monseigneur had never seen before, as though he knew Sherlock now— really knew him, inside and out. In those few moments as they drove each other to completion, there was no Monseigneur and his captive Highlander, no prince and rogue soldier. There was only Sherlock and John.

“Nothing between us,” whispered John as he kissed Sherlock, thrusting his tongue into his lover’s mouth to coax and tease.

Sherlock had never felt so lost, mindlessly giving in to the will of another.

He felt John’s hands on his face; in a moment, John had peeled off his mask.

“No!” Sherlock managed to gasp, but John merely took his face between his hands and kissed him again, deeply, and he suffered, for the first time, that awful sensation of falling.

As from a high cliff, falling down to the jagged rocks and churning waters of the raging sea far below, falling down without any hope of having anything to cling to. He had been falling ever since he’d met this man and he never even knew it.

He had fallen in love.

The realization was perfectly terrifying. He was at a dangerous disadvantage; he was on unfamiliar ground. He realized then what John was really after. John had seen him— seen his naked face just at that point when he was most vulnerable, when he could not lie.

He was in love with John.
It was all too late, for even as everything coalesced in his mind, his orgasm was suddenly upon him — pure, savage delight tearing through his body, his thoughts, bringing in its wake an absolute, blessed silence that engulfed his mind, drowning out all the screams.

Afterward, John very tenderly gathered Sherlock’s wrecked, shuddering frame in his arms and kissed his stunned face, tasting the salt of his sweat on his cheeks and something else entirely.

Tears.

“Sshh,” crooned John, one hand stroking through Sherlock’s damp curls as he buried his head against John’s shoulder. “It’s alright. It’s alright, Sherlock.”

But he knew it wasn’t alright. He hadn’t taken John; John had taken him. How did it happen? How could it happen? He had been so close to the finishing line; victory was within his grasp and yet he had still lost to John at the very last minute. The control he had over John— it was all an illusion, then. It was never his, to begin with. He had lost himself in the entire game of seducing John Watson, and all this time he never imagined that he would be the one seduced.

In the blink of an eye, the game had changed completely.

He was never going to be the same again.

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**Author’s Notes:** The herb, Southernwood, was popular during the Medieval Ages. Its leaves were used to treat wounds and relieve fever. (Source: Health and Medicine in Medieval Europe)

Monseigneur’s poison conditioning method is not a standard practice and does not appear to have any merit as a form of prophylaxis, although several cultures engage in it in one form or another. The concept is lifted from the practice of Mithradates (Mithridates VI of Pontus), mentioned in an earlier chapter.

At first, John feared that Billy may have contracted Malaria, the intermittent fevers associated with the foul air from swamps and marshlands (mal+aria literally means bad air), although this disease is typically found in warmer regions of the world. It would take several centuries more before the true carrier of Malaria is discovered: the mosquito.

~@~

The word "mask" appeared in English in the 1530s, from Middle French masque "covering to hide or guard the face", derived in turn from Italian maschera, from Medieval Latin masca "mask, specter, nightmare". One of the challenges in the study of man is finding the precise derivation of his culture and early activities, with the invention and use of the mask only one area of unsolved inquiry. The use of masks dates back several millennia. It is conjectured that the first masks may have generally been used by primitive man to associate the wearer with some kind of unimpeachable authority, such as "the gods" or to otherwise lend credence to the person's claim on a given social role (hence my decision to have masked royalty in this story).

There will be several allusions to the various functions of masks all throughout this story. This chapter mentions one particular function of masks made popular by Alexandre Dumas’ novel, *The Man in the Iron Mask*. In general, the "mask of shame" (Schandmaske in German) is devised for public humiliation. Particularly uncomfortable types, such as an iron mask (e.g. the scold's bridle) are used as devices for torture or corporal punishment.
A scold's bridle, sometimes called brank's bridle or simply the branks (pictured above), was a punishment device used primarily on women. It was an iron muzzle set in a metal framework that enclosed the head. The bridle-bit (or curb-plate) was about 2 inches long and 1 inch broad, projected into the mouth and pressed down on top of the tongue. The "curb-plate" was frequently studded with spikes, so that if the tongue moved, it inflicted pain and made speaking impossible. Women who were seen as witches, shrews and scolds were forced in public to wear the thing, which was locked onto their heads. For the sake of adding it to the story, I deliberately moved this device several centuries ahead of its time—its first recorded appearance was in Scotland in 1567. (Source: Wikipedia)

During Medieval times, medical practitioners were grouped according to different classes based on their training. The Medieval Ages saw the rise of the first medical schools in Europe, and the Physicians, with their formal academic training, were on top of this hierarchy and did not engage in surgical procedures. They left that practice to the Surgeons, inferior to Physicians because of their mere apprenticeship training. These people had a similar reputation to the barbers with whom they associated and belonged to the Company of Barber-Surgeons. After the Surgeons came the Barbers who, along with haircutting and shaving, were allowed to pull teeth or let blood. After them came the Apothecary and the wise women.

Going back to the Company of Barber-Surgeons, don’t let their so-called inferior rank fool you. These people were in demand in an era which saw constant battles and bloodshed. Given the knowledge and the tools they had to work with, they were nevertheless quite skilled and ingenious, and the science of surgery actually made leaps and bounds during these times owing to the
experience they had gained while attending to the wounded in battle.

To this day, we can see a vestigial link of the barber’s role as Medieval surgeon in the traditional and ubiquitous barber’s pole sign:

“The origin of the red and white barber’s pole is associated with the service of bloodletting and was historically a representation of bloody bandages wrapped around a pole. During medieval times, barbers performed surgery on customers, as well as tooth extractions. The original pole had a brass wash basin at the top (representing the vessel in which leeches were kept) and bottom (representing the basin that received the blood). The pole itself represents the staff that the patient gripped during the procedure to encourage blood flow.” (Sources: Wikipedia; medieval-ages.org.uk—Medieval Doctors)

A little teaser for the next chapter:

"Is that it?" John said as Monseigneur turned away. He could not help the incredulous tone his voice had taken.

Monseigneur turned back to him, his eyes opaque. “Is that what?”

And that was when John felt it: the beginnings of despair that ran down his spine like a trickle of ice water as he realized his nebulous suspicions had taken on tangible form at last.

You’ve given him what he’s wanted and now he’s done with you. From now on you’re nothing but another of his many conquests, an item on his list already ticked off.

But John could not leave it there. He just couldn’t. “That’s all you have to say to me?” he demanded, and could demand nothing more specific as Lestrade was standing just behind him.

"Problem?" Monseigneur queried, his gaze fit to turn a man to stone and his face never betraying a trace of emotion.

John hardly needed to be told that he’d made a dreadful mistake by surrendering to this man before him. A man he hardly knew, really, despite everything they had been through.
Chapter 33

Special Thanks: To my brilliant beta, wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up), who graciously puts up with me and my many (maddening) drafts for this chapter. Thanks so much for the fabulous edits, my dear! They make all the difference.

More author’s notes at the end.

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After a fortnight away, Lestrade returned just in time to witness a disturbing situation unfolding at the Lair: Monseigneur was falling apart.

He was summoned as soon as he arrived. Upon being ushered into his lord’s presence, Monseigneur informed him without preamble, “I don’t want John to attend the nuptial celebrations. In fact, I don’t want him accompanying us to Glasstown at all. He shall remain here at the Lair.”

Lestrade opened his mouth, closed it again and watched Monseigneur worry the precious Andalusian carpets beneath his feet as he paced restlessly to and fro in his study like a caged animal, talking just a little too quickly, a little too wildly— all the signs that pointed to not good.

What the bloody hell happened?

Yet deep down Lestrade already knew. His heart sank as he remembered his last conversation with Monseigneur and his subsequent need to seek John out for a small talk before he went away.

Bloody hell, he thought once more, feeling the deep-seated weariness temporarily dispelled by his holiday seeping back into his bones with a vengeance. He was now back at work, treading on eggshells as he dealt with an agitated Monseigneur.

Aloud, he said, “Now, my lord, let us not be too hasty with our decisions. He is your physician, after all, and we need him. We must remember that the poisoner is still at large—”

“I already know who the poisoner is,” Monseigneur cut in impatiently, sounding for all the world as though that was not the most important issue right now.

Lestrade was powerless to stop his jaw from falling wide open this time. “Who is it then?” He demanded, momentarily forgetting himself in his astonishment.

“You will know in due time,” said Monseigneur as he waved it away dismissively. “A trap will have to be laid. Anyway, we already have the antidote so there is no need to worry about that, and John’s presence at Glasstown will no longer be necessary. I don’t want him with us.”

Lestrade stared at the younger man before him as he attempted to work out the unsteady tone of voice at which those words were uttered, trying to match it with all the previous episodes when, upon ending a friendship, Monseigneur had told Lestrade icily, I don’t want him with me.

It was not the same tone of voice; this was not the same situation. And while Lestrade did not agree with Monseigneur’s decision, he knew better than to voice his objection outright.

“The last I heard, word has already reached court regarding John,” he said slowly. “The King and the Queen Mother have spoken highly of him, not to mention the garrison soldiers who have met him. Naturally, he has piqued the curiosity of many of the lords and ladies who are eager to make his
Monseigneur turned toward Lestrade abruptly, his words filled with an unfathomable vehemence as he growled, “That is precisely the reason why I don’t want him there!”

Lestrade stared at Monseigneur and made no effort to hide his dismay. It was especially hard for him when Monseigneur was behaving like this. All these years of service to the man had not equipped Lestrade with the ability to read minds, certainly not Monseigneur’s. He had been stealing himself with the prospect of having to address the implications of Monseigneur’s relationship with John for quite some time now; in fact, he had been prepared for just about anything, except this. From the way Monseigneur was carrying on, it seemed as though John himself was now being cast out of the palace and the drawbridge was being raised against him. But this was no ordinary rejection. There was something else here—something more.

Lestrade dreaded having to uncover the reason behind Monseigneur’s extraordinary behavior, but whatever it was, the situation had to be contained, and quickly. He resorted to a different approach.

“Does John know of my lord’s intentions to leave him behind?” he asked carefully.

“No,” said Monseigneur shortly. “Why would he?”

“Is he to be informed of the decision at all, sir?”

“I hardly think his reaction would be relevant.”

“Oh, but I think it is,” Lestrade said. “For instance, how are we to address the likelihood of his running away as soon as our backs are turned?”

There was a sudden, stark silence. Then Monseigneur said in a drawn voice, “He wouldn’t dare leave.”

At this point, all Lestrade wanted to do was to put his hands to his face and groan aloud. Was Monseigneur’s reason really this far gone? It was inconceivable that the idea had never even occurred to him!

Two weeks. Lestrade was gone for only two short weeks, yet Monseigneur had changed drastically since the last time he saw him. It was distressing to see his master’s marvelous self-control in pieces when they needed it intact for whatever lay in store for them at court.

Disaster loomed. Monseigneur could not afford to lose his head now. At the same time, they couldn’t leave John behind.

Lestrade shrugged as he attempted a nonchalant air that he was far from feeling. “I cannot say I’ve known John long enough,” he said, “but I am familiar with men like him. When dealing with his kind, there are boundaries that one simply cannot cross. Also, he’s not the type to hesitate once he’s made up his mind about anything. If there has been a fight between you, then there is even more reason to—”

“He belongs to me now. He gave me his word that he will never betray me!”

Monseigneur’s words were like a web that threatened to entangle Lestrade’s reason. Refusing to be thrown off course, Lestrade replied evenly, “Yes, he gave his word, but that won’t change the fact that we might just come back to find him gone.”

Monseigneur stared at him, stricken. There was that look again, as though Lestrade’s words were
hitting home for the first time. Or…

Or, thought Lestrade in sudden revelation, as though he’s finding confirmation of his worst fears.

Indeed, frightened was how Monseigneur looked, and lost. He looked so lost. His next words were raw and so irrational that Lestrade could hardly believe his ears: “I shall lock him up then. In the dungeons, or in a suite of rooms—”

“Monseigneur!”

Lestrade’s outburst surprised even himself, but it succeeded in checking Monseigneur’s outrageous flow of words.

He can’t possibly mean it, Lestrade thought, but he knew Monseigneur only too well and he was afraid he might be proven wrong the way he had been at one time or another over the years. There was simply no telling what the man was capable of doing when he was in one of his moods.

Lestrade cleared his throat. “We will definitely lose John if we are to subject him to so unworthy a treatment. Remember what I told you before, my lord, there is such a thing as breaking a man, and once he’s broken there may not be a way to put him back together again. Shut him away and he will never trust us again.”

He watched as Monseigneur leaned in to grip the edge of the table before him with both hands, his head sunk low between his shoulders and his breathing harsh. Lestrade had never seen Monseigneur so confused— torn between pushing John away and keeping him close.

The full realization hit Lestrade when he heard Monseigneur mutter, so low it was almost inaudible: “He can’t have me. Can you not understand that, Lestrade?”

Suddenly, everything became crystal clear. Lestrade thought he was going to be sick.

Monseigneur is in love with John Watson.

Bleeding Christ!

Lestrade could not imagine Monseigneur to be capable of it, and yet there was no mistaking what his words meant. Fighting down the panic that rose in his throat like bile, Lestrade waited a full minute, and then said carefully, “Do you wish me to speak with John about this, my lord?”

There was no reply from Monseigneur. He merely stood there, head bowed, eyes closed, breathing deeply, and was otherwise still. He was so still, this darkly enigmatic person that Lestrade had watched over as he grew up from boyhood to become the man that he was now. Of course, Lestrade knew all about the rubbish talk at court that branded Monseigneur as a changeling when he was a child. Now, after all these years, he wondered whether there was any truth in it, after all, with an odd twist: could the changeling be transforming back into a human being?

A moment passed then Monseigneur straightened up, shoulders squared and head held arrogantly high. He’d managed to get a grip of himself and their conversation was coming to a close.

Lestrade rushed in before Monseigneur could shut the door on the subject entirely: “Perhaps it will be easier for everyone concerned if we are to bring him along with us, just so we— that is, I— can keep an eye on him. Also, we cannot underestimate his usefulness. Not at court, and certainly not when we have to deal with the Angrians and the poisoner still lurking in our midst. And then, of course, there is the matter concerning the Princess Irene.”
He watched as Monseigneur’s lips thinned into an ominous line and waited for the verbal lashing to commence; but the hurtful words did not materialize. Instead, Monseigneur merely gave a curt nod. “We will be leaving the day after the morrow. I will have John follow along with the ladies a few days after we have arrived in Glasstown,” he said, his voice tightly controlled.

“But my lord—”

“You need further proof as to how dangerously unpredictable John will be at court?” Monseigneur bit out, all patience gone. “Fine. I shall provide you with the evidence. Bring John to me now and let us get this over and done with.”

“Stay,” Monseigneur instructed Lestrade as John made his appearance, so Lestrade did as he was told and waited for the carnage.

John had not changed much since the last time he saw him in the gardens, except perhaps for the shadows under his eyes. Lestrade sighed inwardly. He knew what was coming. It was not something he would wish on his enemies, let alone on John, but he could do nothing that would not make things worse.

God, that look in his eyes, thought Lestrade as he watched the younger man glance at him and then away.

Was John aware of how he looked just then? How his eyes betrayed his seemingly impassive face by mirroring the same kind of torment that had been in Monseigneur’s gaze just a few minutes ago? Of course, he would never know. John would never know how Lestrade saw them just then, as though the two men were already inextricably bound together—two halves of a whole.

To be sure, Monseigneur was so much better at hiding his feelings; he’d had more practice. He was in full possession of himself now. Nothing remained of the unfamiliar, deeply conflicted creature that he was just a few minutes ago. He was coldly impersonal as he looked directly at the man whom Lestrade had every reason to believe he had very recently taken for his lover.

The idiots, Lestrade thought, suddenly furious. He was angry at Monseigneur for being such a child and angry at John for giving in to him. Yet how could he not, Lestrade thought, when temptation lay heavy and unrelenting in his path? And who was he to condemn John—he with his own tarnished past?

He watched John’s face as Monseigneur started to speak, wondering what John was thinking as he listened to Monseigneur’s cool, measured words.

John was not really listening to Monseigneur as he gave him instructions to prepare the medicines that would be needed at Court. There was more: John would not be accompanying Monseigneur’s entourage to the Gaaldinian capital the day after the morrow; rather, he would be escorting the ladies a few days afterward when all preparations in the Lair were complete.

If Lestrade really wanted to know what he was thinking of, it all boiled down to just one word: Bastard.

Two days of cold silence following the most incredible sex John had ever had, and now, finally, this. What the bloody fuck.
It took a moment for John to realize that Monseigneur had finished speaking.

"Is that it?" John said as Monseigneur turned away. He could not help the incredulous tone his voice had taken.

Monseigneur turned back to him, his eyes opaque. "Is that what?"

And that was when John felt it: the beginnings of despair that ran down his spine like a trickle of ice water as he realized his nebulous suspicions from the past couple of days had taken on tangible form at last.

You’ve given him what he’s wanted and now he’s done with you. From now on you’re nothing but another of his many conquests, an item on his list already ticked off.

But John could not leave it there. He just couldn’t. “That’s all you have to say to me?” he demanded, and could demand nothing more; not when Lestrade was standing just a few feet away from them.

"Problem?" Monseigneur queried, his gaze fit to turn a man to stone and his face never betraying a trace of emotion.

John hardly needed to be told that he’d made a dreadful mistake by surrendering to this man. A man he hardly knew, really, despite everything they had been through.

He had been wrong to give in to him. He saw that now.

Now, when it was too late.

He realized that Monseigneur and Lestrade were waiting for his reply. “No, there’s no problem,” he finally said, shaking his head. “Except fuck you, Sherlock. Really.”

The words were uttered calmly and entirely without heat. John turned away and left without bothering to register Monseigneur’s reaction.

Lestrade let out a gusty sigh as he turned to face Monseigneur, who merely slanted him a look: *I told you so.*

A moment slipped by. Monseigneur’s masked visage never changed, maintaining its impenetrable aloofness as he said, “Gather as much information as you can about the Angrian nobility attending the Queen at Glasstown. Pay special attention to the rumors. I want to know everything unofficial about everyone around her.”

Lestrade nodded, mouth tight, feeling the urge to curl his hand into a fist to smash into his master’s face, but he merely said, “Understood, sir.”

Where this may lead, Lestrade could at least take heart in the fact that John was clearly more than a match for the prince of Gaaldine.
After a thorough search of the castle, Lestrade finally found John in the tower overlooking the sea. John sat on the wide stone ledge of the window, looking out absently at the blue waves below. He started a little when he saw Lestrade emerge silently from the shadows of the stairwell. Upon seeing who it was, a shadow passed over John's eyes like a veil dropping into place and he looked away.

_You're a fool_, he thought, angry and humiliated at the way his treacherous heart had bounded for a moment as he imagined something that was quite impossible.

"If he's sent you to deal with me, you can go back and report that I've nothing more to say other than what I've already told him," John said to Lestrade, his tone flat.

“Oh,” said Lestrade, hands braced on his hips. “You mean your little expletive. And have you been doing just that, fucking Monseigneur while I was away?”

John’s eyes hardened at Lestrade’s soldierly directness but he stood his ground, refusing to look away from Lestrade’s scowling gaze.

There was a moment of charged silence, then Lestrade’s tense shoulders sagged and he said softly, “God damn it, John. And there I was thinking that you’d have more sense than this.”

“What in fucking hell is that even supposed to mean?” John said indignantly. “In case you’re blind to everything that’s happened around you in the past few weeks, I didn’t start this!”

Lestrade held up a hand in front of him. “Calm down, John,” he ordered. “Show me that you’re capable of that, at least.”

John would have wanted very much to let out the wounded beast tearing away inside him, but something in Lestrade’s tone of voice gave him pause.

“I said nothing of the kind, and he’s not sent me,” continued Lestrade. “I sent myself, to try and see if I can talk some sense into you. From the way you just behaved, it appears you quite forget yourself in Monseigneur’s presence. You may have been allowed to run wild here, but such impudence has no place at court. Tell me now, John, so that I may decide on what to do with you. Are there going to be similar scenes between you and Monseigneur during His Majesty’s wedding?”

John gave a small, derisive snort. "You need not bother with the chat, and he's made it abundantly clear that he's not interested in talking to me again." 

John knew it to be the truth as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Indeed, Monseigneur had not spoken to him directly since that night.

God, that night when John had thought he would die of bliss. He had not been the only one—Sherlock had been there as well, the two of them in full communion as they shared the same wild, intoxicating pleasure. Sherlock had come inside him, seemingly endlessly; the steel-in-velvet feel of him, locked deep inside John’s body and the sight of Sherlock’s naked face—his mask of self-control shattering against the tide of helpless pleasure—had pushed John over the edge. His orgasm had been so intense and obliterating that for a moment, he could not tell where he ended and Sherlock began.

The aftermath had been overwhelmingly sweet as John gathered Sherlock to him. Sherlock had been inside him still, half-hard, and John had found it easy to simply take him in his arms, wrapping his legs naturally, protectively around Sherlock’s trembling body.

_Christ, I'm going to be sore tomorrow_, he had thought wryly and entirely without regret.
It had all been a glorious mess: the warm, wet slide of their chest and bellies, lubricated by sweat and semen; the musky scent of their lovemaking a heavy, heady perfume in John’s nostrils. And most of all, the feel of the conqueror in his arms, vanquished and sated.

John had kissed his lover tenderly as he felt that long, warm body against him, still racked by residual tremors; he had felt Sherlock’s heart, beating strong and heavy like a drum against his chest. The tremors had gone on and on, and it was only when John had tasted the salt of tears on Sherlock’s face that he realized that Sherlock had been crying.

“Sshh…” John had crooned as he stroked Sherlock’s damp curls, feeling absurdly pleased and deeply touched that he had had such an effect on the man everybody else called Monseigneur. “It’s alright. It’s alright, Sherlock.”

He had felt Sherlock burrow his face into his shoulder, refusing to meet his eyes, and he had felt his heart do an odd twist as he realized that he loved him.

It was the truth, as basic as water, as plain as day.

He loved this man— this proud, otherworldly creature in his arms. He’d thought when the time came, such a revelation would be deeply painful and would be his undoing, but he knew Sherlock now. He knew now that there was mortal flesh beneath the perfect, cold exterior of his armor; that warm, red blood ran in his veins instead of ice.

That Sherlock would choose him to unravel the mystery of his person was something John could not quite grasp yet, and he’d found himself looking forward to discovering more of the man.

Of course, all of that had been before the grand travesty of the morning after. John could not believe that only two days had passed since then.

John stared at Lestrade now, in the gathering twilight, and felt that sense of strangeness emanating from these people and their unfamiliar customs.

“You’re not surprised at all at what’s happened,” John observed, staring at Lestrade with knitted brows. “How can you take this so calmly? Is it really the norm among you Gaaldinians to tolerate this kind of relationship?”

Lestrade gave a small, tired shrug. “Would it change anything if I were to disapprove?” he said. “It’s already happened. The more important question is: what is to be done about this, John? About you?”

Cold rage ran inside John like frost through his veins at Lestrade’s matter-of-fact tone. “I suppose you may deal with me the way you’ve done with Monseigneur’s past conquests,” he said, giving a small shrug of his own. “Are you going to hand me a fat purse and sweep me under the rug like all the others?”

“Be careful, John,” replied Lestrade. “My patience is not to be trifled with just now.”

“Tell me,” the devil in John goaded, heedless of Lestrade’s warning tone. “How many did you have to deal with when Monseigneur got tired of them?”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“So you’re saying he’s never had anyone?” John said, voice rising. “That was what you told me before and if you can deceive yourself by believing it then you may as well know now that you are wrong!”
Lestrade gritted his teeth, wondering what it was about this particular emotion that could drive two, full-grown men to act like silly, lovesick fools half their age.

John seemed to deflate a little after his tirade. “Why can’t you just tell me?”

“Upon my honor, I have nothing to say,” answered Lestrade stonily.

“Sure you have;” said John, his tone brittle, “as you’ve tasted the same medicine yourself.”

Lestrade bristled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You and the King,” John replied recklessly. “What was that all about?”

Almost before he was finished, Lestrade had grabbed John by his collar and shoved him roughly against the wall.

“I’d watch what comes out of that mouth if I were you, John Watson, and it will do you well to remember your position amongst us,” said Lestrade harshly. “You are mistaken if you believe you can get away with this kind of impudence. You won’t be handed a fat purse; you will be whipped for your ill-bred insolence. Ask me anything inappropriate about His Majesty one more time and you will find that I am more than capable of running my sword through you. I can see now that Monseigneur is right: at this rate, you’re not fit to leave the Lair for court. You won’t last a day in that snake pit.”

Lestrade’s fist tightened around John’s collar as he noted the man’s defiant glare. “Lest you forget yourself completely, you are Monseigneur’s man and you are entirely under your lord’s mercy,” he continued. “If he chooses to throw you in chains and shut you away in the dungeons, just as he’d proposed before he spoke to you, nobody will be able to interfere with his wishes. I stood up for you back there, John, to make him change his mind about not taking you to court, and this is the thanks I get.”

The look in John’s eyes changed as Lestrade’s words sank in and his gaze wavered; Lestrade shoved him away roughly, swearing beneath his breath, and brought his hands up to scrub at his face wearily. A few feet away, he heard John clear his throat. His words, when they came, were hesitant, contrite: “Forgive me. You did not deserve that, not when you’ve been nothing but honorable in your treatment of me. I…I don’t know what has come over me these past few days. I just don’t understand what has happened with him; one moment we were good and the next…”

John trailed off as he remembered what came the next day, like a slap on the face delivered with the full force of an open palm. He remembered the awful, unremitting silence that was nothing and everything, breaking him down with its phantom implications. He could have dealt with words, however outrageous, from Sherlock; but the man had flatly refused to see him, sending Dimmock, his private secretary, to intercept John and his inquiries as he grew increasingly worried. He had also ordered Billy to carry out John’s new sleeping arrangements so that John had been effectively kicked out of the royal bedchamber. Monseigneur’s actions had spoken louder than words and after that incident, there was really nothing more to be said between them.

John swallowed and continued as he addressed Lestrade, “I thought you might know, considering—”

Lestrade gave a tired, irate huff. “There is nothing to understand,” he said. “Monseigneur panicked, pure and simple. You didn’t see what I saw. It would have been entirely different if he’d cut you off outright. That would have been clean and bloodless. Its signals would have been clear, not like this muck he’s left for me to handle.”
Lestrade stared at John wearily. “You love him too, don’t you, John,” he said. It was not a question.

When John said nothing, he continued, “You ought to feel flattered, having him run around in front of me like a chicken with its head cut off, but before you give yourself a pat on the back, I would advise you to be extremely careful, John. You’re now an undisputed royal favorite, but you will find that the love of a king or a prince is a double-edged sword. Gaaldinian society, especially the nobility, may be far more tolerant of these things compared to what you’re used to in your country, but even we have our limits. No matter how widespread the practice is at court, these things are never discussed in public. If there is one lesson that you must take wholly to heart, let it be this one.”

John opened his mouth but no words came forth as he struggled to make sense of what Lestrade just told him.

Lestrade gave a tired sigh, relieved that their painful interview was almost at an end. He gave John a long, searching look before continuing, “So tell me now, John, whether I’ve done the right thing by standing up for you. I think I did. If there’s anyone whom I would wish for Monseigneur, it would be you. In return, you will swear on your life that you will be careful with your words and actions concerning him when you’re at court. No matter what has happened between you, he is still your lord and you owe him your allegiance. Trust nobody outside our own circle of people when you’re out there. If you cannot make that promise, tell me now so that I may inform Monseigneur not to take you along.”

John stared back at Lestrade. There was no way in hell he was going to be left behind. “I swear it,” he said.

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Monseigneur left two days later, taking with him Lestrade and Billy along with an army of manservants, his hawks and falconers. Until the very last minute, he was still giving instructions to Lady Hudson and to just about everybody forming the small queue of people waiting to see him off. Everyone, that was, except John.

Yet Monseigneur did look at him as he came down the line to find John standing there, hands folded behind his back— not a mere glance but a look intense and direct as it searched and noted and stored away detail after detail of John’s quiet face. John stared right back, unabashed. His anger had cooled in the wake of his conversation with Lestrade and he had made no further attempt to approach or even talk to Monseigneur.

It seemed that Lestrade was right. Monseigneur needed some time to settle down. With his renewed calm came that wary watchfulness that was almost familiar as he took to tracking John’s every movement with his eyes.

John had yet to get used to the notion that the tables had turned. One thing he was sure of: he’d make the bastard work hard to re-establish the connection they had lost.

Now, John returned Monseigneur’s gaze unflinchingly, remembering how the man had wept in his arms after they had made love. He had thought that Sherlock had been intensely moved by their intimacy when all along, the silly git had been frightened of it, of him. John was not sure what to make of his lover’s reaction, though he felt that it should not have come as a surprise. That was Sherlock all over. The thought almost made him smile.
Beautiful fanart by wonderful Meetingyourmaker. Thank you, my dear!

Monseigneur was the one to break eye contact before their gaze became awkward, a thing of suspicion. Smoothly, he turned away to address his company of men: “Right. It’s time we were going.”

John watched as they made their departure— the clatter and din of the horses’ hooves against the stony pavement of the courtyard growing fainter and fainter as they rode away.

With its heart gone, a deep hush settled over the Lair as it prepared to slumber.

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Author’s Notes: The European fascination with Muslim textile products goes back to the Middle Ages when contact with the Muslim world through the Crusades and increasing trade links resulted in the import of Oriental art items such as textiles. Edward I’s Castilian bride, Queen Eleanor, brought precious Andalusian carpets to England as part of her dowry in 1255. (Source: The Origin of Carpeting— The Muslim Carpet and Europe, from Muslim Heritage dot com)

A changeling is a creature found in European folklore and folk religion. It is typically described as being the offspring of a fairy, troll, elf or other legendary creature that has been secretly left in the place of a human child. Sometimes the term is also used to refer to the child who was taken. The apparent changeling could also be a stock or fetch, an enchanted piece of wood that would soon appear to grow sick and die. The theme of the swapped child is common among medieval literature and reflects concern over infants afflicted by unexplained diseases, disorders, or developmental disabilities.

To be charged as a changeling was a dangerous affair: as late as the nineteenth century, there were cases wherein murderers were acquitted or convicted of lesser charges over the crimes they had committed by making use of the “fairy defence” and claiming that their victims were changelings. (Source: Wikipedia)

Given the era in which the story is set, Lestrade’s tolerant view of John and Monseigneur’s romance
may not seem plausible and may be unconvincing to some of you. It is true that throughout the medieval period, homosexuality was generally condemned and thought to be the moral of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, historian Allan A. Tulchin recently argued that a form of male same-sex marriage existed in late medieval France, and possibly other areas in Europe, as well. There was a legal category called "enbrotherment" (affrèremenent) that allowed two unrelated men to share living quarters, pool their resources, and effectively live as a married couple. The couple shared "un pain, un vin, et une bourse-- one bread, one wine and one purse." The article received considerable attention in the English-language press, since Tulchin may have discovered the earliest form of (civil) same-sex marriage. Tulchin's views have also sparked significant controversy, as they challenge the generally held view that the medieval period was one of the most anti-gay in history. Personally, I would be wary of labeling it as “same-sex marriage” as we perceive it today, because the era hosted and approved of a kind of bromance between men without the sexual aspects getting in the way. Of course the debate will go on, but I have decided to adopt this (nebulous) outlook for the royal courts of Gaaldine and Gondal. (Source: Wikipedia)
Chapter 34

Special Thanks: To wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up) for her excellent beta, as always.

And to PlumpPushu, my French connection.

Please check updates tags before proceeding. More author’s notes at the end.

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John watched helplessly as Monseigneur was slowly taken in front of him— taken from him.

He stood facing the wide, opulent bed, heaped with dark furs, and stared at Monseigneur, naked as he reclined with lazy, leonine grace amid the embroidered cushions— the very picture of decadence. John felt desire clench a hard fist in his loins, but try as he might, he found that he could not move. He stood, rooted, on the edge of the bed he knew so well and watched in dumb misery as his lover made a slow, sensual exploration of himself— running long, graceful hands down the flat planes of his chest, his stomach, the muscled hardness of his thigh. John could see that beautiful body gradually waking as it responded to its owner’s ministrations. Most disturbing of all, Monseigneur's face was unmasked; a study in wonder.

He wasn't touching himself. Not yet. John could see that he was waiting, impatiently waiting for someone's arrival. John was not certain that Monseigneur was waiting for him, and there lay all his anxiety.

For one thing, Monseigneur was not even looking at him. He’d barely acknowledged John’s presence. Perhaps he was not even aware that John was there just a few feet away, hungry yet unable to partake of the feast spread out before him. Monseigneur sighed as he stretched out languorously on the rich pelts, luxuriating in the feel of sable and mink and his own hands against his naked flesh. A soft, whispering sound interrupted Monseigneur’s introspection; he tilted his head to survey the other side of the bed, opposite John, where a figure prowled restlessly in the shadows.

"Come," John heard Monseigneur say, his deep voice guttural with lust and anticipation.

The shadowy figure materialized at last, predictably shorn of all clothing. He was a large man, his body battle-hardened and magnificent: broad of shoulders, lean of waist and heavy of muscle. A mystery man— his identity was forever anonymous to John because he wore a mask that shielded his eyes, gleaming silver and hard. He was of Monseigneur's class, then; or perhaps not. There was no mistaking his level of arousal though, as the man made his way to Monseigneur across the bed like a predator— on his hands and knees, the muscles of his shoulders and upper back rippling honey-gold and amber in the firelight. He was huge, John noted with a wilting heart, and eager— so very eager.

John wanted to turn away then, sickened, but he could do nothing but remain as he was, with his hands hanging heavy and useless at his sides and his feet planted on the ground, as though roped into place by invisible bonds. His tongue lay like a furred, dead thing in his mouth. He was powerless to say or do anything except gaze upon the debauched scene unfolding in front of him.

Raw emotion choked John as he heard that rich, smooth baritone exhorting the new arrival: “Make haste. I can wait no longer. Now-- come to me now.”

The figures on the bed entwined at last, surging against each other in a wave of need; this was what it felt like to have a knife thrust into one's heart. John swallowed and tasted the bitter salt of unshed
tears at the back of his throat as he saw the newcomer making his reverence to his royal lover by boldly taking Monseigneur’s erection in hand.

John watched as Monseigneur wrapped his legs around his unknown lover greedily, bringing the man roughly against him. It felt like an abrupt twist of the knife already buried in John’s heart. John’s hands gradually balled into fists as the masked intruder tilted Monseigneur's head up to receive the man’s tongue, his devouring kisses. The sharp, wet sounds of those caresses were obscenely loud in the quiet chamber.

The sound of panting, eager breaths was all around him. John heard Monseigneur’s soft murmur in between the lewd kisses: “Yes…oh, yes. Now. Now…”

John knew the moment they became one: the tight clench of the faceless man’s sculpted buttocks as he thrust in; his deep sigh of pleasure piercing John's ears; Monseigneur, arching into him; his beautiful hands digging into the man’s rigid back, his nape—desperately seeking to find purchase, to hang on as the man started to fuck him into the thick furs. John felt his world fall apart as Monseigneur's eyes fluttered closed, his mouth forming a helpless “O” of rapture as he threw back his proud head and bared the white column of his throat to his lover’s mouth. His arrogance was a tattered white flag cast at his lover’s feet as he surrendered blissfully to the man ruthlessly taking him.

John could bear it no longer. He finally found it within himself to shut his eyes and cut away the view of the bed, soiled by Monseigneur’s monstrous betrayal and rocked as though by violent quakes, one after the other. He shut away Monseigneur’s face, beautiful as a fallen angel’s—suffused with lust and a deep, dark pleasure that John knew he would never be able to give him.

“Look at me, John,” Monseigneur commanded, almost shouting.

Startled, John opened his eyes, hot tears spilling at last as he met Monseigneur’s savage gaze, boring into his even as Monseigneur continued to cradle his nameless lover in his arms. A murderous rage filled John as Monseigneur’s swollen lips tilted up in a sly smirk and John felt his heart die within him—

John jerked awake abruptly and found himself drenched in sweat. It was only early morning, but John was experiencing his first, full Gaaldinian summer as a highly uncomfortable, sultry affair that began as soon as the sun was up. Wearily, he lay back against his pillow and shut his eyes, forcing himself to take deep, calming breaths as his heart pounded away inside his chest. His jaw ached from all that unconscious crunching down while he was in the throes of nightmare.

He refused to acknowledge the shameful hardness between his thighs. He was no better than an animal, he thought in despair, if he could get off by watching his lover being taken by another brute. There was no recourse but to wait for his body to settle down.

Outside the latticed window panes, he could hear the birds—a pair of mischievous finches, John thought—as they set about their morning ritual of wooing and being wooed, complete with sudden flourishes of wingtips, flirtatious little half-chases and incessant bickering. They had been at it since John moved into this chamber. If he had not been so preoccupied with his travails with Monseigneur, John would have found the little avian drama playing outside his windows amusing. Now though, the silly, twittering courtship grated on his nerves—a mocking reminder, perhaps, of Monseigneur's disastrous advances towards himself.

_I've given the git what he wanted, so why would he be upset?_ John wondered irately and not for the first time. Lestrade had told him it was nothing but a panic attack, but why the hell would Monseigneur lose his head upon being given what he had long sought?
Despite Lestrade’s reassuring words, John could not help but think that his own line of reasoning was far more logical and in tune with the man that he knew Monseigneur to be: he’d allowed Monseigneur to chase him down and now he was done for. His conviction was especially strong during the early morning hours, when he was assailed by doubts and unsettled by bad dreams such as the one he’d just had.

*I should never have given in to him*, John chided himself, also not for the first time.

He sighed and raked a hand over his damp hair in frustration, his gaze sweeping over the bedchamber. As usual, it took him a moment to adjust to the unfamiliar surroundings. This was not Monseigneur’s room, after all; he had been cast out of it without even so much as a word from Monseigneur after their last night together and he’d been given this small chamber to sleep in.

After Monseigneur’s departure, John had dropped by his rooms with Lady Hudson as she oversaw its cleaning. The chamber looked unfamiliar and overlarge without Monseigneur’s bed. Like his hawks and his manservants, the canopied bed had accompanied Monseigneur to Glasstown, leaving behind a richly upholstered, if suddenly cavernous, bedchamber with John’s little divan bed pushed against the wall, forlorn and empty.

It was as empty as he felt inside now.

Heaving another sigh, John placed the back of one hand over his eyes and gave himself a minute before he decided it was time he get on with his morning.

After a brief breakfast, John found the Lady Molly in the Butts, the section of the Lair adjacent to a vast stretch of empty land designated for archery practice.

John found many Gaaldinian practices bizarre, but perhaps strangest of all was the double standard these people employed with regards the training of women to take up arms. On one hand, Gaaldinian soldiers were used to having women warriors such as Sally Donovan in their ranks, but they could not seem to countenance a lady of gentle birth such as the Lady Molly taking up archery. Clearly, the subject was riddled with class issues— something that Monseigneur was adept at ignoring.

From their raised brows and knowing looks when they thought nobody was looking, Monseigneur’s archers evidently found Molly’s training a shocking and unconventional practice, and John knew that they considered this as yet another of their master's many eccentricities. John could almost imagine their thoughts: What? To insist that the women of a princely household be proficient with the use of arrows! As if their menfolk could not defend them properly from harm!

Those sentiments were all rubbish to John who, as an Angrian soldier, could fully appreciate the value of Monseigneur's arrangement. Obviously, Gaaldine had not had many devastating wars lately.

It was one thing to raise women to be the ideal of femininity— to be gentle, docile beings who bothered their cultivated heads with nothing but poetry and music, safe in the knowledge that an entire army of knight-errants was standing by to defend their persons and their honor from the slightest insult. It was quite another thing to have these same women stranded in the citadel keep while everything below them lay in flames and their lords and knights were lying about dead or injured as the enemy advanced relentlessly, pillaging and raping. John had witnessed enough of the latter scenario to believe in arming every woman in sight. To have Molly trained in archery was one of Monseigneur’s more laudable actions, never mind that John wanted to give the man a sound thrashing for his various misdeeds at the moment.
And Molly had not been taught just shortcuts with the crossbow either, John realized. Instead, Monseigneur had made Molly learn from scratch, using the standard bow and arrows. John knew that her shots were usually quite accurate, but her aim could quickly deteriorate when she found herself under intense scrutiny.

Long before John came to stay with them, she had made the mistake of demurring to exhibit her skills in Monseigneur’s presence, prompting him to drawl, “Of what use would it be for me to train you at all if one may not have the privilege of seeing you draw a single arrow from your bow?”

Of course, the shot forced subsequently from her had been awful and, typical of Monseigneur, he had dealt with it—not by dismissing her from archery altogether—but by issuing an order that her instructors and all available archers practicing in the Butts should crowd around, heckling her, until she had gotten used to the distraction and background noise.

John had heard of this and more from previous episodes of idle talk with Gavin, Monseigneur’s chief archer and Molly’s teacher, now gone with his lord to Glasstown. John knew that the masculine heckling, no matter how good-natured, must have tormented her, but Molly had carried on wordlessly with the grueling practice just to please Monseigneur—a proof of her devotion to him.

Today though, there were just the two of them in the Butts, and John was only John so Molly was at peace to proceed with her shooting practice as he stood a little behind her, observing her movements.

“She thinks I am nothing but a wallflower,” she said as she surveyed the target pierced by her arrows, standing a few hundred feet away, with a critical eye: two arrows had pierced the precincts of the blue circles; another one was almost there by the smaller red circles near the center.

John shrugged, remembering Donovan with her longbow and her boomerang; her chin in the air. “Let her. She’s a professional soldier—she’s got no excuse but to excel at what she does whereas you’re good at this and it’s not even your main job, so that more than evens the field.”

Molly could not help but smile at John’s convoluted logic.

“She thinks I am nothing but a wallflower,” she said calmly, as though they were discussing the weather. “She also thinks that I haven’t ears attached to my head.”

"The woman apparently thinks too loudly for her own good," muttered John and Molly laughed.

"However, Monseigneur wishes me to enter the archery tournament for ladies. His Majesty is apparently organizing one for the Angrians at court. Hence my need to practice," she continued.

"Are your countrywomen highly proficient archers, John?"

“Oh, I should think so,” said John mildly, remembering all too well the Angrian women locked in the castle keep with their arrows and sharp projectiles, dry of eye (of what use were tears to them at this point?) and steady of hand, the lady alongside the cook, fighting hard to defend their lords’ stronghold along with everyone else during a siege. No shrinking violets, these. When forced into a corner, John knew how these women, normally so self-effacing, could turn ruthlessly practical. They understood, as he did, the fate that awaited captive women, especially in the Highland conflicts.

Molly’s voice brought him back to the present: “Has he given you leave to participate in them, John?”

“Hmm?” He turned his mind back to Molly.

“Monseigneur,” clarified Molly. “Has he given you permission to join the court jousts?”
“If he has, he has not thought it worthwhile to tell me.” He had meant his words to be flippant, but something must have flitted through John’s face at the mention of Sherlock, for Molly quickly averted her gaze and concentrated on reloading her bow.

Appalled, John wondered how much Molly— and everyone, else for that matter— knew of his quarrel with Monseigneur.

After a while, Molly said kindly, “please do not begrudge him his temper. As you know, he does it to everyone.”

John let out a breath. *So she doesn't know the complete story. Good.*

Lapsing into Gondalian, Molly continued, “Ne t'en fais pas, Monseigneur n'est que dans une de ses phases colériques. Il devrait redevenir lui-même bientôt.”

She peered at him a little uncertainly. “Do you understand what I just said, John?”

He did, on the whole. He tried not to show his annoyance toward the man as he nodded. Now would be a good time to start exercising what Lestrade preached: reveal nothing about his dealings with Monseigneur.

“People think he's heartless, but really, he's not," continued Molly, gently. "You have but to look at me and Lady Hudson."

John raised his brows, thinking that indeed, he'd never seen a pair of high-born ladies so miserably treated. As he ruminated on how to express this in a way that would cause the least offense, Molly said serenely, "You see the everyday details that form the threads but not the overall picture that is the tapestry. The truth is that he saved us."

"Oh?"

"My father died prematurely from a tumor when I was eight years of age. I had no other family. Typically, I would have been sent away to a convent. For other girls, it would have been the completely suitable, but not me. He saved me from a fate worse than death."

"And Lady Hudson?"

"He rescued her from a heavy handed, wastrel husband who was overly fond of drink," said Molly, "when everyone else could do nothing to help her. Not even her closest friends at court."

"What did Monseigneur do?" queried John, interested. Here was news indeed. To separate a wife, who was all but her husband's property, from the abusive man she married was no mean feat, even for somebody of royal blood.

"Monseigneur had the King send him away on an expedition, ostensibly to regain his honor," said Molly in her usual matter-of-fact way. "He did not survive the strict garrison regimen that cut off his heavy drinking. Of course, nobody can really ascertain the extent of his involvement, but I heard from my lady's own lips that Monseigneur had ensured her husband would never return to plague her. Thus, my lord Hudson died with his honor renewed, his debts paid off by Monseigneur and his wife saved from ruin. So you see..."

John stared at Molly, who shrugged prettily. "Don't let Monseigneur fool you, John."

After a moment, she raised her bow again and took aim. "Everybody still thinks of me as a child, but I do have eyes, along with ears, and I do know a bit of what’s going on around me," she murmured,
her eyes intent on the target ahead of her. "I saw how he looked at you, John, just before he went away. He looked…sad. When he thought you couldn’t see him."

With that she released her arrow. John watched, stunned, as it flew straight and true, finding its mark at the center of the innermost yellow circle of the target.

Bullseye.

John briefly forgot his thoughts in the ensuing jubilation. He might have wanted to ask Molly how she could have discerned Monseigneur through his masked visage; Molly might have responded by saying one did not live with the man this long and not pick up certain cues. But the opportunity was lost, and there was no chance of coming back to it without more awkward questions getting in the way, so John finally let the matter drop.

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There was much to be done during the day. John had to prepare the concoctions that Monseigneur had requested. Along with Mike, he made medicines for colic and indigestion— the most common of ailments to afflict one when a fortnight of celebratory feasting was at hand. Then there were other preparations for other maladies, all made into powder. If fresh herbal draughts were needed, John would be able to prepare them at bedside. Most importantly, there was that mushroom sleeping draught that Monseigneur specifically requested, strong enough to flatten the pulse and knock a person out for days, if necessary. That, too, had to be reduced to powder form. And of course, there was the poison antidote that was in Monseigneur’s possession. Mike had a stock of it, but without the White Star added in, the formulation was incomplete.

In the late afternoons and evenings, after his work was done, John watched as Lady Hudson oversaw the packing of the things they would be taking to court: rich gifts, precious linens and silk; their clothes, all done up and ready to be carted off. At one of these intervals, Lady Hudson had shown him the clothes he would be wearing— dark fabrics; Monseigneur's colors. Then there were the garments for the masques: fantastical pieces and ensembles in bright hues of gold, scarlet and silver.

So this was what all the tailors had been up to, John thought as he recalled all those tedious mornings weeks and weeks ago when everyone stood in line, waiting for an army of clothes makers as they bustled about, taking their measurements.

“We’ll be arriving just a few days before His Majesty’s wedding,” Lady Hudson said with a twinkle in her eyes. “Isn’t it exciting, John?”

John sighed as he thought of the days ahead when he would get to see Monseigneur again, among the circle of people he naturally belonged to, and John had to suppress a shudder. Would he see Monseigneur’s discarded lovers in court as well? All of a sudden, he was reminded of his dream and it was enough to make him stop in mid-speech, whatever it was he intended to say slipping away from him as a cold hand squeezed at his heart.

John looked at the bright, happy faces of the people around him as they admired the items being stored in the trunks and he could not help but wish that they were not going anywhere— not to Glasstown for any royal wedding; not to court, where Monseigneur was currently installed. John wanted to pretend, for just a little bit longer, that everything was and would remain as it had been, when the Lair was Monseigneur’s entire world and there was nothing out there to take him away from John. He wanted Monseigneur just as he had been before he, John, made the mistake of giving himself over to him; before Monseigneur changed.
And what of his nights spent all alone in an unfamiliar room, with hours and hours left to himself before sleep would claim him? Seeing John’s dilemma, perhaps it would be kinder not to delve into his nights.

Inevitably, the day came for their departure.

“Eat well,” instructed Lady Hudson as they raised their heads from the small prayer that presaged their generous breakfast. “The journey ahead of us is long and tedious, though we shall be able to sit down to supper with Monseigneur at Glasstown if all goes according to schedule.”

Before John knew it, they were on the road—a merry procession of carriages that looked, rightfully, like they were off to carnival. John could not help but look back as they left the Lair behind, thinking wistfully and quite illogically that he wanted to see it one more time in the clear, morning light; one last time, before it disappeared from his view entirely.

Dawn was breaking on the horizon, and it threw the first of its rosy light against the mighty pile of stone that was Monseigneur’s fortress, his fairy castle. Until now John never realized how much he’d come to love the place.

John felt his lips move, and it took a moment for him to realize that he was uttering a silent prayer as he looked back and watched the Lair recede from his line of vision: Please. Don’t let it change the way he has. Let it be the same upon my return, upon our return. Let it remain as it has always been, what it will always be: my home. My safe haven.

A small enquiry from Lady Hudson drew John’s attention, and reluctantly, he turned his head away from the window. For all his foreboding, John was not insensible to the joyful excitement pervading the carriage that carried him and the ladies to Glasstown.

Against all odds, perhaps it will all end well, he thought to himself as he settled back into the cushioned seats. Perhaps he was being overly anxious. Yet, how could he not, when they were on the trail of a poisoner?

But they had the antidote, he reminded himself, ever the optimist. Besides, a royal wedding and the celebrations that accompanied it could never be dull; and even if the entire affair were to collapse around them like a sand castle in the hands of a petulant child, what was everyone to do except to weather it all out in one piece?

As he settled back in the carriage and prepared to humor the ladies on their long journey to court, perhaps it was just as well that John would not know what lay in store for them. It would be several hours more before they arrived in Glasstown, before they would see Monseigneur again. He would not be alone when he received them; Monseigneur would be accompanied by another person—someone they’d never seen before, standing at Monseigneur’s side and taking the arm that he offered.

Author’s Notes: The Medieval Archer was extremely important to the war lords of the Middle Ages. Archery was not just a sport. Men belonging to the lower classes were required to take up archery practice by law. The first Medieval Archery Law was passed in 1252, requiring all Englishmen between the ages of 15 to 60 to equip themselves with a bow and arrows. The areas designated for training the Medieval archer were called the Butts. There were different types of archers, or bowmen, during the period, specializing in various weapons such as the longbow or
crossbow. The latter was considered easy to use and required less training compared to the longbow. Archers practicing in the Butts used a standard target with five colored rings, each divided into two bands. Each band of the target had the same width. The central two bands (bulls eye) were yellow, followed by the next bands colored red, blue, white and the outermost bands were black. For more details on Medieval Archery, please visit Archery— Medieval Life and Times.

Women in the Middle Ages occupied a number of different social roles. While they indeed faced many restrictions during those times, these women held the position of wife, mother, peasant, artisan, and nun; they also took on important leadership roles, such as abbess or queen regnant. The very concept of "woman" changed in a number of ways during the Middle Ages and several forces influenced their roles during the period. As chatelaine, a lady was expected to be able to run her lord’s household smoothly and efficiently in his absence, and this included defending his castle against marauding invaders. Source: Wikipedia.

Translations:

Molly: Do not worry. Monseigneur is just in one of his moods. He will come back to himself soon.
During his first trip into Gaaldine in the early spring when Monseigneur brought him to Wolf’s Lair, John had likened the country to a lady, coyly smiling behind her fan that she unfolded, one blade at a time, affording him a tantalizing glimpse of riches slowly divulged. Now, in midsummer, and in the throes of a joyful excitement pulsing through every village they passed as only a royal wedding could bring on, John found the lady with all her coyness gone, fan thrown aside to reveal her beauty in a riot of bright color as she danced in exuberant celebration.

All around them, Gaaldine was in high spirits, and everywhere they went, John was made conscious of what it meant to be in the entourage of an important man. They stopped at an imposing manor house on the outskirts of a village for dinner at midday, a lavish affair hosted by the local lord anxious to ingratiate himself with Monseigneur through Lady Hudson. The food was very good; laughter and good cheer flowed as freely as the lord’s fine vintages. In the early afternoon, laden with generous gifts and amid much fanfare, they parted company with their host and boarded their carriage, supplied with fresh horses for the journey ahead.

John— reared in the austere, white silences of the near-perpetual winters of the Angrian Highlands where reasons for public celebrations of any kind were very few and far in between— found the noise, the warmth and the merrymaking infectious and a bit intoxicating. Almost against his will, he felt a sense of excited anticipation at what lay ahead: seeing Gaaldine’s greatest city, Glasstown, for the first time.

He’d dreamed of this, one night months ago: coming to Glasstown for the royal wedding and not finding a place to stay. Instead, he’d found him, magnificent and obviously highborn, striding down a filthy, narrow alley, looking for someone in the crowd of common men with whom to share an anonymous encounter with— a stranger with his patrician face hidden away, inaccessible and enigmatic, yet so very familiar as he took John’s body, his pleasure.

The dream was so vivid and, combined with his intimate experience of actually having Monseigneur in bed, it had the power to reach out and squeeze at John’s heart with a pleasured pain so great that it rendered breathing momentarily difficult.

With thoughts of Monseigneur came the uneasy recollection of how they had parted ways a few days ago. Before John could quell it, a familiar sense of dejection swept in, temporarily blotting out the happy anticipation he felt just a moment ago.

He looked out the carriage window as he cast his mind back over the events that had transpired in the months he’d been in Monseigneur’s household.

It was strange, he thought, gazing out at the village’s cobbled streets, hung with colorful banners and streamers as they drove past, that all throughout his stay at the Lair, he had never once tried to venture out, not even to the small neighboring town of Elderidge. Instead, he had been content to stay within the confines of the Lair, wrapped up in Monseigneur’s world for days and weeks that stretched to months.
He tried to reason that he had done so because he was never permitted outside the Lair and he didn’t want to get anyone into trouble on his account. Yet he knew deep inside that it was all a white lie, as the thought of leaving the Lair on his own had not actually occurred to him seriously enough to warrant any action.

With or without his oath of fealty to Monseigneur, it had never occurred to him to simply run away.

Thinking about it now, he was disturbed by his lack of initiative all these months, and his lack of concern over this newfound passivity within himself. He’d changed so much in such a short time. Where had the battle-hardened Angrian soldier gone? It seemed that Monseigneur’s campaign to disarm him had been very effective indeed.

*That’s the thing with these Gaaldinians,* he thought, glancing covertly at the Lady Molly as she beamed away while looking out at the crowded streets that they passed in their stately carriage. *To look at them, one would think it possible for the lion to lie down with the lamb.*

There was silence inside the carriage, and John felt the Lady Molly’s gaze shift from the lively street scenes to settle upon him. John was in no mood to talk, but he could not easily ignore this young lady who had so patiently explained all sorts of Gaaldinian customs to him as they proceeded with their journey. After a moment, he sighed and willed himself to glance back at Molly, whose bright, inquisitive eyes missed nothing.

Yet Molly surprised him by simply saying, “it’s all right, John.”

John raised his brows inquiringly.

“That look that you sometimes have,” Molly explained. “When you let your guard down long enough to be pleased or happy, a shadow comes over your face, as though you’re deeply conflicted. You think it’s somehow wrong for you to be happy amongst us, but it’s really all right; we do want you to be happy with us, John. You’re part of our family now.”

What could one say to such a declaration? Embarrassed, John cleared his throat and found that he could not bring himself to look at Molly.

“Speaking of family, you might have wondered why we never asked you about yours,” continued Molly, growing awkward as she sensed John’s discomfort, but bravely pressing on, “Monseigneur warned us not to bring it up with you. He said that you lost your loved ones in tragic circumstances in Angria, so we thought— we thought it best never to bring the matter up lest you would feel sad, or pine for home. Monseigneur said you don’t have one— that was why he’s brought you here to us.”

John felt his throat constrict. “Did he really say all that?” he asked.

A dimple showed in Molly’s cheek. “Yes,” she said, her tone gradually turning mischievous, “though Monseigneur also said you were as wild as a hawk when he first came upon you and you fought him tooth and nail over it. Do you know that when you came to stay with us, Monseigneur would sometimes refer to you fondly as his eyass, taken from the wild?”

John was once again caught off guard with Molly’s candid revelations. It was not the most appropriate of conversations. Briefly, he wondered what Lady Hudson would think of it if she heard the exchange, but the good lady was now bundled away in a corner of the carriage by Molly’s side, lulled by the heavy dinner and the gentle jugging of the carriage into a brief afternoon nap.

“I thought it odd then, but I now see what he meant,” continued Molly.

“And what do you think he means by calling me an untrained fledgling?”
Molly laughed. “Oh, John, please don’t take it the wrong way,” she said. “I rather think he loves it—the idea of you as something wild and free, belonging to the heavens. Sometimes, I think he envies that you have that quality of proud independence. He doesn’t have it, you see.”

As John looked at her, surprised, she hastened to add, “he has everything, possibly more than anyone can ever hope to have in this world—enormous wealth and power; everything except the true freedom to do as he wishes, which is probably the most important thing for him. As royalty, he cannot escape the burden of responsibility that comes with his birthright. Do you see now, John, why he’s drawn to you?”

“That’s not how he looks at me, my lady,” said John slowly. “Men like him…”

John caught himself just in time as he realized that what he was about to say was unfit for feminine ears. How could he tell Molly about the base desires that existed in certain men for the absolute possession of another human being?

He let his words trail away but Molly finished his thought for him: “you think that for him, you’re nothing but his captive—that he took away your freedom.”

"Yes," John said quietly. “He bound me to him.”

"Just as we are all bound to him," argued Molly earnestly, "and just as he's bound by his royal obligations."

John shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "You know what I mean."

There was silence for a moment, and then Molly asked curiously, "if he were to let you go, what would you do?"

"I'd go back to Angria, of course. I'd..." John stopped, aware that he had hit a blank wall and disliking it intensely.

Out of nowhere, a memory arose, unbidden, of a deep, drawling voice murmuring, *why fight me so hard, John? Am I really so repulsive that you'd rather choose to go back to your empty life in Angria, soldiering for some worthless lord? Such a waste of ability and talent when you can make better use of your time by serving me. At the very least, you'll never be bored.*

Molly’s voice brought him back to the present. "Go on," she said politely after a moment’s pause.

"It's not the same, the ways we’re bound to him— if you will call it that," argued John testily.

"The only way that it is different between us," said Molly softly, "is that I don't wish to leave him; but do you really want to?"

"I can’t so what’s the point of asking if I want to?" said John, voice hardening at his own lame answers.

Undeterred by his gruff tone, Molly smiled at him teasingly. "I don't think you want to."

John could feel the skin on his nape prickle in sudden alarm. "Now, my lady..."

"It's all right, John," she said lightly. "It's all fine. We're his people; we're attached to him. There is no shame in admitting that."

John gazed at this innocent, trusting creature before him and felt suddenly, acutely, protective of her.
"What will you do if he were to marry somebody, someday?" he asked carefully.

There was a small pause before Molly said quietly, "we'll just have to cross that bridge when we get there."

John knew he'd hit a nerve and was sorry for ever bringing up the very issue that was constantly at the back of his mind. He hated himself even more for thinking as he did now, wondering if this girl ever daydreamed that that special somebody for Monseigneur might be her. Of course she did. How could she not, when she so obviously adored the man?

Not for the first time, John wondered how much she knew about him and Monseigneur, and what she thought of it. She seemed so accepting, so resigned and forgiving of Monseigneur's many quirks. That was true love indeed.

Feeling that they were in dire need of a change of topic, John asked, "and how about you, my lady? What will you do if you were to find out that somebody else has a very high regard for you?"

John almost laughed as Molly's eyes grew comically large. "Oh? And who might this somebody be?" she wanted to know, sounding intrigued.

"Guess."

"No, I cannot guess! John Watson, you are teasing me," she said, breaking into a smile.

"No, I'm not," he said. "Can you really not see who it is, given how obviously affected he is by you?"

"No!" said Molly. "Who is it? John, I must demand—"

"All right, all right," laughed John. "It's not really a big secret. It's Billy."

John's smile faded quickly as he watched Molly's face fall. "William?" she exclaimed incredulously.

John bit his lip, suddenly realizing that perhaps he'd made a mistake in revealing Billy this way. He said, "why do you call him that? William? It's so…formal."

"Well, that's his proper name, isn't it?" she replied, puzzled. "I remember how embarrassed he always got whenever anyone addressed him as Billy, when he was newly arrived; it's his mother’s pet name for him. He thought he’s always being treated as a child. I know how that feels, given my own name. I always thought he longed to be taken seriously."

"He seems fine now with everyone calling him Billy," John pointed out. His tone grew teasing as he continued, "as for that one person who keeps calling him William, I don’t know how she’s not noticed that he thinks the world of her. When asked what he thought of her, his exact words were: 'she is all that is amiable and good.'"

Molly gaped at him as words failed her, then she looked stricken as a thought occurred to her. "Does he…does he mind me calling him William, then?" she asked in a small voice.

John laughed. "I don't think he'd mind if you ever call him anything you'd wish. You really mean to tell me that you've not noticed his devotion to you all this time?"

"No," said Molly. Marveling more to herself than to John, she repeated in amazement, "William!"

John grinned. "Well, it's quite a relief to see that some things do escape your sharp eye, my lady
“But I don’t understand,” protested Molly, flustered. “We grew up together and he’s never said anything to me all these years.”

John declined to comment and merely gave an eloquent shrug, chuckling as Molly gazed at him in dismay while she arrived at her own conclusions. This was a pleasant change of topic, safer and infinitely preferable to John than having Molly poking about and forcing him to face his own dilemma with Monseigneur. At least with Molly and Billy, the prospect of happiness was not as remote and impossible as in his case.

Turning serious, John said, “Billy is a good lad, kind and honorable. Given his training, he’d grow up to be a great man. Most importantly, he sees you; only you. He may not be Monseigneur, but that’s for the best, trust me.”

He would have said more, but again, delicacy stopped him from saying his thoughts aloud.

He would have said that he knew what kind of man Monseigneur was: a lethal sword with no scabbard capable of holding it. The man was a walking portent of disaster, not fit for any demure damsel dreaming of her first love, tender and chivalrous.

Yet John found his own allusion disquieting, even hypocritical. He did not need anyone to point the obvious fact to him, that no one in the world could better appreciate the dangerous allure of a drawn, bloody blade than a soldier.

Despite the momentary gloom cast by thoughts of Monseigneur, the journey through Gaaldine with her picturesque villages, her bustling towns and peaceful fields, combined with the ladies’ lively chatter and gossip in the carriage, managed to charm John away from his troubles.

The sun was setting by the time they got to the borders of Gaaldine’s capital—a vast, walled city bordered by a great river, glittering and suffused with light against the gathering dusk. Upon their arrival, riders and soldiers came forth to meet their carriage. As always, Monseigneur’s royal arms emblazoned on the carriage doors spoke louder than words, and they were escorted through the main bridge over the river and into the city gates amidst much shouting and jostling. There were crowds of people everywhere. Indeed, Glasstown was already filled to overflowing with people from all corners of the kingdom and beyond.

“They say we will have to take leave of this carriage and make the rest of the journey to the palace on the river,” said Lady Hudson after chatting pleasantly through the window to one of their escorts clearing a way for them, “otherwise we shall be compelled to stay on the streets for the rest of the night.”

“Can you believe the size of the crowds, John?” Molly cried, excited as she peered out the window.

John was having difficulty keeping his mouth closed as he took in the sights and sounds of Glasstown, much more impressive than he had ever imagined: the imposing fortress-like castle on the river bank called the White Tower, of which he had heard countless, ominous stories of torture and imprisonment and also of opulence as a royal residence; the massive stone cathedrals and the magnificent edifice that served as Gaaldine’s parliament. To John, who was used to the sight of hardy Angrian fortresses and citadels dull and squat as boxes as they sat on barren hills, every building that they passed seemed like a polished jewel: everything was so huge and gorgeously designed with ornate carvings and colored glass in the windows, courtesy of the artisans whose
glassworks gave the town its name.

The sheer volume of people pressed in from all directions against their carriage reduced their progress along the streets to a snail crawl. After what seemed like hours, they finally made it to an embankment where a barge waited to take them down a river tributary.

John sighed in relief as they left the stuffy interiors of the carriage behind in favor of a light breeze and the delicious coolness of the river. They sat beneath a richly tailored canopy amidst music and refreshments while Lady Hudson engaged in conversation with their escorts, gleaning from them instructions passed down by Monseigneur.

With the Angrian and Gondalian royal entourages in town along with several other royal personages from various kingdoms, the days had been extremely busy ones and Monseigneur was hardly ever seen; however, Lestrade, they learned, would be waiting for them as soon as they reached the palace delegated to Monseigneur and his people.

Lady Hudson had described the palace in which they were to reside as a small one compared to all the others in Glasstown, yet for John, it was huge and quite handsome as they finally disembarked on its riverside platform. Staring at the imposing walls and the tall, latticed windows glowing with a warm, mellow light from within, John could feel his heartbeat quicken at the prospect of seeing Monseigneur again.

So here they were, finally arrived in Glasstown. Here he was— always just a few steps and several doors away from Sherlock. It was only now, standing on the threshold of this palace, that John allowed himself to admit that he had missed the man very much and, no matter how he would deny it to everyone else, how much he was looking forward to seeing him again.

Inevitably, thoughts of their last reunion in the Queen Mother’s residence came to mind, yet this present meeting was different, fraught with complications as soon as they entered the palace doors.

True to his word, Lestrade was waiting for them in the great hall, looking somber and very dignified in a stiff surcoat of dark grey silk. He was distant and preoccupied, giving the ladies a perfunctory greeting and his excuses before turning to John.

“Come with me, John,” he said curtly, and hurried across the hall without so much as a backward glance at Lady Hudson and Molly.

With the ladies behind them, John was astonished to see Lestrade’s expression quickly change and grow darkly thunderous. He had to quicken his pace just to catch up with Lestrade’s long strides as they walked down winding, torchlit corridors, going deeper and deeper into the castle.

John thought briefly of breaking the ice by saying something jaunty, but Lestrade’s scowl was making it very difficult to be flippant. Finally, John settled for a cautious: “what’s going on?”

“The devil take me if I know what’s going on,” bit out Lestrade. “Monseigneur wants to see you as soon as you've arrived, but you will need to change your attire before you meet him. And her.”


“Come along,” said Lestrade as he pulled a door open and stepped into a room. “I’ve asked Billy to lay out some fresh clothes for you.”

Inside the small room, Lestrade gestured at the clothes laid neatly out on a table. As John changed from his sweaty, dirt-lined travelling clothes into a fresh linen shirt and dark wool trousers, followed by a finely made, dark brown surcoat, Lestrade said, “now I want your word, John.”
“About what?” John did not like the sound of Lestrade’s tone.

“Promise me,” said Lestrade, arms crossed in front of his chest, “that you will do whatever it takes to exercise full control of yourself in front of Monseigneur. If you find it unbearable to be in his presence, just back out of it; but for God’s sake, keep your bloody mouth shut. Never forget where you are; never forget that we are after a poisoner lurking in our midst. Will you do that for me, John?”

“All right,” said John, frowning, “yeah. I can do that. Now tell me what’s going on.”

Lestrade looked away, his jaw tight. After a moment, he said, “the Exinian princess is currently staying with Monseigneur as his...guest.”

It took a moment for John to fully understand Lestrade’s meaning. “Wait,” he said slowly. “You mean the Princess Irene? I thought…”

“So did I,” said Lestrade bitterly, “and God only knows what Monseigneur is up to, consorting with that woman. I suppose he’s keeping her away from His Majesty until the wedding two days from now, but royal or not, she’s certainly not very ladylike. You should have seen her the day she arrived, slapping one of her own male attendants in full view of everyone. I’ve not seen anything like it; the woman has a whip for a hand and the tongue of a wasp.”

John stared at Lestrade’s grim features. This was quite a first for John. He’d never known Lestrade, who was the very soul of chivalry, to criticize a woman, any woman, much less to disparage her in front of him, John.

“I just thought you should know before you meet them,” Lestrade said, shaking his head. “Bloody Christ, what a picture they make.”

John nodded, his mind suddenly numb. “I’m...grateful you told me,” he said.

“Arrange your face and just pretend that you’re in a masquerade,” Lestrade said as he turned away. “Come along, then. I’ll take you to him.”

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John was indeed thankful for Lestrade’s warning, though nothing could have really prepared him for the task of seeing Monseigneur—the man who, only days ago, had taken him to bed—with a woman hanging on his arm.

He could barely remember entering the royal chamber and advancing forward with Lestrade, nor could he remember bowing in front of Monseigneur as he had been instructed, though he supposed he must have done so.

All he could remember was the icy feeling of his heart dropping to his boots as he gazed at his lover, clad in impeccable black, as always; and at her, dressed in a trailing rose scarlet gown, with one arm linked around Monseigneur’s and her small, lithe body leaning into his as she laughed at something Monseigneur murmured to her.

Her features were very fine, sharply beautiful and almost feline in their cold hauteur. Her long, dark hair, John was startled to realize, was not bound by any form of headdress; he could see it in its entirety, swept away from her face and gathered behind her head in a heavy, elegant chignon. The woman was definitely unusual, even bold and immodest as she stood regally before John. Her wide, keen eyes were like the talons of a bird of prey as they raked over his person, taking him in and dismissing him in one casual sweep before she turned her gaze back to Monseigneur.
“He’s one of your men, then,” she said, her voice a light tinkle of sound.

“He is my Angrian healer,” Monseigneur said, his voice incredibly soft, almost gentle, and John could feel the blood rush to his head, making it pound as hard as his heart.

At Monseigneur’s words, the Princess Irene turned to look at John once again, this time with more interest. “So he’s the one you’ve been telling me about,” she said. “John Watson.”

Monseigneur tilted his head as he took in every detail of John’s visage. “Leave us for a moment,” Monseigneur said, “I will need to confer with him over something of import.”

The woman’s eyes widened a little but she let go of his arm willingly enough. “As you wish, my lord,” she said before she drifted away, exiting via a side door partially hidden behind a rich tapestry.

Monseigneur nodded at Lestrade to indicate that he was also dismissed.

As soon as they were alone, Monseigneur said abruptly, “quickly: have you the medicines that I’ve asked you to prepare?”

Taken by surprise, John nodded wordlessly and handed over the small, leather bag he had slung over his shoulder. Monseigneur opened the pouch and took out the vials and the powders stored in their little containers. “Excellent,” he murmured. “I’ll need you to help fill them into certain vessels.”

He began to pull off the rings on his fingers as he spoke and handed the jeweled trinkets to John. “They can be opened to store powders,” he said. “Fill them and return them to me.”

John stared at the rings in his hand before looking at Monseigneur. The black velvet mask covering his eyes, John noticed for the first time, was also elaborately edged in silver thread and studded with small, precious stones. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He felt unable to speak lest he choke in his confusion and gathering wrath. He closed his fingers tightly over the rings before Monseigneur could see that his hand was shaking—a futile little evasion.

Monseigneur glanced at John then looked away with a roll of his eyes which only served to fuel John’s fury. “For God’s sake, just spit it out and let’s be done with it,” he said, voice suddenly shifting to the familiar, dry drawl.

John was having trouble breathing, let alone stringing two words together. That’s good, a part of him thought, remember your promise to Lestrade. Keep your bloody mouth shut.

But the rest of his mind had other ideas, and he finally managed through stiff lips that barely moved: “so. That's the Woman.”

“Yes, obviously,” replied Monseigneur unhelpfully.

“Whatever happened to your plan of annihilating her?”

“Well, clearly there has been a change of plans,” said Monseigneur dismissively.

“Oh?” said John, his voice a mere breath of rage. “Does that mean you’ll be marrying her now?”

“And if I were to say yes,” said Monseigneur as he stared at John intently, a corner of his lips sliding up into a minute smirk, “would you be jealous?”

John could have hit him then were it not for Billy, who chose that particular time to enter the room. By the time he turned back to Monseigneur, the violent impulse had passed as quickly as it had
"No," John said instead, his voice tightly under control and very cold. "Oh no. I wish you every happiness. I think you deserve each other."

"Out!" cried Monseigneur sharply, and John flinched. For a moment, he thought Monseigneur meant him, but it was addressed to Billy, though Monseigneur’s gaze never wavered from John’s face.

As soon as Billy was gone, Monseigneur said caustically, “Oh, bravo, John. What a remarkable mind you’ve got there— straightforward and simple, its paths barely used. You see the woman here alongside me and you leap at the most obvious conclusion. I commend your astuteness.”

“Well, what do you expect me to think when she's hanging off your arm like that?” John bit out. “That’s certainly not conventional behavior, is it?”

“Get used to it. She will be doing more than that in the coming days,” said Monseigneur curtly. “In future, kindly do not think to question my decisions, John; certainly not in public. Never forget that here, I am your lord and master and you are in no position to do anything but to trust and obey me unconditionally.”

John stared at Monseigneur for a moment before he started to shake his head. "No."

Monseigneur scoffed. "No?"

John took a step back, then another.

It was the old song and dance once again and he couldn’t. He just couldn’t go on with it. He was so tired of this, tired of having Monseigneur show him again and again that he was done with him, that what they had did not matter.

“No,” said John slowly, clearly. "I don’t want to do this anymore, playing your games. You can't keep doing this to me."

"You can't turn your back on me, John. Don't you dare."

"Watch me."

Monseigneur shot out a warning hand to restrain John just as he made to turn away. “John—”

At the touch of that hand on his arm, John felt something snap inside him. He could not have guessed at the next move he made. He thought he’d knock away the slender hand on his arm but instead, he found himself surging forward, into Monseigneur’s arms, catching that narrow face between his hands and leaning forward to take Monseigneur’s mouth savagely with his.

The bruising kiss may have lasted a few seconds; it may have lasted forever. It was long enough, anyway, for John to feel Monseigneur recover from his surprise; to feel his arms instantly wrapping around John, pulling him closer as he kissed Monseigneur hungrily. There— the evidence that John needed. So much for Monseigneur’s games; he wasn’t able to help himself with John any more than John could with him. He wasn’t able to forget what had happened between them, the bond they now shared whether they liked it or not. Monseigneur could make a show of casting John aside but he wasn’t able to deny that he still felt something for him.

His point made, John roughly broke the kiss as he stepped out of the close circle of Monseigneur’s arms.
For a moment, there was thick silence punctuated only by heavy breathing, then John reached up and deliberately wiped at his mouth.

“Savor it,” John said, his voice low and harsh, “that’s the last time I’m kissing you.”

“Don’t make promises you will not be able to keep, John,” replied Monseigneur, his voice ominously cool, composed.

John gave a little snort, shaking his head once again in disbelief before abruptly turning on his heel and leaving.

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John found Lestrade just outside the chamber doors, waiting for him. “All right, John?” Lestrade asked, his tone bracing.

John lifted a trembling hand to wipe at his mouth once again. “I will be,” he said.

“Good,” said Lestrade as he placed a reassuring, fraternal paw on John's shoulder. “I’ve not heard a shouting match in there, which means you’re making excellent progress. Come and let us have supper with the others. From now on you must always be on your guard and remember what I’ve told you.”

“Yes,” John said, his heart a cold, heavy lump in his chest.

What Lestrade had said was true. Indeed, the masquerade had begun.

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**Author’s Notes:** In falconry, an **eyass** is a very young raptor that has been taken from the nest while still in its downy stage.

The general layout of Glasstown is patterned after **Medieval London**. During those times, the Thames and its tributaries were widely used by the Londoners to get around the main points of the capital. The Tower of London was also known as the **White Tower**. (Source: Wikipedia)

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Dec. 6: Hi everyone! Many thanks to those who have written asking for updates on CH and Essence. I promise I will update these stories, as soon as I can find some time to settle down and write. Things have been hectic at work and I’ve got a lot on my plate right now, but definitely, definitely, the stories will be updated before Xmas. I post stuff regularly at my tumblr as well.

For Captive Hearts, I am planning on posting a one-shot called **Changeling**, which will cover Monseigneur’s earlier years (back when he was thirteen) as seen in the eyes of his late tutor, Sir John Hooper (the Lady Molly’s father). Just a peek into what goes on in that funny little brain of his, this narrative will help shed light on Monseigneur’s subsequent treatment of John Watson at court.

Here’s a little snippet:

"I will not go so far as to admit it in front of him," said Monseigneur, his voice cold and clear like the crisp winter morning outside the latticed windows of the study, "but my brother is right: all lives end. All hearts are broken. Caring is not an advantage."
Sir John gazed at the pale, little face of his charge and felt pity surge through him at the thought of the harsh lessons this boy had to pick up so very early in life.

"It’s a good thing then," continued Monseigneur, "that I don’t have one—a heart. As for those rumors that I’m a changeling, well. There was no need to swap places with a demon child at birth because I am that child."
Chapter 36

Special Thanks: To wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up) for her excellent beta, as always.

And to you guys, for being there to cheer this story on! Thank you sooo much and Happy Holidays! Series three is almost upon us!

More author’s notes at the end.

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The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

-- Jeremiah 17:9

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Long after John left him, Monseigneur stood in the center of the room, his thoughts a whirlwind in his head.

Four days.

He had not seen John for four days and it had felt like dying. That thing pumping blood inside his chest had felt tight as a fist— a heavy, twisting knot of misery and anguish, heedless of all reason as it raged over John’s absence.

It had been most disconcerting, not to mention wholly unwelcome.

*Alone is what I have*—*what I’ve always had*, Monseigneur had angrily reminded himself, over and over, as though he needed to remember one of the basic principles he’d lived by all his life. *Alone protects me.*

Much to Monseigneur’s annoyance, the words had not achieved their desired effect. They had always worked like a charm before and now they were suddenly, completely useless when set against John Watson. Monseigneur’s heart was an alien thing inside his body, newly born and already a prisoner of its own desires. Distressingly, it refused to heed the stern dictates of his mind as it stubbornly chanted its own mantra: *John, John, John…*

Monseigneur had always thought of himself as a solitary being and those rare occasions when he had felt something like loneliness were an anomaly—something nameless and impersonal— which he had been able to dismiss from his consciousness with very little effort.

Now, to his horror, he realized that that loneliness had never gone away; instead, it had taken root inside him, blossoming to something monstrous seemingly overnight and, even worse, it had a name: *John.*

Was this what the entire wretched business of being in love meant? He’d not been disappointed— it was truly a dangerous disadvantage. At the very least, it was appallingly silly to find himself *pining* for John. At most, the situation was a perfect gift to his enemies— a golden opportunity not to be wasted.

This was how it felt to walk on quicksand.
With no immediate solution in mind, he’d hoped that the problem would solve itself when he saw John again. Well, John was here now and he’d brought no relief—if anything, Monseigneur felt even worse after seeing him.

Perhaps it had something to do with being seen with a certain princess hanging onto his arm. Monseigneur would rather die than admit it, but the thought of seeing John alone again had filled him with something suspiciously like panic and for once, his steely self-confidence had deserted him. Needless to say, that had not sat well with him at all. Neither had the humiliating memory of his weeping into John’s shoulder after sex. As always, on these occasions when he’d been shoved into a corner, he’d turned vicious, resorting to vile tactics honed from an entire childhood of defending himself from a wasp-tongued brother. He had decided to make John suffer by showing him that he, Monseigneur, had not been much affected by him and their lovemaking.

Of course, it was all a lie, heaped like cards, one on top of the other, and, like a house of cards, it all fell down around him when John kissed him. So much for his desperately wicked ploy. He had even responded blindly to John for an instant instead of turning away, thus allowing John a precious opportunity to wound him with that gesture of breaking off the kiss first and deliberately wiping his mouth, as though John had tasted something deeply unsavory. It was crude but highly effective, even brilliant. Why hadn’t he thought of it?

What is this? Monseigneur thought, not for the first time, his hand clutching hard at the front of his chest, fingers crushing the fine silk of his surcoat as he felt fresh pain surge through him at the memory of John disgusted, of John walking away from him.

He was losing the game—losing to John, and all because of his goddamned heart. He had heard frequently enough from various people that he did not have one. It was deeply distressing to realize otherwise, because it meant that he was no different from anyone else, as it turned out.

His heart felt so new and already it was broken— a thing of lies and deceit, never to be trusted. If he only could, he would have gladly torn it out before it started to beat irrevocably within him because, for God’s sake, couldn’t anyone see it would be dangerous for someone like him to acquire one?

It was absolutely ridiculous for him to feel so much for another human being, and all at once: intense pleasure and that familiar hunger, admixed with a deep, lacerating pain whenever he looked at John. It crushed him to note that John’s clear gaze—angry and hurt, deeply contemptuous—was like that of a fierce bird of prey through the close-set bars of his cage; a vivid, restless, untamed captive. Were he but free, he would soar cloud high and leave Monseigneur behind.

If he were to admit it, it was a thought that had passed through his mind several times before, and each time had not lessened its power to leave a cold, nauseous feeling inside Monseigneur. How was it, that all those months of being with John in the Lair had reduced him to this? It was as if, by knowing John, a burning string had been attached to that accursed organ in his chest. It was knotted tightly, inexorably, to that same place in John and if that cord were to be severed between them now, Monseigneur thought he might take to bleeding deep inside. As for John, he would forget all about him in no time. John had promised him that much, with his savage kiss and his searing words: That’s the last time I’m kissing you.

If John were to make good on his promise and leave him, Monseigneur did not know to what depths he could sink. He’d always prided himself as an immensely capable man; there was no knowing what he was capable of doing if John were to go away. He’d merely to look at the man and all he could ever think about was the perfect fit of John’s body as he sheathed himself fully inside that wonderful, warm tightness; and John, taking him in as he lost himself in his lover’s arms, as though he truly belonged there and nowhere else. Pure madness, but Monseigneur had never known
anything so potent and sweet, so dangerously addictive. Monseigneur knew he must have John again soon, and at the same time, it was all he could do not to lay his hands on John to thrust the man farther away from him.

How can something feel so right and so wrong at the same time? How could ordinary people stand this without going mad? Why would they even want to endure it at all? Questions—there were so many of them and not a single answer was in sight.

It took a moment for Monseigneur to realize that he was breathing erratically, mouth clamped down so hard that his jaw was starting to ache as he felt his heart beat out a violent, staccato rhythm in his chest. Breathlessly, he waited to see if it would stop.

It would not.

_Enough!_

Ruthlessly sweeping all the unwanted thoughts away until they were bolted behind one of the iron doors inside his mind palace, Monseigneur gave a terse, impatient toss of his head as he straightened and gathered himself.

And not a moment too soon.

The small door to the side of the room opened, and in glided the Princess Irene. She took her customary place beside Monseigneur and threaded her arm around his once more.

“He’s gone then,” she said, glancing about at the empty room before looking up at Monseigneur’s pale, shuttered face. “Come, my lord, and let’s have supper.”

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She’d been saying that since they first met two days ago.

Before meeting her, the King had given him specific instructions: he was willing to receive Exinia’s envoys for the wedding but he would leave the princess to Monseigneur to do with as he saw fit. Before that, however, the King had asked Monseigneur to investigate how the Woman had managed to get herself to Gaaldine with her country’s envoys. Since the queen regent, her stepmother, had assumed power for her young brother, Mycroft had thought the princess was done for.

“Why bother knowing when it is obvious that she poses no threat at all to your wedding plans?” Monseigneur had drawled. By then, he had been presented to the Angrian queen over a formal dinner, and one glance at his future sister-in-law had told him she would not call off the wedding just because another woman had entered the scene. In fact, she would be no trouble at all as she was far too busy securing her own survival by making sure she got properly married to the King of Gaaldine. Upon their meeting, the dark-haired, light-voiced Anna Thea had presented a nervously pleasant, if slightly blank façade. Boring, except for Monseigneur’s deductions backed by reports from the King’s spies that told a different story: of a woman almost at her wits’ end, seeking to hold on to her crown by any means possible. She had refused Mycroft’s offers of an alliance until she could no longer do so. Yet this marriage—hugely unpopular in her native land—may just be the catalyst to set off a full-scale war between their nations.

She had nearly been kidnapped by one of her own noblemen months before. He had managed to flee court before she could get him arrested and thrown into prison. Now, seizing this royal marriage as an excuse, that same nobleman had gone on to raise an army against her by declaring that she had given Angria away to the Gaaldinian King, and on her marriage bed, no less. According to the spies'
reports, several Angrian high lords opposed to the Gaaldinian match had already flocked to join him. Mycroft was the only one who stood between her and a powerful rebel faction back home. Monseigneur was sure that the King was only too aware that he had the little queen in the palm of his hand.

The King himself had been under a lot of strain these last months. Still, Mycroft had lost none of his suave diplomacy as he graciously welcomed his future bride and her small entourage to Glasstown. During the sumptuous dinner, she had sat stiffly to one side of the King while he leaned over on his other side to tell Monseigneur, in Gondalian, to get rid of the Woman as soon as he was finished with her.

“The Exinians know it is in bad taste for us to turn anyone away during a wedding,” Mycroft had told him, “and I do not wish to have any scenes from that Woman that will make a mockery of it. We only have a few days before the ceremony. I am only asking you for a few days to hold off any disaster, and you shall have anything you desire that it is within my power to grant.”

It was this promise that had clinched the deal between the brothers. Casting the assembled Angrian congregation a fleeting look of disdain, he had known as surely as the sun rose and set each day that somewhere within this crowd of unrefined northern nobility lurked the reason that might take John Watson away from him. Monseigneur knew he would need his brother to fulfill his word by the time this entire debacle was over.

So he had given in with as good a grace as he could muster and had murmured, “agreed.”

Yet, the Princess Irene had proven to be a force to be reckoned with when he’d finally met her. Upon arrival, the Exinian delegation had been waylaid to the White Tower, that most infamous of Gaaldinian fortresses that was part palace and mostly prison. Monseigneur’s reception had been brief and to the point. Dressed splendidly in black silk and a heavy velvet cape adorned with his coat of arms, Monseigneur had delivered his scripted lines of welcome with a chilling formality that had silenced the outraged tones of the Exinian envoys who had expected better quarters for their stay.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are all busy people,” Monseigneur had drawled quite pleasantly as he drew to a close. “Let us get on with dinner but before we do so, I understand that there is a royal personage amongst you to whom I have not yet given my proper respects. Why suffer me this discourtesy by hiding her from me?”

She had come forward then, stepping away from her ladies and drawing away the heavy hood that hid her head. A shocked murmur had risen from the crowd as she advanced boldly, hair uncovered and unbound, spilling about her shoulders— inappropriately regnant and falsely virginal. Her wide eyes were at least her own: they were hard and agleam with sharp interest as she fixed her gaze on Monseigneur.

A fellow from her entourage— a large man with the chest and limbs of a Hercules— made to stop her. “Princess—”

He had got no farther. The Princess Irene had turned upon him in an instant, that slender arm extended, swinging in a wide arc before she brought her palm down savagely across the man’s face. In the stunned silence and the echoing hall, the slap of her hand had cracked like a whip.

“Don’t ever think to touch me again,” she had hissed. “You’re done now.”

Seemingly undeterred by the sudden distraction, the Princess Irene had turned back to Monseigneur nonchalantly and swept him a deep curtsey.
If the turn of events had surprised Monseigneur he had been excellent at hiding it. “Your Highness,” he had murmured, bowing deeply in return before extending a hand out to her. “It has been a while. I imagine we will have quite a few things to talk about.”

The Princess Irene had smiled. “Oh, quite, your Highness,” she had said as she took Monseigneur’s proffered hand.

Once they had been alone in one of the Tower chambers, the Princess Irene had said without preamble, “For my safety, I want separate lodgings for myself and a few of my ladies immediately and as far away from Count von Ormstein as possible.”

Monseigneur had been briefed on the tangled relations that existed in the Exinian court and he was ready: “Your stepmother’s representative and, if reports are accurate, her unofficial chief adviser and bed warmer as well. He’s going up the rungs of the ladder rather quickly and may soon even gain the post of Secretary of State.”

“All in a night’s work for him, I assure you, your Highness,” the princess had replied as she met Monseigneur’s impassive gaze unflinchingly. “As you can see, he’s here as my watchdog.”

Monseigneur had begun to circle the princess slowly, hands behind his back, as she got more and more interesting. Ten years had brought about quite a change in her appearance, but not her demeanor. “And you, I believe, are part and parcel of his work, too. He’s to accomplish it here,” he had said. “Why not just lock you up in an Exinian nunnery where you’ll never be heard from again? That would have saved everyone a lot of trouble, and I seem to remember you’d had a fondness for nunneries when you were much younger.”

The princess had smiled widely. “Believe you me, my lord, I’ve had a lot of growing up to do in all the years we’ve not seen each other. I can assure you that I’ve not managed to get here by behaving like a nun. I think you already know that I am not expected to return to Exinia alive. That was the only reason why I was allowed to come here.”

“So that you can be dispatched amid the pomp and pageantry of my brother’s royal wedding,” Monseigneur had murmured, growing more interested despite himself. “A murder far from the shores of Exinia where blame can never reach your stepmother. How convenient. Still, what has that got to do with me?”

“Obviously you can stop it, my lord.”

“Why should I?” Monseigneur’s voice had been coldly indifferent. “If you’ve come hoping to snag a husband here, or a knight in shining armor to rescue you, I will advise you now of its futility. I’m not interested in gaining a wife and it would be useless for you to try and seduce me into marriage. You’ve been stripped of your wealth; you’ve nothing to your person except your title. Now stop boring me and think: what have you to offer that will interest me or my brother enough to help you?”

There was a beat of silence or two, and then Irene, never batting an eyelash, had said, “All right. I do happen to know something that might interest you. Somebody else wants you dead, my lord, and I have been tasked to kill you in order to save my own neck.”

She had looked at him from beneath her lashes and murmured, “that got your attention now, didn’t it?”

Indeed, Monseigneur had stopped moving. He had stood stock still, back ramrod straight, as he
looked at this creature before him— really looked, for the first time.

Was she bluffing or wasn’t she? Monseigneur had realized with a start that he did not know. He had not been able to read her.

She had continued to gaze at him with her cat’s eyes, coolly calculating, before saying, “don’t think I did not realize the intentions of my stepmother and her lover before leaving Exinia, and have not made certain arrangements of my own. Somebody managed to contact me to offer a way out, but there is a hefty price to be paid for his service.”

“My life.”

“None other, your Highness.”

“Obviously you do not trust him.”

“Of course not. The moment you’re dead, I may as well be, in his hands. I will no longer be of any use to him or anyone else.”

“And you think you can trust me?” Monseigneur had given her a coldly amused look from the corner of his eyes.

“You’ll need me alive if you want to get to him, my lord,” she had said, smiling. “Of course, you may throw me in the dungeons and have me over the rack to pry a name out of me, but I promise you this, Monseigneur: my lips will be sealed and I will never let slip a word even under torture. Besides, once he finds out the game is up, he’ll probably scuttle away to devise another plan and you may never catch him the next time.”

“I already know who he is.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that you may already know who he is. Your massive intellect is known far and wide after all, my dear Prince. That ought to simplify things. I need not tell you who it is, then. But to catch him— ah! That’s a different game altogether, wouldn’t you say, my lord? It won’t be easy at all, but surely it has also occurred to you that I am the most direct way to him. I can save you a great deal of time and effort.”

“You’re proposing to betray the very person who’s helping you?” Monseigneur had murmured. “No: this person knows about the plot to get rid of you. He’s probably been asked to plan your murder but he’s chosen to blackmail you instead and use you to toy with me. He’s brought you here to play his little games. Novel.”

The princess gave a nod of approval and she had continued, “he’s had the count believe he’s working for him and my stepmother. He’s got me out of Exinia and he’s promised to get me all the way out and to provide money and protection after I’ve done his bidding. I don’t believe him. Not after what he’s done to the two villages in the north.”

Monseigneur’s voice had been very still: “You know about those.”

“I know a great many things besides,” the Princess Irene had said engagingly; she had never stopped smiling. “All in due time, my lord, and I will need your pledge that you shall carry out the rest of our bargain after we are done.”

“What makes you think I can trust you?”

The princess had shrugged prettily. “Perhaps you never will, but then, that’s already a given, isn’t it?
You’ll constantly have to be on your guard against me then.”

“And you think you can trust me to carry out our so-called bargain to the very end?”

The princess had tilted her head to regard him beseechingly. “You are a man of your word, your Highness, are you not? That is what all Gaaldinians far and wide will readily attest to, anyway. They believe in you, their ange noir, and so must I. There’s nothing like summoning a dark angel to thwart the devil’s work.”

When Monseigneur had said nothing to that, she had pressed on, “I have a list of my requests and some ideas about my protection once they’ve been granted. We can talk about it later, if you wish. For now, my lord, let us have dinner. I’m starving.”

Author’s Notes: Count von Ormstein, he with the chest and limbs of a Hercules, is lifted from the description of the King of Bohemia, Irene Adler’s tormentor, in ACD’s A Scandal in Bohemia.

During Medieval times, only queens (and usually only during their coronation) and very young girls were allowed to wear their hair loose. All other women were required to wear caps and elaborate headdresses.

In Jewish, Islamic and Early Christian mythology, dark angels are angels of death and destruction, different from fallen angels in that they are messengers of God and their obedience to Him is absolute. In some holy texts, they are regarded as avengers of God's justice, the takers of life and terrible to behold but without actually being evil.

And yes, a part of Monseigneur’s thoughts on John are lifted directly from one of the most famous passages in Charlotte Brönte’s Jane Eyre, wherein Mr. Rochester declared to Jane, “I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you — especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. As for you, — you'd forget me."
As things turned out, a hearty supper and a good night’s sleep went a long way to restoring John’s sense of equanimity. His head was clear and his heart was much calmer when he awoke early the next day, risen by Billy as the youth moved about in their sleeping quarters, quietly getting dressed. Outside the window, dawn was just breaking.

“John, sir,” said Billy, surprised to see John sitting up on his pallet. “There’s no need for you to get
up so early. You still have half an hour or so to lie down.”

“I’ve slept my fill,” John said softly, careful not to raise his voice lest he disturb the others— two young pages unfamiliar to him but obviously Billy's Glasstown friends, lads from good families who were tasked to help Billy attend to Monseigneur during the wedding festivities. Monseigneur’s sleeping quarters lay just beyond a small connecting door to the side of their room. While four men had to make do for the night in a room that was little more than the size of a pantry closet, Monseigneur had made it plain that he wanted nobody else sleeping in his spacious chambers last night.

Why? A treacherous voice had whispered resentfully inside John's head when he heard that tidbit from Billy. *Does he happen to have someone under the sheets with him?*

Shut up! John had snapped at himself irritably.

With or without the Woman by his side, the simplest explanation was that everything was business as usual with Monseigneur: as always, he was being an inconsiderate prat by using his royal prerogative to hog all that bedroom space to himself when the castle, not to mention the entire Gaaldinain capital, was full to overflowing with people.

Down the hall, Lestrade and his family had to share their cramped rooms with their personal servants, with only a curtained bed to provide them some privacy for the night. Outside the rooms, even more servants were to be found sleeping in the corridors. Various ladies-in-waiting were crammed together in narrow rooms all over the palace while some of the knights had decided to stake out parts of the great hall, sleeping on the long wooden benches normally used by diners during mealtimes. Still others, the lower soldiers and retainers, had to find their lodgings outside the castle.

John gave Billy a brief once-over and inquired, “What about you? Did you sleep well?”

If at all, he wanted to add.

 Barely a week with his master in Glasstown and fatigue was already etched into the boy’s face and under his eyes, hollowing out his cheeks. On any given day, attending to Monseigneur’s needs was never the easiest of tasks, yet John suddenly realized that their routine in the Lair was almost like a holiday compared to Monseigneur’s rigorous schedule at court.

In answer to his query, Billy merely gave a tired shrug. “I will need to be there when Monseigneur rises,” he said.

John was silent for a moment, his lips pursed as he carefully weighed his next words. “So,” he said finally, “what’s his schedule like today?”

“Monseigneur will be in the jousting grounds for most of the morning. I’m sure he’ll send for you there along with my lord uncle after breakfast,” said Billy as he pulled a linen shirt down his lean frame. “Then there’s dinner with the King at noontime, but before that, quite possibly he will need to accompany His Majesty on his long, daily walk round the gardens.”

John raised his brows. “The gardens?”

Billy laughed softly. “It’s one of the most dreaded of royal activities— accompanying the King while he tours the gardens at the main palace. It's tedious but His Majesty needs the exercise. Not even Monseigneur can refuse when he is summoned— I mean, invited— to attend along with the other ministers. It’s basically a series of state meetings with a bit of socializing thrown in.”

John gave a brief smile at the mental image Billy’s words had conjured of Monseigneur, sulkily
trailing after his brother along the prettily arranged flower beds like a dark raincloud, then said, “So, he’s jousting today, is he?”

“Monseigneur? Oh yes, sir. He needs to practice in time for the tournaments to be held immediately after the wedding,” said Billy as he finished dressing. “Excuse me, sir, while I wake these gits. Oi! Enough beauty sleep there! Time to rise.”

John would have wanted to ask more but Billy was apparently in a hurry, so he settled for watching as Billy nudged at the other two pages none too gently with his foot. The youths rose amid much yawning and muttering but readily followed Billy through the small door on the other side of the room to start their morning chores for Monseigneur.

There wasn’t any point in lying back down, so John got up after a moment more and began to get dressed. He was ready for quite some time before a servant of Lestrade came around for him.

Lestrade presided over the brief, informal breakfast with his soldiers clustered loosely together in one of the stone courtyards of the castle. With fresh, warm bread and a cup of ale in hand, they waited for their orders as Lestrade handed out the lists of chores and assignments for the day. When everything had been settled and the group had dispersed, Lestrade said to John, “we’ll be meeting Monseigneur in the lists, but I suppose Billy has already told you that.”

“Yeah, he did,” said John.

"You got your medicines with you, then? I mean, in case you forget, you're officially his doctor now —"

John patted the leather bag that was slung over his shoulder. "I'll never be anywhere without them."

"Good." Lestrade was silent for a moment before he turned to John, eyes wide, as though a thought had just occurred to him. "You've never seen him in a joust before, have you?" he said.

"Well, let's see," said John, affecting to think hard. "There was that time when he was chasing me down that open field and he tripped me up with his lance, but I was too busy running away to really take a good look at him."

Lestrade snorted laughter through his nose. "Yeah, well, that was ages ago."

John's smile was tight. "It seems that way sometimes, doesn't it?"

Lestrade's smile wavered a fraction but he brought a huge hand down to squeeze at John's shoulder reassuringly. "Just remember to arrange your face like I told you," he said as they started down the courtyard toward the stables.

"Meaning?" Queried John.

"You're a smart man, John. Work it out for yourself," said Lestrade and John had to pause for a bit as he realized he was being teased.

Dick, he thought, smiling nevertheless as he followed Lestrade into the stables.

The lists, or jousting grounds, were situated in the open parklands on the very edge of town, away
from the teeming crowds. It took Lestrade and John quite some time to get there on horseback as they navigated through Glasstown’s busy roads, filled with people going about their morning business amid horses and oxen pulling heavy carts and carriages laden with even more people and produce. All around them, a cacophony of sights and sounds—the shouts of town criers and peddlers competed with the peals of church bells while colorful banners and garlands of flowers hung from buildings and houses.

There was nothing like the bright, festive air of a city rejoicing in a very public and royal wedding. John could not help but feel the excitement as they passed through these happy, bustling scenes, and he and Lestrade were made to stop frequently as the general was hailed by a multitude of people along the way.

“What?” Demanded Lestrade as he caught John staring at him after he received a series of felicitous, not to mention obsequious, greetings from a set of knights on horseback.

John shrugged, smiling. “I didn’t realize you were popular,” he said.

Lestrade gave a shout of laughter. “You’ve not seen anything yet, John Watson,” he said. “Monseigneur casts a long shadow, but long before I was his man, I was known around these parts as the Silver Paladin.”

John struggled not to wince at Lestrade’s choice of words, uttered quite literally and innocently. It was not Lestrade’s problem that certain phrases could now strike at John like a slap on the face—phrases that had passed through Monseigneur’s own lips that had the power to conjure various memories of intense pleasure and pain for John.

“Silver Paladin,” mused John, cloaking his momentary discomfiture under a layer of cheek. “What’s that supposed to mean, exactly?”

“It means, you’d better know the stations of the people around you enough to behave properly towards them,” growled Lestrade. “Monseigneur, for instance. So help me, I’ll have you hauled away if I hear you say anything that sounds remotely like ‘Sherlock’ when you’re addressing your royal master in public. You are either to address him as Monseigneur or its equivalent, which is ‘my lord’, or, as court etiquette dictates, Your Highness. Got that, John?”

“Or I won’t be addressing him directly at all, how is that?” said John.

“I’d like to see you try,” muttered Lestrade. “And another thing: you will not be speaking to him unless he speaks to you first, and that applies to all the nobles at court.”

John was silent for a moment as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. Then, he said, “will I be expected to attend to him at every moment?”

“Not every moment, no, but you will be on standby just the same unless he says otherwise,” said Lestrade. “As of now he will be extremely busy—he’s got wedding rehearsals to attend to, and—”

John snorted laughter despite himself. “Wedding rehearsals?”

“Well, prince of the realm or no, it’s only natural that he’s got an important function to perform at his brother’s wedding!” exclaimed Lestrade. “It would be unthinkable to have anything otherwise.”

“And you?” Asked John, his tone turning serious.

“Of course I have my own role in the ceremony,” answered Lestrade flatly, staring straight ahead. “Come on, John, let’s not dither. We’re late enough as it is.”
The rest of the ride was marked by a sudden, heavy silence that John thought best not to break. Until now, he had never given much thought about how Lestrade would feel about the wedding of his royal friend who, according to rumor, was dearer to him than was appropriate. If it felt anything at all like how John felt for Sherlock, then Lestrade must be in considerable torment. Yet at all times during the past, except for that episode in the Lair tower when Lestrade lost his temper with John and his insolent remarks, Lestrade’s demeanor towards his friend, the King, had been perfectly unassailable, his actual feelings indiscernible.

Now this silence between them was suddenly speaking volumes, yet how admirably Lestrade continued to carry himself as he betrayed nothing to John. Let the silence speak of different things to different people—Lestrade was never going to dignify their assumptions with a response.

There was something here, John realized, that he could learn much from as he dealt with the thorny issue that was Monseigneur: Monseigneur, who had made it clear that he was through with John. Monseigneur, who could still prove to be John’s ruin if John were not careful to hold the man at bay. Yet John knew it would be a difficult task. Or, at least, he should have known. At any rate, he knew immediately what he was up against when they reached the lists and saw Monseigneur in full battle armor, charging down the line astride the Beast with lance drawn and ready to strike at his opponent coming the other way.

A crash of steel reverberated in the still, hot air as the lances met and Lestrade gave out a sharp whistle of appreciation as the opponent's weapon splintered under Monseigneur's strike. There were cheers and applause from the neighboring stands.

"To look at Monseigneur, you wouldn't have thought that he's not been in the lists even once these past months," said Lestrade with a touch of pride in his voice.

John said nothing. Indeed, he found that he could barely utter a word as he watched Monseigneur rein in the Beast.

"So this was how he looked like," thought John as he remembered yet again their first, fateful meeting. He'd been too busy running away from him then, but he recalled catching a glimpse of Monseigneur with his head bare, dark curls made wild by the wind and his body encased in that splendid, black armor with a black cape billowing after him as he chased John across that green field, slippery with rain, and tripped him with his lance.

The devil on horseback, darkly magnificent, out hunting for his favorite quarry: a lost soul. He'd captured John and bound him to his person so completely that all throughout these months, John had lost himself over and over to the man and he'd never been able to find his way back.

Lestrade’s voice brought him back to the present: “Shut your trap, John; you’re drawing flies.”

John could feel his face flush as he closed his mouth with an almost audible snap. He could hear Lestrade sniggering as they dismounted from their horses and made their way along the edge of the berfrois to have a better look at the match.

"Wiggins won't stand another assault like that," observed Lestrade, shaking his head as the two opponents were given new lances. "I'd say we're nearly done here."

John stared at Monseigneur's armored figure as attendants swarmed around him and the ever-impatient Beast, also draped in Monseigneur's colors of black and silver.

"Marvellous bastard, isn't he?" remarked Lestrade.
John turned to him, eyes wide, before he realized that Lestrade was talking about the horse.

"He's as wild as they come," said Lestrade, nodding at the Beast as it gave an imperious toss of its massive ebony head, sending a startled attendant scuttling away from him. "Of course, his lineage is impeccable; came from a long line of war horses, he did, but he’s got a touch of the devil in him. The first thing the bloody creature did when he arrived at the Lair was to trample on a groom. The fellow almost died and the Beast almost got sent back before Monseigneur could even lay a hand on him. That would surely have been the end of him."

"Except Monseigneur tamed him."

"Of course."

"How?"

"You won't believe this, but the big brute was actually scared of his own shadow," said Lestrade, grinning at the memory. "That explained why he went crazy whenever he was led out in the mornings and early afternoons with the sun high in the sky. Monseigneur saw the problem almost immediately after he'd interviewed the retainers and he soon broke him in good and proper. All it really took was for Monseigneur to talk to him softly and turn his head away so he wouldn't see his own shade."

“What? And that’s it?”

“That’s it,” said Lestrade. “The Beast was his creature, and only his, from then on.”

John let out a soft snort as he shook his head.

“What? You don’t believe me?” asked Lestrade. "I was there myself, you know."

"Oh, I believe you," said John briefly. He stopped himself before he could say his thoughts out loud—that Monseigneur was highly adept at breaking his creatures in.

“Well, I dare say that horse and master closely resemble each other," said Lestrade, “Monseigneur himself is an immensely difficult man with more than a touch of the devil in him. There’s hardly anyone like him, and I’ve known many great men. There are people out there who find him an irresistible challenge for that very reason.”

John stared at him, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"Of course it’s tough, penetrating his armor, and there aren’t many chinks in it either," continued Lestrade with a shrug, his tone mild and detached as though he were discussing an academic problem. "Besides, I can imagine that he’ll be all claws and bared teeth beneath that armor. Blood will surely be drawn on several occasions, but that hasn’t deterred people from pursuing him as though he were some great prize. They’re going about it all wrong, of course. Now, your tactic, on the other hand..."

John waited for Lestrade to finish, but when nothing else seemed forthcoming, he said, "“I…I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you, really?” Queried Lestrade, looking at John with brows suggestively raised.

No, I fucking don’t! John wanted to say crossly.

Instead, he found himself saying, “The Princess Irene seems to be succeeding in that area. You saw
her with him last night. A few days with her and she practically had him eating out of her hand.”

Lestrade scoffed. “And you believe that farce, do you?”


“Hell, no!” Exclaimed Lestrade, and John felt a surge of those emotions he’d never wanted to feel—the ones he’d resolutely tried to keep at bay: a sweeping tide of relief and wild hope, so fearfully unbridled, dangerous in its willingness to be deceived over and over again.

Before John could press Lestrade further, the call to charge was given, and they watched as the two armored fighters clashed in the field once again. John watched as Monseigneur finally delivered the *coup de grace*, thrusting his lance past his opponent’s shield and straight onto his armored chest, sending the man toppling from his horse. Monseigneur was already galloping away when the man landed on the soft, muddy track in a dull crunch of metal and the frenzied neighing of his stunned horse.

“Like I said: game over,” announced Lestrade briskly as he turned away from the ensuing commotion. “Come on, John. Pavilion three. Let’s get a move on.”

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It took three men to attend to Monseigneur after the joust: one to receive his shield and lance and two to help him dismount from the Beast.

*This*, he thought irately as he pulled off his gauntlets, *is all Mycroft’s fault!*

Trust the King to have the bright idea of holding a royal wedding with all its attendant festivities in the middle of the hottest month in Gaaldine. An hour strapped into his armor and Monseigneur felt as though he were being broiled alive. He could only hope the King would feel just as sweaty and uncomfortable in his wedding finery when the big day came.

There were just a few more days to go. It could very well be an eternity away as far as Monseigneur was concerned.

He stalked into the pavilion, pulling off his helmet and tossing it to Billy who followed a few steps behind him. Jerking off the chainmail coif that covered his head, he raised his hands to ruff through his damp curls, aware that John Watson was standing silently by, watching every move he made.

“You’re late,” Monseigneur growled as he approached Lestrade and John.

“Heavy traffic across town, my lord,” replied Lestrade with a straight face.

“Is that so,” said Monseigneur, his pale eyes flicking over to scan John’s closed face. He could see that John was going to carry on being mulish. Tedious, but he would be better prepared to deal with him today than last night.

“His Majesty has asked us to accompany him for his daily walk,” said Monseigneur, “after I’ve had my bath.”

He continued to watch John carefully, noting how John's gaze skimmed along towards the bath being drawn just a few feet away before ducking his head, lips pursed. Monseigneur almost smiled.

*This*, he thought. He'd missed this, missed all the little games he played with John. He didn’t even mind admitting to himself that he'd missed John so much.
For the past few days, he’d been so caught up in the maelstrom of emotions elicited by John that he had not noticed how much he needed him by his side. It finally dawned on him a few moments before when he had caught sight of John talking to Lestrade as they stood at the sidelines, waiting for his match to resume. John had been deep in conversation with Lestrade and at one point he had laughed at Lestrade’s words.

That little scene of friendly familiarity between John and Lestrade had set off a wave of jealousy so intense that at that particular moment, Monseigneur would have gladly strangled his trusted general and right-hand man who had served him so faithfully for almost ten years.

And this was just Lestrade; John had yet to meet the ladies at court.

It felt wrong, having John so far away when he should be here, right beside Monseigneur and in happy collusion with him as they discussed what was to be done next. During his calmer moments, he knew he was doing the right thing to exclude John from his plans, but why did it feel wrong?

But this—toying with John, getting him all hot and bothered and struggling to hide his confusion—this was good. Monseigneur felt like he was back on solid, familiar ground. This was what he did best.

Monseigneur turned away and allowed Billy and another page to begin the process of removing his body armor from him.

“For this afternoon, I take it His Majesty will require our presence in the wedding rehearsals, sir,” remarked Lestrade as Monseigneur undressed.

Monseigneur scoffed. “How many times does he need to see me go down the aisle with the holy scepter? I’ve already promised that I won’t be dropping it at any time during the procession.”

From behind them, Dimmock, Monseigneur’s secretary, announced, “The Queen Mother is also arriving in time for dinner, Your Highness.”

“Oh joy,” remarked Monseigneur dryly. "That would mean supper at her place every night from now on.”

Finally stripped bare, Monseigneur moved to stand in front of John, spreading his arms sideways. John blinked and cast an uncertain glance at Lestrade, but before Lestrade could intervene, Monseigneur drawled, “Go ahead, John, and do your duty. You’re supposed to examine me and make sure I’ve not sustained any injury.

“Search carefully,” urged Monseigneur as John hesitated, watching Monseigneur’s chest rise and fall from all the exercise. Monseigneur could feel the heat roll off him in waves through skin moist and glowing with a patina of sweat. "This was how the killer almost got me last time."

Monseigneur’s lips twitched as John cleared his throat and muttered, “Right.”

He kept still, arms gracefully spread out, as John tentatively took a step toward him.

“Why are you even jousting when you know the killer might strike again the same way as before?” John asked, voice pitched very low.

“All the quicker to flush him out,” murmured Monseigneur. “Though I am quite certain he won’t need the joust as cover this time around. A repeat performance is boring and this one likes to keep things novel.”
John bit his lip and was silent. Monseigneur gazed down at John as he examined him closely, a little
gingerly. John was careful, oh so careful, not to touch him at all. By now John had learned how to
hide his own emotions, his eyes not giving anything away as they swept impersonally over the
muscled contours of Monseigneur's body.

“You’ve not shaved this morning,” Monseigneur suddenly remarked.

“It’s only a bit of stubble. It can wait another day or two,” said John as he quickly ran a hand over
his jaw. “Besides, I didn’t have the equipment this morning to—”

He broke off as Monseigneur moved a hand to touch the side of his face. To his credit, John did not
even flinch. In a voice low enough so that only Monseigneur could hear it, he said, “What the hell do
you think you’re doing?”

“I like my doctors clean-shaven,” said Monseigneur, voice a mere breath as he trailed a finger down
John’s rough cheek in the most fleeting of touches. “Besides, they’re not paying any attention to us
right now.”

He watched as John carefully glanced over his shoulder at Lestrade, who had moved away to speak
to Dimmock.

Then, between one breath and the next, something went wrong.

Monseigneur felt again that cold sensation of dread, as though someone had tipped ice water down
his back without warning, as he watched John’s gaze return to pin him with a reproachful look from
under his brows and just like that, he was drawing away.

“All right, stop it now,” said John, his voice not so much angry as weary. “Why even bother when
we’ve moved past the old song and dance. I get it, yeah? You’ve made yourself clear as crystal last
night.”

Monseigneur leveled John with a long, cool stare. “Have I?” he drawled.

John gave a soft snort of disbelief, and that thin trickle of icy dread turned into an avalanche as
Monseigneur saw once again that look of contempt flit through John’s features.

Lestrade's voice suddenly broke in, dispelling the thin thread of tension that had woven itself
between them: "Are you done now, John?"

"Yeah," said John as he took a step back and turned away from Monseigneur. "I'm done."

Through his mounting outrage and the cold feeling of distress that gripped him, Monseigneur sensed
another emotion fighting to reach the surface as he heard John’s words, brutally simple and startling
for its honesty: a kind of awe that was equal parts admiration and respect.

Dear God, this man he loved.

He supposed he’d always admired John, but he never fully realized how much he respected him until
now— now when he could no longer deny the pull that John exerted over his nascent heart. Now
when John may no longer want him.

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Author’s Notes: The story of how Monseigneur tamed the Beast is lifted from the story of
Bucephalus, Alexander the Great’s legendary war horse. So beloved was he that Alexander named
the town in which he was buried after him (Phalia, in Pakistan’s Mandi Bahauddin District) when he died of wounds incurred in the Battle of the Hydaspes in 326 BC.

In terms of build and function, the Beast is probably a destrier (derived from the common Latin term, dextarius, or right-sided), known during Medieval times as the Great Horse. The word destrier did not refer to a specific breed, but to a type of horse. It carried knights and royalty into battles, tournaments and jousts. These horses were usually stallions, known for their size and aggression, thus bred and raised from foalhood specifically for the purposes of war. Being highly prized, destriers were also not very common. Most knights usually rode other horses such as coursers and rounceys. Together, these three types of war horses were often referred to generically as chargers. (Source: Wikipedia)

**Terms for medieval armor parts were obtained [here](#):**

**Terms for the Medieval Joust were obtained [here](#):**

*Berfrois*- grandstand that housed the spectators of a tournament

*Coup de Grace*- the death blow that a knight delivers to his mortally wounded opponent

*Lists*- barriers that defined the battlefield or jousting grounds in a tournament

*Pavilions*- brightly colored, rounded tents that housed the combatants and their attendants and surgeons

And speaking of horses, [Happy Lunar New Year](#) to everyone! May the Year of the Horse be a lucky one for us!
Chapter 38

Special Thanks: To wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up) for her excellent and perceptive beta, as always. Happy Birthday, my dear!

And to PlumpPushu, my French connection, for her lovely translations.

More author’s notes and translations at the end.

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“The heart wants what it wants or else it does not care.”

--- Emily Dickinson

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Months ago, when John was still a newcomer at the Lair, the Lady Molly had told him a strange story from an ancient, far-off land where people worshipped many gods, not just one.

“Once upon a time,” Molly had said, “there was a woman—the first woman ever created, in whose person each of the gods had bestowed a special gift. In fact, her name, Pandora, meant ‘the all-gifted.’ To this peerless creature the gods assigned a special task: the guardianship of a particular box that was never, ever, to be opened.

“Instantly, Pandora’s curiosity was piqued. ‘What lies within the box?’ asked she upon receiving it.

“‘T’is not for you to know,’ answered the gods enigmatically before they went on their way, leaving her with the heavy chest. So she went about her daily tasks as best she could—she was a good weaver—but her mind would not leave the box alone; her thoughts were constantly upon it. Every so often, she would look up from her loom and gaze longingly at the thing. ‘What can the contents be,’ she mused, ‘to warrant such secrecy?’

“The more she looked upon the beautifully crafted box, the more convinced she was that it contained something valuable. It flattered her that the gods would entrust her with something so obviously important. She meant no harm and she certainly did not intend to steal whatever was inside. She only wanted to take a peek. Besides, she told herself, no one would ever know.”

At this point, Molly had broken off her narrative to ask, “Are you alright, John?”

John had cleared his throat and said hastily, “Yeah, I’m alright.”

“It’s just…your face—”

“No, no,” John had said, flushing an angry red. “I just…remembered something. It's nothing. Pray continue.”

“So Pandora finally managed to open the box,” Molly had continued, “and guess what was inside?”

“Nothing good,” John had muttered, more to himself than to Molly.

“Exactly!” Molly had said. “It turned out that the box contained all the evils that would plague the world and mankind. As soon as she opened it, every imaginable woe and illness, pestilence and strife, burst forth from the box and flew into the air—a torrent of bad wind that spread throughout
the world— too much and too quickly for Pandora to do anything to stop their escape. By the time she managed to shut the box, only one thing remained within it. ‘Let me out,’ it said to her, ‘let me out so we may have a remedy for all the troubles unleashed.’

“It turned out to be Hope. Pandora let it out and watched as it fluttered away,” Molly had said as she wound her story to a close. “So that was how the world came to be evil, at least according to the early peoples to whom the myth belonged.”

Molly had paused before she continued: "Though to be fair to Pandora, I hardly think anyone would be able to resist such a temptation, wouldn't you agree, John Watson? I think the gods deliberately placed that box in her care knowing that she would open it."

“Like Eve,” John had murmured absently. He did not know why he had said it— his thoughts had been far away, going back in time to his first days with Monseigneur when he had watched the man burn with fever and his hand had made mischief by lifting that damned mask from Monseigneur’s features. All the while, Pandora’s words had echoed in his mind: No one will ever know…

Oblivious to John’s thoughts, Molly had given him a pleased smile. "True. Very true,” she had said. “Anyway, the moral of the story is, as long as Hope is abroad, Man can ultimately triumph over any evil.”

John had been silent for a moment as he digested Molly’s words. “I thought that box contained all the evils in the world,” he had finally said.

“It did.”

“Then Hope must be evil as well,” John had argued, ‘if the gods decided to place it with all the other evil things in the box.”

His little paradox had left Molly floundering for an explanation. “Well,” she had finally said. “I suppose Hope can be cruel, the false kind especially, but how can we know how things will turn out in life? It is not for ordinary mortals to know. That is perhaps why, no matter what happens, we must never lose hope.”

John had not bothered Molly with his opinion and he had merely given her a vague, noncommittal reply. How could he possibly make her understand what he knew of life when they belonged to separate and opposite worlds? Molly was young and idealistic, raised alongside royalty all her life and sheltered from the world’s wayward influences as befitting a proper lady. She could afford to shut herself in the ivory tower she had built out of her romance books and dream of true love. John, on the other hand, was a soldier. He had fought in bloody conflicts and he had lost friends along the way. He had never known his family and whatever chance he had of building one was taken from him when he had lost his wife and child. He had accepted very early on that for men like him, life was hard, short, and fundamentally unkind. Ruthless practicality was an asset while hopes and prayers were flimsy barricades to shield oneself from the reality of things.

After Mary, he had learned his lesson: He could not afford to wrap himself in dreams and set his hopes too high, knowing they could be dashed any moment.

This was precisely why Monseigneur was dangerous; so very dangerous.

John had known it from the moment they met. He knew it now as he watched Monseigneur take a leisurely bath after the morning joust and he knew it every moment in between. Monseigneur was dangerous because, despite everything that had happened between them, he had the power to make John hope and yearn for something that was quite impossible. If John were not careful, he was afraid
he might very easily forgive him.

The man was an utter bastard. He was also temptation personified— specifically and diabolically designed to ensnare John’s soul. John could think of so many incidents in the past months when Monseigneur had pushed him to the brink, yet John found he could wipe away Monseigneur’s many trespasses with just the memory of how he had looked the last time they made love— Monseigneur’s face open and naked, his eyes wild and alight with the shock of realization.

It was but a fraction of time, yet at that moment, pausing on the brink of orgasm with his lover buried deep inside him, John had been sure that Monseigneur was in love with him. That had been enough to send him over the edge. Then Monseigneur had wept as they lay together, spent: the final proof of surrender. Wrapping his arms around Monseigneur’s prostrate and immobile form, John had thought incredulously: Mine. Oh my God, he’s actually mine.

It was frightening how the knowledge had made him so happy; whole and complete like he had never been in his entire life.

And even now— even now that John knew differently…

I still want him, a treacherous part of John acknowledged miserably as he watched Monseigneur settle back in the warm, fragrant waters. I want this man to love me. Only me.

Just as I am, the dreamer in John interjected rudely, seemingly deaf to the practical voice shouting warnings in his head: Impossible, impossible, impossible…!!!

And on my own terms, he silently added to himself.

God, he was so f**ked.

John could swear that he was not an unreasonable man, but that was before he met Monseigneur. He knew he was being extremely foolish, but his treacherous heart had made its decision and there was nothing he could do to stop it from wanting Monseigneur. John knew that all his life he had been drawn to danger and nothing was more dangerous than this man soaking in a bath of lavender and herbs just a few feet away from him.

John knew he’d done well so far, but it had taken everything in his person to turn away when Monseigneur had bared himself yet again to John’s scrutiny. John was proud of that little victory; he was proud that he could stand his ground and show the bastard that he was not willing to let things slide just because Monseigneur had flashed his long, hot body in front of John. Against his heart’s desires, John would show this man that he was not going to come running at a crook of his finger. If it was mental warfare Monseigneur was seeking, John would make sure to put up a good fight.

Still, it was not easy.

After his bath, Monseigneur called John to him. Stretching a hand out, Monseigneur said, “The rings.”

John blinked. He was steeling himself for yet another verbal spar and it took him a moment to understand what Monseigneur was asking for. Quickly, he pulled out a small pouch from his leather bag and emptied its contents onto Monseigneur’s open palm.

“The sapphire is for stomach ache,” explained John, describing the medicinal powders he had put into the hollow cavities of the rings the night before, “and the ruby is for emergent cases when you suspect poison and you need to throw up.”
“Or if I need to dodge a meeting with my brother,” said Monseigneur, giving John a small smirk, his pale eyes filled with cool mirth as they swept over John’s face.

John drew in a breath and looked away quickly.

He was being tested. He knew it. He knew that look— lazily caressing with a kind of satisfied, unspoken intimacy that John had only ever seen in Monseigneur after they’d had sex. It was the kind of look that John secretly hungered for, but it did not fit here, now, in this situation. After his earlier rebuff of Monseigneur’s advances, John would have thought the man might be mad at him, which meant this—whatever this was— was nothing more than one of Monseigneur’s tactics. John was having none of it.

_You could have had me_, John thought grimly— a reminder to himself as much as to Sherlock. _You could have had me on my knees before you if only you did not push me away._

“Here,” he heard Monseigneur say, and John looked back to see a new ring in Monseigneur’s hand. It was silver, simple yet elegantly designed with Monseigneur’s wolf crest. John could feel his heart clench painfully as another wave of deeply conflicting feelings passed through him.

_Steady, John..._

“Take it,” drawled Monseigneur, his voice hardening as John continued to gaze uncertainly, almost suspiciously, at the thing. He dropped the small but heavy ring onto John’s hand. “It contains the antidote. We haven’t got a lot of it left so don’t lose it.”

_He’s angry_, John thought, almost relieved. _Good. Damn good._

Monseigneur abruptly turned away from him to speak to Lestrade in a clipped tone: “Let’s not keep His Majesty waiting. God only knows what kind of tirade he might launch, given the present state of his nerves.”

Then, to John’s surprise, Monseigneur continued: “And I want John armed with a sword and dagger at all times.”

_Temptation personified_, John reminded himself. Try as he might, he failed this time to keep from feeling pleased.

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It was three days before the royal wedding, and Glasstown was alive with happy anticipation. It was also bristling with heightened security and nowhere was it more obviously manifest than in the King’s palatial residence.

Guards decked out in gleaming chest armor and colorful liveries were posted everywhere. Making his way through His Majesty’s gardens, John could see a couple of them trailing a respectful distance behind their small entourage before Monseigneur dismissed them with a few, curt words.

John himself was feeling the novelty of wearing a sword again after so many months of going without. The weight of it felt familiar and reassuring against his right hip. He could remember his first days in Gaaldine without his sword and it had felt as though he were going about inadequately dressed. The dagger that Lestrade had given him was safely tucked away in his surcoat.

John was surprised to see so many people milling about, some in clusters, others by themselves, all of them elegantly dressed and obviously waiting to have a word with His Majesty. It was as though they had arrived in the middle of a garden party. Without exception, everyone turned to gape at
Monseigneur as he strode past, oblivious to their stares and their hands going up to shield gossiping mouths.

John turned to Lestrade, who merely rolled his eyes and shrugged, as if to say, *what else is new?*

Lestrade himself was having more success with the crowd as he graciously nodded and returned greetings. Then there was John, who could feel curious eyes going over him and hear murmurs erupting as they walked past.

“Show them no fear or discomfort, John,” murmured Lestrade in a low voice. "Game faces on, now."

John nodded as he continued to feel eyes upon him, assessing him and fastening onto his consciousness like the pricking of so many tiny pins. He could perceive very little surprise in the collective gaze of these strangers and he realized uneasily that they already knew him: Monseigneur’s new man. He’d often heard Lestrade say that word travelled fast within the Gaaldinian royal court and here he was now in the thick of it. All of a sudden, he was immensely grateful for Lestrade’s presence beside him.

Ahead of them, Monseigneur abruptly checked his stride as his brother came into view farther down the flower and shrub-lined path. It was almost as though he had been taken by surprise.

The King was magnificently robed in red and black velvet, and he was not alone. Beside him stood a tall, slender lady and, for the first time, John found himself looking upon his own queen— the woman whom every Angrian soldier had sworn his life to protect and uphold.

Much had been said about the beauty of the Angrian queen. There were poems and ballads written about her, spread far and wide by travelling minstrels. Taking in his first sight of her, John could not really be certain whether the poems were accurate: her face was veiled against the hot summer sun and she stood a cool arm’s-length away from her would-be husband, keeping close to her ladies.

The Angrian ladies were more of an open book as they glanced this way and that with small, bird-like movements, taking everything in. Amused, John surveyed them, huddled together as though expecting an attack. Compared with the bright colors that Gaaldinians favored, the ladies from John’s land wore dark, somber garments, the cut and design of which were several years out of date. Angria’s capital, Dùn Èideann, was not far off from the borders of Gaaldine yet it was suddenly clear to John just how isolated and out of touch they were from the rest of the world.

The ladies-in-waiting also brought with them that familiar touch of bleak Angrian winter in their demeanor and shuttered faces. John knew that pinched expression well enough; he must have looked exactly like that when he first came into Monseigneur’s service, examining everything with narrowed eyes and an expression typically reserved for viewing tubs of rancid fat even while he secretly enjoyed himself with the novelties of Gaaldinian life. It was clear that no matter how terribly impressed they were with Gaaldine and its opulent court, the ladies were not going to give these Gaaldinians the satisfaction of knowing what they felt deep inside.

It would be interesting to see how long they could maintain this masquerade, John thought wryly. Already, one of the ladies—a small woman with pale, washed out features and flaxen hair— had let her guard down by looking at him very strangely; so very strangely indeed.

As though she had seen a ghost.

John frowned and looked away from her as they made their reverence to the royal couple: Monseigneur with a nod of the head and a slight inclination of his shoulders; the rest of them with a
Before John could straighten up, he heard the Monseigneur address the Queen of Angria: “Ah, we meet again, my dear sister.”

John almost laughed. What is he doing?

If Monseigneur meant to intimidate, he had succeeded: the Angrian ladies hurriedly crossed themselves while the queen drew herself to her full height. "Good morning," she said stiffly, her lilting accent— albeit of the Lowlands—striking a familiar note to John.

"Sherlock—" the King began, a note of warning beneath his placid tone.

"And here I thought it was bad luck for the bride and groom to meet before the wedding," continued Monseigneur nonchalantly. The corners of the King's mouth turned down ever so slightly in displeasure as Monseigneur's words filtered through the murmuring crowd.

John stared at Monseigneur's rigid back. What the hell. That was exceptionally rude, even by Monseigneur's standards.

A moment passed as the King glowered silently at his brother. Then, he replied with as much grace as he could muster, "that is reserved for the wedding day itself, as you very well know. There's nothing wrong with meeting one's intended days before the wedding, even if I forgot to mention the fact to you in my summons."

John stared at the King then back at Monseigneur, intrigued. Something was going on between the two; something else was being said in between the lines.

"A perfect coincidence, I'm sure," Monseigneur ground out.

The King turned to his bride and laughed. "I am sure I know not what he means, my dear," he said easily. "Forgive us, but my brother and I sometimes indulge in riddles; it's a little game we like to play. However, this is an excellent opportunity for you to meet Monseigneur's entourage."

Sweeping Monseigneur aside with his gaze, the King made a graceful gesture at Lestrade. "My lord Lestrade, my dear," he said, "is a dear and loyal friend of mine who has proven himself invaluable to my brother and myself."

John watched as Lestrade made a small, stiff bow. "Your Majesty is too kind," Lestrade murmured, and except for the stern set of his jaw, his face was serene and placid. To the queen, he said, "your humble servant, Madam."

Whatever happens, be like Lestrade, John said to himself, impressed.

The Angrian Queen merely gave a small nod at Lestrade’s direction.

“And this,” said the King, waving his hand with a flourish, “is John Watson, Monseigneur’s healer from the Highlands.”

The buzz of voices in the hot, still air was suddenly loud in John’s ears.

The queen regarded him with more interest. “He is Angrian, Your Majesty?” she said incredulously.

Before John could bow and murmur his greetings, the queen’s attention was suddenly diverted to a scene behind her. ‘Goodness,” John heard her say in raised tones. “What has happened to the Lady
Harriet?”

It was one of the queen’s ladies—the little blond woman, sinking into the arms of her alarmed friends as she fainted. Instantly, cries of dismay were raised all around and, much to John’s surprise, he heard Monseigneur cursing.

Instinctively, John moved toward the lady even as people rushed in, calling for some ale to be brought over. He was stopped by a hand biting into his arm. Turning around, John found Monseigneur just behind him, his hand gripping John’s arm and his pale eyes wide with alarm and fear.

“Don’t,” Monseigneur said.

“Sherlock.” The King was suddenly at their side. “Let him go and attend to her; unless you want people to talk.”

Monseigneur suddenly released his hold of John and turned to his brother. “This is all your doing,” he growled in a low voice that only John and the King could hear. “Mais ne pouvez-vous pas faire appel à un de vos propres docteur pour être à son service?”

John stared at Monseigneur as he suddenly lapsed into Gondalian.

The King refused to oblige his brother in kind. “Yours will have to do for now,” said the King with finality, placing a hand on John’s shoulder and steering him away. “Come then, John. Help her, please.”

John’s prospective patient was already coming to by the time he bent down to attend to her. Amid much fan flapping and murmurs of concern, John reached out a hand to touch her damp forehead before bending down to peer at her eyes, blinking and quickly turning red as tears gathered. Her breathing was quick, erratic, as was her pulse beneath John’s callused thumb.

“John…?” she breathed as John stared at her blankly, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

Her voice was eclipsed by Monseigneur’s deep baritone, edged with impatience: “Well?”

John withdrew his hand from the lady’s wrist and straightened up. “She’ll be alright,” he said. “She probably just had too much sun.”

Monseigneur shot the King a look: Satisfied?

For a moment, it looked to John as though Monseigneur might take hold of him yet again to haul him away, but before anyone could move, a goblet of ale appeared and was passed to the lady. Monseigneur turned to Lestrade and said curtly, “You and John may take your leave. Now.”

From his icy tone, Monseigneur’s message could not be clearer: Get him the hell away from here.

If Lestrade had questions, he knew well enough not to ask them. “Your Highness,” he said, bowing formally before he ushered himself and John from the royal presence.

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When they finally marched out of earshot, John released a breath and said, “What was that all about?”

“The devil take me if I know,” said Lestrade shortly, “and it’s not every day that Monseigneur is
caught off guard. As you can plainly see, he didn’t like it.”

“Caught off guard over what?” asked John, puzzled.

Lestrade gazed at him searchingly. “Do you know any of those people from Angria?” he wanted to know.

“No.” John’s answer came back more sharply than he intended. “Why would I?”

Lestrade shrugged. “They seem to know you,” he said, “or think they know you. Hell, I didn’t know the sight of you can be so overwhelming, John.”

“That’s insane,” said John, not amused by Lestrade’s attempt at levity.

Lestrade made to wipe at his face, his familiar gesture of frustration. “Come on,” he finally said. “Let’s get out of here. I’ve got to attend a meeting, but you’re free to go around town, if you like. Keep that sword close to you.”

John watched, stunned, as Lestrade pulled out a heavy pouch and counted out a few gold coins before handing them over to him. “Will that do?” he asked.

John stared at the coins in his hand. “Yeah,” he finally said.

This was really turning out to be a morning packed with surprises.

“You won’t be needed until the late afternoon,” said Lestrade. “Make sure you get back to the castle then. We will probably—”

“Lestrade!” accosted a voice behind them, and Lestrade turned around and did a double take.

“Well, if it’s isn’t the two Sebastians!” Lestrade said to John, his voice curiously flat.

The two men approaching them were tall, and there their similarities ended. One was dark-haired, with an overbearing chin and an insolent smile. He was richly dressed and soft as putty, like a pampered house cat. John figured he’d never worked a day in his life. The other one was strongly built, ruggedly handsome, his light-colored hair cropped close to his head. John could easily tell he was a soldier from his gait and bearing, not to mention a thin scar running down the side of his sunburned face. His gaze was hard, intense, and fixed upon John’s person in an unsettling way.

Instantly, John knew he was being sized up the way rivals would in a tournament.

Lestrade addressed the dark-haired fellow first. “My lord Wilkes,” he said, his tone unenthusiastic. “I did not realize you attend His Majesty’s garden walks.”

Lord Sebastian Wilkes let out a loud, braying laugh. “That’s what cousins are for. Fancy meeting you here as well, Lestrade,” he said, his gaze turning sly. “Has his Majesty introduced you to the Queen yet, or are such introductions not appropriate in public?”

“I am here on Monseigneur’s account,” returned Lestrade evenly, his voice cool.

“Ah, Monseigneur. Yes. Speaking of the devil…” Wilkes broke off to eye John more closely and his thin mouth stretched widely into a crooked smile. “What? Is this him?”

Lestrade’s expression darkened but he quickly made the introductions: “Gentlemen, this is John Watson, Monseigneur’s healer from the Highlands. John, this is Lord Sebastian Wilkes, cousin to the King and Monseigneur; and this is Sir Sebastian Moran, one of our most decorated warriors. I didn’t
see you in the tilting yard earlier, Seb.”

Sebastian Moran shrugged—a lazy roll of the shoulders that belied his set, watchful stance. “I was summoned here, same as you, my lord Lestrade,” he drawled. He nodded to John and said, “I saw you fight in the behourd at the garrison, sir. Impressive. Very impressive. Will you be participating in the swordfight demonstrations after the wedding?”

Lestrade quickly stepped in as John glanced at him uncertainly. “That will depend on Monseigneur’s plans,” he said. “We’re still awaiting word from him.”

“I’d love to have a round or two with you,” said Moran, running an appraising glance at John. “I’ve been meaning to, back in the garrison, but then Monseigneur left so suddenly.”

“Monseigneur is Monseigneur. We all know how he is,” said Lestrade easily, a hand already on John’s shoulder, ready to lead him away.

Lord Wilkes was not yet finished though. Grinning, as he eyed John up and down, he said, “so this is really him. Monseigneur's Highlander.”

Turning to Lestrade, he continued in a perplexed tone, “Je ne réussis guère à comprendre son raisonnement.”

“Et que ne comprenez-vous pas, Monsieur?” queried Lestrade, almost growling.

“Lui, visiblement. Est-il le nouveau jouet du moment de Monseigneur? Et sérieusement, pourquoi?”

For the first time that morning, John saw Lestrade struggling to control himself. “Celui-ci comprend tout aussi bien le Gondalien, Monsieur Sébastien,” he said through clenched teeth.

Lord Wilkes turned to regard John, surprised. John looked back at him steadily with lowered brows and unsmilting mouth, arms crossed over his chest. He had not fully understood what had passed between the two men, but he’d made out some of Lestrade’s words and the tone in which he’d said them, and John knew that they were talking about him and Wilkes was not handing out any compliments.

Behind Wilkes, Sebastian Moran added in a bored tone, not bothering to mask his words in Gondalian, “and he’s got a sword to him, my Lord. We all know there’s no telling what Highlanders can do. It’s quite possible that he won’t bother with trivialities such as rank and hierarchy; he just might go ahead and run his sword through you.”

There was an almost comical moment when Lord Wilkes looked stricken. “Kidding. I’m just kidding,” he finally said, laughing it off. “Jesus Christ, can’t anyone take a joke anymore these days? Say, I’ve got a party planned for this evening. You ought to drop by, all of you.”

“Isn’t it too early for that, my lord?” asked Lestrade disapprovingly.

Wilkes threw up his hands, feigning shock. “My dear Lestrade, I know not what you mean. It’s not that kind of a party at all,” he said. “Not yet, anyway. Be sure to come. I bet my cousins will be there as well. Not sure about the bride though. Perhaps it would be best to keep her away as the Woman might also be there. You know, that Exinian princess that Monseigneur is currently keeping all to himself? It will be quite a show. I’ll be expecting all of you, yeah?”

With that, Wilkes walked away, chuckling to himself.
“Prick,” Lestrade muttered as they watched him go.

“The kind who can’t even piss right without anyone taking him in hand,” Moran said, perfectly deadpan.

For the first time that day, John actually found himself laughing together with Lestrade. Moran glanced at him, thin lips stretched in a small, sardonic smile.

After a moment, Lestrade collected himself. “Right. Anyway, are you going on to the Great Hall, Seb?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good, then we shall go together.” Lestrade turned back to John. “I’ll see you at the castle before nightfall, then, John.”

Just like that, John found himself alone with a sword by his side and a pocketful of coins to do as he wished. The day was still early and the whole of Glasstown awaited.

After three months with Monseigneur, John savored the first, giddy taste of freedom and suddenly found that he did not know what he ought to do next.

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“I really don’t know what ails you, brother mine,” complained the King as soon as they were alone. It had not been easy to extract themselves from the crowd in the gardens and it took well over an hour before Monseigneur could vent his anger in the privacy of the King’s chambers. “You asked me to help you out and I thought I did an excellent job.”

It was true. Given that the Angrian nobles accompanying the Queen were all marred in one way or another by a violent and tragic past, Monseigneur had not been able to narrow down on the person he needed to seek out within their ranks. In desperation, he had turned to his brother for help but, as always, Mycroft’s idea of aid was to extend Monseigneur a double-edged sword.

“You planned that to happen!” Monseigneur accused, pacing the entire length of the King’s study.

“If you mean that I knew the Lady Harriet would have a swooning spell upon seeing John Watson then you are quite mistaken,” replied the King, “although you must admit it answers your question directly, does it not?”

He watched his brother restlessly prowl the length of the room and sighed. “For God’s sake, Sherlock,” he said. “Of all the people in the world, why must you want John Watson?”

“Who is she?” Monseigneur demanded.

“The Lady Harriet has been a lady in waiting to the Queen since she was sixteen,” said the King. “It is her right as the wife of the Duke of Isley, who was the Queen’s distant cousin, now deceased. She herself came from an ancient clan of illustrious Highland warriors who were the hereditary rulers of the Hebrides before they swore allegiance to the Kings of Angria. In exchange for their loyalty and service, they were given the Dukedom of Rothesay and were allowed to keep their ancient title of Lord of the Isles. Unfortunately for the Lady Harriet, her father, along with her young brother, perished in an accident while negotiating a peace treaty with some of the Highland clans in the mountains many years before. Now the title stands vacant. As a woman, Angrian law dictates the Lady Harriet cannot succeed to the dukedom and as her husband left her so little, she is now dependent upon the Queen’s charity. She has a young son who may be able to claim the title as an
adult but there are several ambitious Angrian nobles who are eager to claim it as their own.”

“Do you know the name of her dead brother?” Monseigneur’s voice was barely audible.

“I don’t, but I think we can safely hazard a guess.” The King looked at Monseigneur meaningfully.

“It’s not possible,” Monseigneur burst out angrily. “John is a simple Highland soldier; one of several thousands, in case you’ve not noticed—”

“Who just happens to be able to read and whose demeanor is clearly that of a high-born warrior,” finished the King. “Don’t bother lying about his literacy. Dimmock has told me everything.”

“It’s a coincidence, nothing more,” Monseigneur said dismissively.

The King tilted his chin towards his brother, and Monseigneur felt his hackles rise immediately at the gesture, familiar since childhood and heralding a scathing lecture.

“What do we say about coincidences?” said the King.

“Don’t presume to give me a sermon, Mycroft,” snapped Monseigneur. “I’m no longer a child.”

“Good,” said the King, his voice clipped. “Then I expect you to do the right thing and let John Watson go. Do it as graciously as you can before he’s snatched from you.”

Monseigneur shook his head vehemently. “No. He’s mine.”

“Would he agree with your pronouncement?”

“Whether he agrees or not is not—”

“Why don’t you just ask him?” said the King. “That would be the simplest way. If he says he belongs to you then we don’t have a problem in our hands. If he says no and he happens to be the long-lost scion of a great Angrian noble house and a relation of the Queen’s—”

Here the King broke off to look at Monseigneur with something close to pity. “Do you really think you can keep John Watson captive? I hardly know what to say. Your blind arrogance is simply breathtaking,” Mycroft said. “Although I will admit that I understand your predicament; more than you can possibly imagine. The heart wants what it wants or else it does not care. Take it from me, though: it is hard enough when both parties are willing. The sacrifices involved are horrendous, not to mention the consequences should you be discovered. Surely even you would appreciate the precariousness of your situation. When everyone finds out that you’ve been keeping him, possibly against his will—”

Monseigneur shook his head. “No,” he said.

“No?”

“John is not unwilling. And no, it’s not to your advantage to have John Watson removed from me,” Monseigneur replied, “at least, not until after the wedding.”

“Why not?”

“That was the reason why Anna Thea agreed to your proposal of marriage, was it not, brother dear?” said Monseigneur, his tone deceptively gentle. “Because she does not have enough trustworthy allies among the unruly Angrian nobility? Imagine how it will be if this ‘long-lost scion of a great Angrian noble house’ suddenly turns up right before the wedding to tip the scales back and your bride realizes
she just might have an alternative apart from marrying you.”

The King’s voice was suddenly very cold: “Anna Thea is not going to risk a war between our two nations. Not then and certainly not now.”

“Won’t she, if she has someone like the Lord of the Isles to back her up at home?” countered Monseigneur. “Besides, I see you’ve not succeeded in getting the woman to trust you even now.”

“There will be time for us to get to know each other better once we are married,” the King replied, entirely without conviction.

“Good luck on that,” Monseigneur muttered.

“You may not believe this, Sherlock, but we are on the same side,” Mycroft said, exasperated. “To keep John Watson as your captive is not going to do you or the man any good. It is neither right nor honorable, and if the man does not want you then it will only be a matter of time before you break him into pieces. Remember Redbeard.”

Here Monseigneur stopped pacing. For a moment, he stood still, so still and forlorn in the middle of the room. Then, in a desolate tone that Mycroft had not heard him use in a very, very long time, he said: “What is it about the situation with John that you cannot understand? It will kill me to let him go.”

The King sagged into his chair. “Oh, Sherlock.”

Sherlock stared at Mycroft, looking a little panicked at the words that had just escaped his mouth.

"You do realize that we've got other, far more pressing, things to worry about," said the King. "Lest you've forgotten, there is that poisoner—"

"I've not forgotten," Monseigneur growled, "and that is another reason why we cannot afford to lose John Watson."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Time," Sherlock said. "I need more time to know what John thinks of me. Well, I know what he thinks now but I want to change that. I want him to—"

Here he bit his lip and looked away, unable to say it even now. Finally, he said, his voice hard, “will you give me more time?”

The King nodded after a moment. “There are still a few days,” he said cautiously. “I don’t see why John has to be informed of his past now. As far as I am concerned, everything that we have is still pure conjecture. I shall see to the Queen and her ladies, and the wedding will go ahead as planned. After that...”

The King made a gesture with his hands and Monseigneur smiled. He was not in the habit of thanking his brother and he was not about to start now. “I’m so glad we’re finally in accord, Your Majesty.”

After a few hesitant starts along Glasstown’s roads, John finally decided to follow his instincts and head for the market place. One could never go wrong with that path, he reasoned, and he was not disappointed.
As he strolled aimlessly along the crowded markets brimming with fresh vegetables and fruit, poultry and meats hanging from hooks along the butchers’ rows and exotic looking fish and seafood in various fishmongers’ shops, John started as he recognized, or thought he recognized, a figure walking several feet away with dark and curling hair.

It was impossible to conceive of Monseigneur being here. He was in the castle, enduring a grueling day of wedding rehearsals, according to Lestrade. He could not be walking among the common crowd here, in a market, of all places! Yet the set of the shoulders and the gait of the person ahead of John seemed so very familiar.

Thinking he’d found some small purpose to his outing, John decided to tail the stranger as he continued to walk ahead, his strides lengthening. It was not easy catching up and the thick crowd obscured John’s view. A glance away from that curly head was all it took for John to lose him.

John looked this way and that, muttering a bit ruefully beneath his breath, but the stranger seemed to have vanished in the crowd.

Well, so much for his little adventure, John thought as he tried to turn back. What was he even thinking?

That was when he heard his name being called by a very familiar voice, unmistakably couched in the thick accent of the Highlands.

“John! John Watson!”

John turned around sharply to find young Alec standing a few feet behind him, grinning.

The last time John ever saw Alec, it was in the garrison as John tended to his wounded shoulder before giving him his farewells as Alec was sent back to Angria.

Now he was here in the Gaaldinian capital along with several others, Alec told John as he led him down several alleys to a little alehouse. What with an upcoming royal wedding replacing the war they had all been expecting, masses of soldiers had been discharged from the armies of Angria until further notice. For months they had drifted before they finally decided to come to Glasstown to try their luck.

“So now you’re mercenaries,” John said as they entered the cool, dark interior of the house.

Alec laughed. “Hardly,” he said ruefully. “We’ve not been able to get ourselves hired as everybody seems to be afraid of us.”

That certainly rang true of the alewife, John was quick to notice. She was, thank God, middle-aged and homely. The hapless woman was obviously terrified but determined to stand her ground as two burly, fully bearded Angrian soldiers stood before her, legs spread and arms across their chests as they demanded to be served.

“But sirs, you just said you have got no coin to pay for the beverages,” complained the portly woman bravely.

“Aye, but what of it?” demanded one of the soldiers whom John recognized as Stephen, the man who had followed them into the forest and who had run off when they encountered Monseigneur and his men.
“It’s all right,” said John quickly, stepping up to the alewife with his hand in his pocket. “Here, I’ve got…”

She stared at the coins along with the silver ring John’s hand had fished out of his pocket. “You… that’s… Monseigneur’s…” She gazed at the ring then back at John, unable to believe what she was seeing. “You’re Monseigneur’s man.”

“Uhm, yeah,” John said, breaking into a pleased smile.

The alewife gazed at him with new eyes. “Well then, sir, I daresay the drinks are on us,” she declared.

So they sat, huddled with their tankards of hard cider in a corner, speaking in the thickly gutteral Highland dialect that would have been incomprehensible to ordinary Angrians, let alone Gaaldinians.

What did one say to friends and acquaintances that one had not seen for so long? John wondered.

The man known as Stephen took care of the dilemma for him: “Well now, John Watson. Look at you.”

Look at John Watson indeed. Three months ago, he was a grizzled, half-starved Angrian soldier who had gotten lost in the woods and captured by the enemy. Obviously, they had all given him up for dead. And now here he was, his hair cut short and his face shorn of the full beard Angrian men favored. He was richly dressed in a surcoat of Gaaldinian design, with a pocketful of coins and a good sword swinging at his side. The men took a good look at John, lips stretched into smiles which did not quite reach their eyes, and John could instantly tell that things were not looking good.

John cleared his throat and shifted rather uncomfortably in his seat. “So how did you blokes get here?” he said, changing the topic.

“We’ve been discharged, haven’t you heard?” said the other man whose name John had failed to catch. “Half of Angria’s fighters, laid off when the royal wedding was announced.”

He spat out the words royal wedding like a thick blob of phlegm stuck in his throat. His accent was thicker than usual, slurred; as though he had passed the entire day drinking. And here John thought they had no money for drinks.

“Came down to Glasstown we did,” said Stephen. “Thought there might be something for us here. First thing you know though, they took away our swords; said something about wanting no trouble from the likes of us when there’s a grand royal wedding to celebrate.”

The other man laughed. “As if we can’t snatch a blade someplace in no time,” he snorted.

John frowned.

“John can get us something,” Stephen said, eyeing John the way Lord Sebastian Wilkes had done. “He’s gotten himself a new master, after all. He can try to get us jobs, right, John?”

“Jobs, hell!” said the drunk man. “I’d not be getting a job from these people.”
He leered at the alewife and her assistants who were ignoring the men as best they could. “Can’t even get a decently pretty woman around here. I’d rather we all go back to Angria. That was the plan, anyway, after whatever we can get from the festivities. I’d not pass up a free meal, mind you.”

There was a burst of laughter all around. John looked at Alec, who stared down fixedly at his drink. He had not spoken a word all throughout.

“Yeah, but John will be staying,” Stephen persisted, nodding at him. “He’s made himself quite a deal here. Wouldn’t dream of uprooting himself now that he’s got it all made. Why would he?”

A muscle twitched in John’s set jaw; otherwise, he was silent and still.

“These wee Gaaldinians,” muttered the other man, shaking his head, “soft as a babe’s arse, all of them. Feh! What makes them think they can handle Angria? I’d not be having any of them. Hear me, ye? I’d not be having ye or anything of yours, not even this foul piss that ye’re serving around here!”

At these words, he hurled his tankard across the room. It flew in an arc, spilling its golden liquid all over before it smashed into pieces against the wall. The man began to laugh as he saw the woman cowering behind her counter, but before he could continue with his insults, John was up from his seat, grabbing the man by his collar and hurling him down on the table.

“Don’t you ever think to do that again,” snarled John, pinning the much larger man down against the hard wooden slab. “Babe’s arse or not, when it comes down to it, you’re not fit to wipe any of these people’s arses.”

John leaned his weight in, imprisoning the man’s elbows against his back and shoving him back down on the table with his fists as the man, cursing, fought to stand.

“For God’s sake, that’s enough, John Watson!” Alec cried as he spoke at last.

John abruptly let the man go, running a hand down the front of his surcoat as if to smooth it out. Instantly, the man sprang up from the table, snarling obscenities, ready to lunge at him. John stepped back and all of a sudden, there was a knife in his hand.


It took a moment for the man to comply. He stared at the drawn knife in John's hand for long seconds before he shrugged and rumbled out, banging the door behind him.

Panting, John turned to the terrified woman behind the bar and said, “My apologies, Ma'am. We'll—I'll pay. For all of this.”

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The alewife was initially reluctant, but in the end, John managed to make her accept the coins given to him by Lestrade except two. These he gave to Alec and Stephen before realizing he had run out of money. His little disastrous excursion was over and he could hardly wait to take his leave.

Finally turning away from Stephen and Alec after he'd said his farewells, John let out a heavy breath as he fisted his trembling hands.

Bloody Christ, to think things had escalated like that so quickly; not that he regretted what he did. Still, the incident bothered him.
It bothered him to realize that he could be so different from his own fellow countrymen. If he had not realized it before, he knew it fully now: the way they regarded him as though he were a stranger. He should have known they would think and act like this, yet it had mortified him to witness something that would have been a typical drinking scene in Angria.

He had not realized that he had changed so much in three months, yet a changed man he was and he wasn't sure if he could—or would—change back.

Plagued by these thoughts, John made for the castle, unaware of the figure following him a few steps behind.

It was already well past dinner time when he arrived at the castle.

"John!" Another voice was calling his name, though John could not be happier to hear this one.

Molly came up to him in a flurry of soft skirts, her pretty face aglow with excitement. "Where have you been? We were looking all over for you during dinner. Anyway, have you heard?"

"I'm sure I haven't, my lady," said John, ignoring his stomach as it gave a loud, protesting growl.

Molly said: "We're to attend a masquerade ball this evening!"

Author's Notes: The myth of Pandora is ancient, appears in several distinct Greek versions, and has been interpreted in many ways (John’s view of Hope as an evil entity and thus placed inside Pandora’s box (or jar) by the gods is one such interpretation). In all literary versions, however, the myth is a kind of theodicy, addressing the question of why there is evil in the world. For more details on the various interpretations of the myth of Pandora, please visit Wikipedia.

I took a (great) liberty when I had Molly tell John about Pandora’s story, which was a Greek myth. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Greek classical texts were lost for centuries. It was only during the late Middle Ages that European monks and scholars began to recover/rediscover the works of Aristotle and to translate the Greek classics into Latin. (see Wikipedia—the Recovery of Aristotle) Even so, the Church initially saw Aristotle’s newly translated views as opposed to their own and the works were banned as forbidden books until Thomas Aquinas was able to reconcile the viewpoints of Aristotelianism and Christianity, primarily in his work, Summa Theologica (1265–1274). Given the collective mindset of the period, it would have been most unusual for Molly to have heard or read of Pandora, but I would like to think of Monseigneur as extremely unconventional and liberal in terms of education and his quest for knowledge—a dangerous trait during the times set in this story.

The designation Lord of the Isles is a title of Scottish nobility with historical roots that go back beyond the Kingdom of Scotland. It emerged from a series of hybrid Viking/Gaelic rulers of the west coast and islands of Scotland in the Middle Ages. Their territory included the Hebrides, (the isles of Skye and Ross), Knoydart, Ardnamurchan, and the Kintyre peninsula. (Please see attached maps with demarcations of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands as well as the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles) At their height, they were the greatest landowners and most powerful Lords in Britain following the Kings of England and Scotland. In 1493, following an act of treason, the estates and titles of these rulers were forfeited and given to James IV of Scotland. Since then, the eldest male child of the reigning Scottish (and later, British) monarch has been styled "Lord of the Isles". Today, the title (including the Dukedom of Rothesay) is attributed to the Prince of Wales.
In lieu of ordinary water, which was unsanitary at the time and unfit for consumption, Medieval Europeans drank alcoholic beverages on a daily basis. Although the profession was later taken over by men, the original brewing profession was originally principally performed by women. These women, known as alewives, also brewed the majority of ale for both domestic and commercial use in England before the Black Death. They were allowed to run alehouses and to supplement their husbands’ regular income without fear of social stigma. (Source: Wikipedia)

Translations (thanks very much to Lyliachan as well!):

Monseigneur (to Mycroft): Mais ne pouvez-vous pas faire appel à un de vos propres docteur pour être à son service? (Can't you get one of your own physicians to attend to her?)

~@~

Wilkes: Je ne réussis guère à comprendre son raisonnement. (I don't get it.)

Lestrade: Et que ne comprenez-vous pas, Monsieur? (Get what, my lord?)


Lestrade: Celui-ci comprend tout aussi bien le Gondalien, Monsieur Sébastien. (It just so happens he can understand Gondalian, my lord Sebastian)
Chapter 39

Special Thanks: To my super-dedicated beta, wearitcounts (Sher_locked_up) for her excellent edits, as always.

To PlumpPushu, my French connection.

And to Songstersmiscellany, for her valuable advice on Medieval/Renaissance music and dance.

More author’s notes at the end.

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“We missed you at supper, my lord, though I hope you’re still hungry,” the Princess Irene greeted Monseigneur as he entered her chambers with his page.

The greeting was perfectly polite and it would have been entirely commonplace were it not for the fact that the Princess was naked.

Those who knew her would not have been surprised at her tactic. Shyness and hesitation were only for those who could afford it. As for her, she’d always aimed for the jugular. Any sense of shame must be discarded if one were bent on winning the game of survival.

Her wits and daring had served the Princess well during her most desperate hours in Exinia and they had gotten her this far. She was determined to go much farther. Certainly, she’d captured the attention of Monseigneur during their first meeting, but at this point, it had become clear to her that more drastic measures were necessary.

Time was running out as the royal wedding neared. After the nuptials, she would have nothing in her hands worthy of driving any sort of bargain, and Monseigneur was far from cooperating in the manner in which she had initially hoped he would. For the past few days, this strange Gaaldinian prince would come very late in the evening, well past suppertime, and instead of engaging her company to conspire and make plans, he would sit immobile for hours in front of the fire, lost in thought.

The first time this ever happened, she had stopped halfway through her chatter to demand of Monseigneur’s page, “What is the meaning of this?”

The tall youth with the ginger curls had merely given her an enigmatic reply: “Monseigneur has gone to his mind palace.”

"Does he do this all the time?" Irene had inquired, smiling incredulously, and the page had declined to answer.

She could tell from the way he looked that the young man was wary of her. How adorable. One glance at him and she’d known him instantly for what he was: a virgin, pure and as yet unsullied by the baser passions that swayed older men. Doubtless, he’d be idealistic and doggedly loyal to his master. Just how long would he be able to hold out before he succumbed to her charms? She’d give him less than half an hour if she had her way with him, undisturbed.

But what would she get out of toying with the boy when Monseigneur was the man of the moment around whom everything revolved? His taciturn demeanor was a novelty for the Princess, used as she was to turning men’s heads wherever she went. Was this silent treatment of his a bluff? She’d
recognized her favorite game when she saw it and although it would be delicious to break this eccentric man to her will as she had so many others, there was no time for a leisurely seduction, and a few days in these chambers, lavishly comfortable as they were, had brought on the familiar sense of suffocation and rage that had been her constant companions in the months of privation before she had left Exinia, perhaps forever. She had not successfully escaped one prison in order to land into another.

Still, she would need to keep all her options open. What a great conquest Monseigneur would be indeed, if only his heart could be won over. He had not yet given any kind of answer to her outlandish proposal, and she had grown tired of waiting. That, along with the furious letter from Count von Ormstein that she had just received with the ominous promise, “You shall see that my hand has a long shadow that traverses even the thick walls of Gaaldinian castles,” had prompted her to lay out all her cards on the table and examine them carefully.

The trick of having multiple options was to not let any fall whilst juggling them. It was always good to have alternatives—drastic ones, if need be.

And so it was that she was writing a little letter of her own when Monseigneur was finally announced.

_Drastic alternatives_, she thought as she quickly moved to stash the letter away in the folds of her dress. She could not help but smile. _Tonight, I will make sure that you will not be able to ignore me._

Dismissing Kate, the only lady in her retinue that she allowed to attend to her, the Princess turned around leisurely to face her royal visitor; the loose robes of her diaphanous gown, already conveniently undone from their loops and stays, falling from her body as if by accident. Underneath, she was in her battle dress.

“We missed you at supper, my lord,” she said pleasantly, “though I hope that you are still hungry.”

As expected, her little scene had its desired effect on the page, who averted his gaze from her immediately as though he’d been burned, but Monseigneur… ah, Monseigneur was a different beast altogether. She could see that it would take more than this to impress him. Still, she could tell that he was not entirely unaffected by her as his pale eyes skimmed over the creamy contours of her slender body.

There was the faintest note of appreciation in the depths of his voice as he said, “Your Highness will be pleased to know that I’ve decided to take you up on your offer. And as much as your natural costume is a marvel to behold, I think it would be best for you to get dressed for your—shall we say—coming out party tonight.”

If his words had taken her by surprise, she did very well in concealing it. Cloaking her triumph, Irene murmured, “What would the occasion be, my lord? Something suitably grand, I hope.”

“I thought you might want to indulge in a little game of charades,” Monseigneur replied lightly.

There was no masking the rapacious glint in her eyes as Irene gave an insouciant shrug of her lovely shoulders and said, “I _adore_ charades, but as you can see, my Prince, I have absolutely nothing to wear.”

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As they left the woman's chambers, Monseigneur turned to Billy for one final admonishment: “Dites-moi avant qu’il ne soit trop tard. Vous savez ce qui vous attend. Vous allez devoir laisser tout
derrière; votre dignité, votre modestie, tout à la porte de la chambre de cette femme. Pensez-vous en être capable?"

Given Monseigneur’s laconic turn of phrase ever since they got to court, this was a veritable outflow of words. Yet so much remained unsaid as there was no need to state the obvious. Now that the game was afoot, they could not afford to lose. There was an important wedding to be got through and a dangerous enemy to lure out.

A complicated dance was about to begin.

If they failed in their endeavors, there would be no royal wedding taking place in a couple of days, but funerals. Scores of people would be dead, Angria and Gaaldine would be plunged into war, and Monseigneur would lose John—if he had not lost John already through his distressing miscalculations, his all-too-human errors.

If Billy had questions, he was wise not to ask them. Instead, he said in a voice that was not his, “Oui, Monseigneur.”

“Rapelle-toi de toutes les leçons que je t’ai donné.”

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Around the same time but in a different castle across town, John was making his way down a narrow, torch-lit corridor along with Lady Hudson and Molly for a special late supper.

“There is no hurry,” Lady Hudson told them reassuringly. “The ball will start long after supper is over so there is plenty of time to spare.”

Lady Hudson must have sensed their anticipation in attending their first masked ball. John had to smile at the good lady’s consideration of their feelings, but given that the summons came from the Queen Mother, he doubted very much if they could refuse the supper invitation—tantamount to a royal command—even if they had wanted to.

“Are you sure, my lady, that Her Majesty’s invitation includes me?” Even now, Molly was incredulous.

“Yes, my dear, Her Majesty has not forgotten you,” said Lady Hudson, ‘or the fact that you are my charge.”

That, John knew, was the main reason why Molly was allowed to stay at the Lair. Although Monseigneur was nominally her guardian, he was nota blood relation of hers, and Molly would not have been able to maintain her place in the prince’s household without a respectable lady to supervise and care for her.

If Molly were asked though, John was sure the lass would be quite happy to own that she belonged to Monseigneur anyway. John had wondered more than once if she had ever considered that as a deterrent to her marriage prospects, until it struck him that perhaps Molly had no intention whatsoever of leaving her lord’s side—a dangerous illusion. Hadn’t Monseigneur been the one to tell John that nobody was indispensable, so early into their acquaintance? John dreaded the outcome, when the veil was finally lifted and Molly would see for herself the awful truth that Monseigneur was not meant for her.

In the same way that Monseigneur was not meant for him.

Such moments of terrible epiphany never failed to touch John, leaving him to nurse a sudden, sharp
ache in his chest, but it was getting harder for him to ignore the truth. The months he had spent in the Lair in close proximity to Monseigneur seemed very much like a dream now that he was here at the heart of the Gaaldinian capital. Back in the Lair, he could sometimes forget who Sherlock was as they quarreled and made love, but not here, not at court where his lover was a Prince of the Realm and his master.

So John had very little recourse except to alternate between feeling wonder and heartache. It was exhausting. John was tired of alternating between high hope and deep despair, and sometimes having to suffer both these emotions at the same time. It was absurd, but John found that there was no easy remedy for the thing that afflicted him and Molly.

And now here they were, joining the Queen Mother for supper. John tried to suppress the thought before it could take shape in his head, but as with all his resolutions concerning Monseigneur, he failed.

Will he be there?

He was not there, John noted the moment they arrived at the Queen Mother’s apartments. Monseigneur had said that he would expect to dine with the Queen Mother every evening now that she was here, but he was absent. Intensely annoyed at that little sinking of the heart that accompanied his observations, John resolutely turned his attention to the formal greetings taking place.

Monseigneur’s mother looked formidably regal as always, though she smiled kindly at John as he bowed to her. “T’is good to see thee again, John Watson. I trust that thou art well,” she greeted him, her Gondalian accent filling her words with liquid warmth.

“Your Majesty,” John murmured. As he straightened, his attention was diverted from the queen dowager’s masked face to the people standing behind her.

Clearly, they were not the Queen Mother’s only guests for the evening: she had invited her future daughter-in-law and her ladies as well.

The introductions could not be more awkward than the supper that followed. It was two days before the wedding and the bride was understandably on edge. John was not familiar with the wedding customs of Gaaldine but evidently, the King had seen it fit to give Anna Thea over to the care of his mother before the big day. Indeed, between the combined efforts of the Queen Mother and Lady Hudson, the Angrian queen gradually let slip her shy silence to engage hesitantly in light-hearted conversation while everyone else around the table listened in politely.

That must have been why they had been summoned to sup with the Queen Mother, thought John. To break the ice.

Yet even though the formality and protocol that surrounded court suppers were relaxed for this small gathering, the entire affair was stifling for John, especially as he found himself the subject of the silent but constant scrutiny of a pair of Angrian ladies-in-waiting who sat across the table from him.

It was extremely uncomfortable to be gazed at in this manner. The woman who had collapsed in tears upon seeing him earlier in the day was not among the ladies present, thank goodness; nevertheless, John did not like this. He did not like this at all, the way the Angrians were staring at him so oddly.

As though they knew him.

Judging by the way these ladies exchanged occasional, knowing glances with their queen during
lulls in the conversation around the table, it would appear that everyone on the Angrian delegation was in on the little mystery, which irked John. He could tell that something extraordinary was about to happen yet again and he wasn’t sure how he was going to handle it.

That moment finally came after supper, when the table was cleared and everyone moved to an adjacent room where wine was served along with spiced fruit and sweetmeats.

Perhaps she had exhausted all avenues of conversation with her daughter-in-law, for the Queen Mother readily accepted the Angrian queen’s excuses before focusing her attention on Molly. John watched helplessly as Anna Thea rose gracefully to make her way towards him.

John was seated unobtrusively at a corner of the room, and short of getting up to walk away from the presence of royalty, he stayed where he was, greeting his sovereign’s approach by rising and bowing to her.

She gestured for him to sit down while waving away her ladies, who had trailed after her. They sat on stools farther away but still within earshot.

Anna Thea turned to him and smiled as she settled down on the seat next to his. Tonight, she was unveiled—an astonishingly beautiful woman of soft features, dark of hair and eyes.

“So, John Watson. We meet again,” she said to him in Angrian. “I must admit I am surprised.”

John gazed at her warily before replying, “That would be unsurprising, Your Majesty.”

The queen laughed softly. “I’d not expected to meet a Highlander here in the royal court of Gaaldine,” she said. “You look very familiar. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so, Madam,” John said. What did she mean by her words? Obviously, she thought—as probably everyone did—that he was not the sort of man to be seen in the royal court of Angria, let alone the more sophisticated one in Gaaldine. Yet her next words took him by surprise.

“It’s just that you remind me of someone with whom I was acquainted a long time ago,” she said, “and it seems that I am not the only one who shares this impression.”

One need not have Monseigneur’s lightning intellect to work out her meaning. “The lady earlier—” John began.

“Yes. The Lady Harriet. Unfortunately, she continues to feel a little ill and must abstain from her duties this evening.”

John could think of nothing to say except: “I hope she feels better soon.”

Looking at this woman, John could see her trying to work things out through her increasing puzzlement and doubt. He waited for the inevitable questions: what was he doing here, serving Monseigneur and having supper with the Queen Mother? Instead, she said, “Things have been so unsettled in Angria, enough that I’ve not been able to meet many of my own people in the Highlands. I would like to remedy that, after my marriage.”

John remained silent. He was sure that there was more to come.

She continued, “There are many in the Angrian nobility who oppose this union with Gaaldine. They would rather wage war than see me marry the King. I disagree. I won’t spill the blood of my kinsmen if there is another, more peaceful alternative to be had.”
Yet she won’t be marrying the King of Gaaldine either, John realized, if she has other alternatives.

As though she’d read his mind, Anna Thea said, “Fate is fickle and its forces have governed me all my life. It does no good to wonder about things as they might have been, but I was married once. Hardly a year was I a bride before my first husband was taken from me by illness, and before that, there were numerous matches planned and abandoned since I was a wee child. I remember a possible alliance with a powerful Highland lord’s son which would have secured a long-lasting peace between the Highlands and the Lowlands. Triath nan Eilean— perhaps you are familiar with this noble title?”

Lord of the Isles. The designation meant nothing to John and he shook his head.

“T’was the hereditary title of the Rothesays— a very ancient Highland clan and a valuable ally to the Crown. Unfortunately, the last lord and his only son died in tragic circumstances while they were negotiating peace with another clan in the mountains and nothing came of the alliance. The Lady Harriet belonged to this family, you see, and there is reason to believe that the tragedy that befell her father and young brother was no accident.”

John stared at the queen with wide eyes, wondering at her words which verged on the incredible. His heart was beating oddly as an idea, nebulous and absurd, began to form in his head.

“I…I’ve never heard of the story,” John said. “I lived in the mountains as far back as I can remember, not around the isles.”

It’s true, he told himself defiantly. He had no recollection of his childhood.

There was a great deal of uncertainty in the queen’s eyes, but she pressed on: “Yet the resemblance between you and the Lady Harriet is so striking, and you share her brother’s name.”

John shook his head as he exhaled a soft, incredulous laugh. This was becoming bizarre— bizarre and dangerous. He could not resist glancing around the room, fearing they were being overheard by the wrong set of ears. The castle was crawling with guards and courtiers, yet for this small, intimate supper, the Queen Mother had dismissed them all, and John was alone with the Angrian queen and her ladies, for now.

He said, “my name is neither rare nor exotic, Your Majesty. Half the male population in Christendom is probably named John.”

“And the name Sholto means nothing to you?”

For one infinitesimal moment, John froze. How did she know that name? John himself did not know why he knew it, except a man of that name kept cropping up in his worst nightmares, a man with half his face burned off.

John recovered quickly to say, “I’ve never heard of it.”

His first lie.

The queen gazed at him searchingly for a moment before she murmured, “You are right, of course. T’is but a story. I regret if I have caused you any discomfort. T’was not my intention to do so.”

John said, “There is no offence taken, Majesty. Only, it’s not every day that one gets mistaken for someone so exalted. I’m nothing more than a healer and a soldier. I come from no great family and I have no noble title attached to my person. In the grand scheme of things, I am nobody.”
"Tell me then, John Watson," urged his sovereign, "if you are who you say you are, how came you into the service of one such as Monseigneur?"

*How indeed,* John thought bitterly.

What a riveting story that would be. Perhaps the Angrians had already heard of some gossip in court relating to his captivity in the hands of the Black Wolf of Gaaldine, but John knew it would be wise not to add fuel to all the talk already swirling around Monseigneur.

Nevertheless, the words, when they came out of his mouth, took John and everyone else by surprise.

"I was lost, and then he found me."

It took him a moment to realize the import of his words and John was quick to amend them by saying he had been lost, quite literally, in the forest. He gave a brief and colorless rendition of his being discovered just in time to help Monseigneur through an illness.

The queen gave him a doubtful look but she did not pursue the topic of Monseigneur further. Instead she asked, "And before that, whose soldier were you?"

"Young Lord Maclan."

The queen's eyes widened. "Maclan?" she exclaimed. "Did you not know he was murdered by his own men just a few months ago? Apparently he had reneged on his promises and I understand that his soldiers had not been well-treated during that brief campaign at the border. Nevertheless, his murderers had to be executed and his unit disbanded. It was all a great bother. You were lucky to have left his service before all that trouble broke out."

John opened his mouth and shut it again. In truth, he was neither surprised nor sorry for the young whelp. A lord who could not take care of his soldiers had no business maintaining his own army.

The ladies nearby shifted uncomfortably in their seats and John knew that their conversation was at an end. He was acutely aware of other eyes upon them and realized that the social gathering was drawing to a close.

It was a relief for John to get away, but before he was dismissed, he said, "I pray that Your Majesty’s marriage will finally bring peace to Angria. If it would mean an end to all the infighting that has taken so many lives then it will be well worth it."

Anna Thea smiled sadly. "T’is a sacrifice that I am happy to make," she replied. "It gives me great comfort to see you here, taken in and cared for among my husband’s people."

She paused for a second before continuing, "I have yet to become accustomed to Gaaldinians. As you can see they have a variety of strange ways about them, and I certainly do not know much about my future brother-in-law, but fortunate is he who is able to gain the loyalty of the fiercest and bravest of warriors. If he’s able to recruit a Highlander to his service, I daresay Monseigneur is deserving of his fearsome reputation indeed."

The interview with Anna Thea could not have been more than ten minutes, yet to John it had seemed like hours.

The surreal feeling did not pass as he rejoined Lady Hudson and Molly, flushed with pleasure after her successful little chat with the Queen Mother— a feeling that was only heightened by Her Majesty
as they bade her goodbye and good evening. The ladies had curtsied out of her presence but she signified to John that she wanted a word with him before they left.

“My daughter the Queen has yet to make friends here at court and I thought a familiar accent might help to put her at ease,” the Queen Mother explained to John. “I remember being in her position nearly forty years ago, when I arrived for my own wedding, but then my good husband saw to it that I would need no company other than his own. I was lucky.”

John said nothing, merely cleared his throat unobtrusively. Not for the first time, he wondered how Mycroft would fare as a royal husband.

The Queen Mother did not appear to expect a response from John. She moved on: “I take it that you are all going to the masquerade ball thrown by Lord Wilkes, a nephew of mine by marriage.” It was obvious from her tone that she was not going to attend. “‘Tis not the most proper thing to do before the wedding, throwing an early ball, but the young these days will not stand to have their pleasures curtailed. I have even heard that my nephews, newly arrived from Gondal, are going to be in attendance. While I am fond of my nephews from both sides, ala, they are all wild as hares— too much joie de vivre and not enough sense.”

John was not sure how to respond, so he merely smiled at the Queen Mother’s words, spoken apparently in jest. Before he could say anything, the Queen Mother continued in a low voice, “but I trust you to have sense, John Watson. Take care of yourself and the ladies whenever you are out among the crowds. Watch your back at all times and be careful of refreshments offered to you by unfamiliar hands.”

With those astonishing and cryptic words, the Queen Mother turned and swept away.

“John, are you alright?” Molly inquired.

“Hmm?” John tore himself away from his thoughts. “Yeah. Fine. I’m fine.”

John knew Molly was expecting a grander reaction from him. After all, they were here now, dancing in the masquerade ball. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that John could hardly recall their arrival in Lord Sebastian’s palatial mansion across the river from the Queen Mother’s residence. All around them, heavily masked couples in richly elaborate costumes twirled elegantly to the lively music of flutes and dozens of stringed instruments: vielles and lutes, the bandora and citterne. John himself was in full disguise, as was Molly, vibrantly pretty in a yellow gown and a black, lacy mask around her eyes. It was hard to talk as he was frequently separated from her, linking hands with strangers as they bounced about in a lively ronde.

Having briefly reunited with John, Molly tilted her head as she gazed at him mischievously, a dimple suddenly appearing on each cheek. “I see that the Queen of Angria made such a huge impression on you. She really is beautiful, is she not?”

John laughed. “I’m afraid you will need to speak more plainly, my lady,” he said.

“Back in that little soiree, you were talking to her so seriously, and there were moments when you looked so—I don't know—incredulous, that I thought…well…” Molly trailed off meaningfully.

John cleared his throat which had gone suddenly dry. Did everyone who saw them think that?

“She’s mistaken me for a man of rank,” he said. “That's hardly surprising. I suppose everyone’s wondering the same thing, or else why would Sher—Monseigneur—take me in?”
John had meant to be flippant yet he was startled by the resentful tone in which his words were couched.

“To be fair to Monseigneur, he doesn’t take just anyone in,” Molly reminded him gently.

John shrugged and let his attention wander about the crowd for a moment, waiting for his bitterness to subside. What was the matter with him? Never in a thousand years could he imagine himself to be here in Glasstown, in the middle of sumptuous royal celebrations. He ought to be enjoying the evening with Molly, not wallow in thoughts of Monseigneur.

He would enjoy himself then, he thought decisively, and gave Molly a twirl that had her laughing.

He couldn’t believe there were so many people in attendance. Apart from the dancing couples, there were people, talking and laughing, lining the sides of the gigantic hall, brilliantly lit with thousands of candles. Matrons, among them Lady Hudson, were seated sedately in one corner of the room, their fans aflutter as they exchanged the latest news and gossip.

John was about to do a turn when a figure along the sidelines caught his attention—a man in dark robes with a silver mask on his face. There was no way to tell who he was—the mask was one that covered the man’s entire features, not just the eyes. John had caught a glimpse of him once before as the dance started, gliding his way through the chattering bystanders. There was something about his bearing and the way he moved that had caught John’s eye although he was all but invisible to everyone else.

Then John turned, and he lost sight of the figure once again.

He was seeing things and making much of nothing.

Turning back to Molly, John deftly changed the topic. “And you? I take it the Queen Mother was very much taken with you.”

To John’s surprise, Molly actually giggled. “She predicted that before the wedding festivities are over I shall find myself a husband here,” she said. “She has also asked us to come and join her for supper as much as possible. Isn’t she very sweet?”

Molly’s smile faded a little when John did not return her mirth. “What is it, John?” she asked. “You’ve been distracted the entire evening.”

“I think she’s trying to protect us,” John said. "That was one of the reasons for the supper invitation. She is trying to keep us safe."

“What?”

The dance came to an end just then. John said, “Come on, let's take in some air.”

They left the dance floor and headed out the overheated chambers for the open terrace. The crowds thinned out as they reached the massive flag stoned parapet and John told Molly what the Queen Mother had told him.

“Oh, but that is intriguing,” Molly exclaimed. “Do you suppose Monseigneur has a plan for capturing that poisoner? Speaking of Monseigneur, I’ve not seen him since we arrived. Do you think he will be here tonight?”

It was only natural that Molly, in her excitement at attending her first formal ball, would only lend him half an ear, but John felt compelled to repeat the Queen Mother’s warning: “Remember, she said
to receive no food or drink from unfamiliar hands, and don’t engage with strangers—”

Just then a great din sounded from the ballroom— murmurs of astonishment at some latecomer who had decided to make an entry grand enough to stop everyone else in their tracks. From the diffuse chatter, they were able to make out shocked murmurs of “Monseigneur” and John felt that familiar twist of the heart.

He glanced at Molly and suddenly realized that she knew nothing about the Woman. John himself did not know how the Exinian princess figured in Monseigneur’s plans, but he knew from his own reaction upon seeing the Woman for the first time with her arm around Monseigneur’s that Molly ought to be warned at least, but it was too late. Upon hearing the murmurs of the crowd, Molly eagerly turned and swept back into the ballroom, leaving John to call after her as he followed, “Molly, wait—”

Of course, it may not be Monseigneur making his appearance at all, John thought a little desperately, and even if he had indeed arrived, John might be wrong in thinking that Monseigneur had brought the Woman along to such a public outing. That was tantamount to making a formal announcement of some kind.

But then again John could be right. He had no luck in these kinds of things.

They made their way through the thick crowds until they could catch a glimpse of the scene unfolding on the dance floor: Monseigneur, magnificent in dark, formal clothes, taking by the hand a woman in a scarlet gown. Both of them were heavily masked-- an inconsequential thing, given that their identities were no secret. The music started again, slower this time, more sensual, and the new arrivals began to dance— such a close, inappropriate dance that involved Monseigneur touching the Woman on her waist, her hip. It was decidedly a dance that Molly would not have taught John.

John had been expecting something like this to happen. Still, it was surreal to watch Monseigneur dancing with a woman and it pained John immensely to note that he did so quite beautifully, with such fluid grace. It hurt even more to remember that this was the same man who had taught him to dance intimately not so long ago, the two of them pretending to take it seriously as they shuffled awkwardly around Monseigneur’s chambers, a prelude to the last time they ever made love.

John was almost grateful to have his thoughts interrupted by Molly. Voice quivering, she whispered, "John, who is she? What is she doing, dancing with Monseigneur?"

Just then a collective gasp sounded through the crowd as Monseigneur caught the Woman by the hips and lifted her in the air. John had never seen anything so brazen and he tore his gaze away. Having had enough, he said to Molly, "Let’s get out of here."

They extracted themselves with difficulty from the crowd. Molly’s hand felt cold as it clenched around John’s fingers tightly, so tightly. John could only hope that she would hold out until they could be alone, that nobody would find them odd. Still, their hasty retreat attracted some glances from the people around them. John noticed someone in particular-- a slight young man with short dark hair and brilliant dark eyes—who turned to look him full in the face as he and Molly brushed by. John glanced at him in passing and the man’s eyes widened comically as he pulled the corners of his mouth down and raised his shoulders in a shrug.

A strange man.

It would be later, much later, when John would think back on that man and remember that he had not bothered to put on a mask.
They were back in the relative solitude of the terrace, and contrary to John's expectations Molly did not cry. He was immensely proud of her for that.

She stood rigidly, eyes glazed, not quite looking at him, as John told her what he knew about the Woman, which wasn't much, and about her possible role in Monseigneur's plans, about which he knew next to nothing. Yet John felt slightly better as he spoke out loud. It helped to voice out what he knew must be mere conjecture. Monseigneur would doubtless scoff and declare John wrong in everything if only he were there to hear John's theories, but saying something was infinitely better than admitting that he, John, knew nothing.

When he was finished, Molly said in a small voice, "If it's all right with you, I'd like to go home now."

"Of course," John said. "Only, please hear me out on one last thing, my lady."

There was never going to be a good time to say what he needed to say, but John sensed an opportunity now. He was a soldier—he knew how to look for moments such as this: an opening that would enable him to deliver a clean blow. He'd do this for Molly—end her misery before it could properly take root. It was a kindness that he wished somebody would extend to himself.

_Do it now_, he thought, _before things get worse._

John peered down at Molly's drawn face and said, "I hope you find someone soon, just as the Queen Mum says—somebody who will love you and cherish you for yourself. It's what you deserve. In fact, there's somebody out there who thinks the world of you, if only you'd care for him, but it's not Monseigneur. It's never going to be Monseigneur. You know as well as I do what he is—a blade without a scabbard. You won't be able to hold onto him without getting hurt. For your own sake, let him go, Molly."

He'd never spoken to Molly so baldly before and he realized after he was finished that he might have gone too far. He steeled himself for her reaction, yet Molly said nothing even though she looked at him strangely, almost accusingly. Even now, Molly's unswerving loyalty would not permit Monseigneur to be slandered, not even by John. For one uncomfortable moment, and given John's heightened paranoia, he read something in Molly's expression that the lass would never ever think to say to him out loud: _Will you be able to follow your own advice, John Watson?_

But then Molly dropped her gaze and nodded slightly, and John quietly escorted her back to that crowded ballroom in search of Lady Hudson.

They found her soon enough and it took very little effort to convince her to make an early departure. Doubtless, Monseigneur's little spectacle had aroused a great deal of interest among the assembled ladies, and Lady Hudson had suddenly found herself bombarded with an avalanche of inquiries. John saw her looking around with a panicked expression before he and Molly managed to extract her from that wasp nest of aristocratic matrons, tongues already wagging with poisonous gossip. For the benefit of the crowd, John explained that Molly was not feeling very well and Lady Hudson was only too glad to take her home.

En route to the carriage, Lady Hudson's shocked exclamations over Monseigneur were a distressed flutter of words which mercifully did not require a response: "I had no idea...that woman, here...so shocking...oh my God, what has that boy done...!"

John saw them into the carriage and shook his head when Lady Hudson inquired, "Are you
accompanying us home, John?"

"No, I think I'll just stay here for awhile," he said. "I'll be able to find my way back, not to worry."

Lady Hudson merely nodded, lips now compressed in a thin, grim line as she said no more, and John was only able to breathe easier once the carriage had started on its way.

Expelling a gusty sigh, he watched it disappear from view.

_You're a fool, John Watson_, he said to himself grimly. _A miserable, bloody fool._

He knew Monseigneur was up to something but he should have seen this coming. _He should have known._

Not that it would have hurt less, but he should have known what Monseigneur was capable of.

_God, he was so tired of this. He was so tired._

Standing on the empty stone courtyard with his hands on his hips, John’s thoughts went back once again to the odd look that Molly had given him. Until now, he did not realize how much it had unnerved him. How much did Molly know, or guess? Not that any of it mattered now.

Would he be able to do it? He wondered. If he were to be asked, could he let go of Monseigneur?

He remembered once again those two figures, dancing so close together they were almost intertwined, and John swore aloud.

_What the bloody fuck!_

It was ridiculous for a grown man to feel so jealous. The pain came in waves—an empty, hollowed out feeling in his chest one moment to be followed by an unbearable tightness the next, as though his shriveled heart had suddenly swollen inside him to bursting point. For how long was he going to allow himself to feel like this?

John knew—of course he knew—that Monseigneur was merely playing a game, but it did little to assuage the terrible hurt and confusion that reigned in him. There were the familiar feelings of disappointment, anger and a sense of betrayal for having been left out of Monseigneur's plans, yet through it all there was also a flutter of hope that things were going to change, that he’d be let in from the cold once again by Monseigneur.

He found that he was able to rationalize everything just to keep that hope alive inside him, and that was what alarmed John the most. Hadn't he once argued with Molly that hope may not be an entirely good thing, that it could be evil? John did not think he would be able to bear the agony of having his hopes dashed again and again while Monseigneur played his little mind games.

Bleeding Christ, he never realized he could be this pathetic. There was a killer lurking in the midst of these festivities and John was acting no better than a lovesick whelp as he wrestled with himself. It was unbecoming, not to mention insane. If things looked bad now, he was sure it was going to get worse, and soon. John would need his wits about him; he would need his head to be clear. He should not care so much if Monseigneur decided to include him in the game or not. Most of all, he must not allow himself to hope.

And yet his heart remained obdurate, the little traitor. It continued to throb painfully inside him like an open wound.
John reached up a hand to clutch at his chest, hard.

*His fucking heart.*

Monseigneur had always said he wanted John's heart; little did he suspect that it already belonged to him— it had been his all these months; John's love in its entirety. If only Monseigneur knew.

*Then he must not know,* John thought bitterly, *and if he already knows and does not care, then I don't actually have a problem on my hands.*

He would have to throw it away then. As soon as possible; that night, if he could.

John was going to give his heart away.

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**Author's Notes:** Very little survives of Medieval European dance and the music that accompanied it. I've mentioned the ronde in an earlier chapter-- the group dance that Molly taught John-- and it is the most commonly described of European Medieval dances. However, Monseigneur's dance with Irene will need to be something decidedly more risqué. Thanks very much to Songstermiscellany for suggesting *la volta,* but in using this dance technique for the chapter I have left the Medieval Ages behind and leaped into the late Renaissance. It was popular during the reign of Elizabeth I (and was performed in the two Elizabethan movies starring Cate Blanchett). The volta (or *la volta*-- Italian for "the turn" or "turning"; *la volte* in French) has for its main feature *a turn and lift of the female partner into the air whilst confined in a closed position with the male partner.* Needless to say, there is a lot of touching and body contact involved, and as one chronicler had disapprovingly predicted, it was a dance that would lead to the making of babies. After the initial shock had worn off and after it gained Elizabeth I's approval, it became a respectable but never completely dignified dance.

(Source:Wikipedia)

Songster also made a lovely post regarding the galliard, and it's really a perfect fit for the dance music featured in this chapter. Thanks so much for everything, my dear!

**Translations:**

Monseigneur: Tell me now before it is too late. You know what lies ahead of you. You will need to discard everything, your modesty included, here, on the threshold of this woman’s door. Do you think you can do it?

Billy: Yes, my lord.

Monseigneur: Remember the lessons I’ve taught you.
Chapter 40

Special Thanks: To PlumpPushu, my French connection.

More author’s notes at the end.

~~~~~@~~~~~

The pain came in waves.

John stood in the silent courtyard, willing the hurt in his heart to go away. He could almost taste the bitterness that welled within him, lining his throat to form a hard lump that made swallowing difficult. He swallowed anyway, forcing himself to breathe evenly as he tried to bury the hurt down, down inside him where it could never touch him again. At last, a measure of calm returned and John went back to the mansion.

He did not return to the ballroom, now brimming over with people so that the furiously chattering crowds spilled out onto the terrace. John could still hear music drifting from within, but nothing could induce him to step into those chambers once again and behold the grand spectacle on the dance floor. Instead, he went down the terrace steps towards the vast gardens.

There were lanterns strewn on the trees and small, flaming pots of oil scattered along the grounds, illuminating an intimate path for John as he walked slowly by. A full moon hung in the clear night sky, casting a soft light that made the encroaching shadows of the surrounding trees darker. John could almost imagine the trimmed, leafy hedges before him to be rose bushes, and almost immediately, he felt the pain clawing at him from within as he remembered another moonlit night such as this, not so long ago, and him, standing in his mother's rose garden.

Don't think!

John tore himself away from the memory of his first night with Monseigneur, but too late. There went his heart again.

Don't think, John reminded himself, staring hard at the lanterns on the trees, his mouth clamped tightly shut as his heart swelled painfully within him. He focused on the flickering orbs of soothing light, and the wave of feeling soon passed.

Pathetic, John said to himself with an angry shake of the head as he turned his gaze from the trees at last.

He scanned his surroundings uncertainly. Although the ballroom had attracted a huge crowd, there were still people out and about in the gardens— discreet, fleeting shadows that melted away as John approached. Soft laughter drifted in the cool night air and John could hear the faint notes of a lute being played nearby.

Right, he thought. So now, he ought to go about his task. How did one go about these things, anyway? Approach someone— anyone— and start a pleasant conversation, and from there...who knew? The plan was simple enough, in theory. In reality it was a bit daunting, given what John wanted to happen. Yet wasn't that the entire point of engaging in a masquerade— to traverse boundaries and cast off all inhibition?

The leather mask that covered his upper face itched, and John longed to take the thing off. Wearing it made him feel like a silly, pretentious git. It reminded him yet again of Monseigneur and that was one
git that he was bent on forgetting as soon as possible.

A tremulous sigh escaped John as he remembered that night in the rose garden yet again; how everything had seemed so full of promise. He’d been more than ready to give himself to Sherlock and he’d thought the man had felt the same. How had things come to this? How had he got things so wrong between them?

John was so engrossed in his thoughts that he jerked in surprise when he felt a light hand on his shoulder. He turned and warily regarded the masked being standing just behind him. *Definitely a she,* he thought rather confusedly as he glanced at the brightly painted mask on her face and the cloud of dark curls flowing down her shoulders.

Then she spoke, and John's disappointment was complete: “John Watson. I thought I recognized you by the stubborn tilt of your head.”

John’s shoulders sagged. “Sally,” he said, his voice flat.

Sally Donovan tossed her head back haughtily. “Your enthusiasm is *very* touching,” she said dryly, her voice set an octave higher than usual. She seemed ready for a quarrel.

John looked around. The last thing he wanted right now was to bicker with Sally. “I don’t see your shadow anywhere,” he said after a moment.

“Oh, *him.*” Sally snorted. “He’s gone.”

John blinked. That was certainly news to him. "Anderson's gone?" he said, trying to ascertain that he'd heard right. "Gone where?"

Sally let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Back to his wife, of course, or have you not heard? I thought everybody knew by now, especially at the Lair."

John shook his head. Back in the Lair, he had been so wrapped up with Monseigneur that he had not heard anything of the others since they left for Glasstown two months ago; and even if he'd heard, he was pretty sure he would not have cared very much.

He could see that Sally was relieved to find him ignorant of her predicament. Some of the tension eased off her shoulders and the defensive tone left her voice.

"That cow had only to issue an ultimatum and he crumbled," she said, and John could hear the bitterness in her voice that matched his own. "Apparently he’s terrified of his in-laws and their threat to exile him to their domains in Éire. Well, I can’t have anyone who’d run away with his tail between his legs for whatever reason, can I?"

John did not know what to say. By the fierce look in Sally’s eyes which the mask did little to conceal, John thought it would be a foolish thing indeed if he were to make the smallest indication that he felt sorry for her.

In the end he said nothing and gestured at a stone bench nearby. Friend or not, Sally had chosen to confide in him. How strange, John thought, that he would end up in the same boat as the indomitable Sally Donovan.

"Of course, I shall never forgive him," said Sally as she sat and fumed beside John. "He’d better not come begging to be taken back if he knows what's good for him."

"Hear, hear," murmured John. "It’s his loss. You won’t have a problem moving on."

"I have moved on."

There was a short pause before John said, "all right."

"You don't believe me," said Sally, her voice reverting to its usual cool, lofty tones. "You think I'm pulling your leg."

John flushed beneath his mask. "I didn't say that," he said quickly. He'd thought it, of course.

Sally nodded at a figure a good distance away as it made a beeline towards them. "There's my new man right now," she said.

John stared, mouth going slack, at the flamboyantly dressed gentleman as he waved enthusiastically at Sally. Sally waved back and the man broke into a loping run. Sally cast John a triumphant glance that said it all.

Impressed, John let out a soft laugh. "When did this happen?" he asked, smiling.

"About half an hour ago. I met him during the dance," said Sally airily, returning John’s smile with a grin of her own.

She rose smoothly to her feet, but she was not done talking with John yet. Her tone turning serious, she said, "I'd get a move on as well, if I were you. I take it you saw Monseigneur's latest escapade. That’s a little extreme, even for him. Some say the Exinian princess is a sorceress who can bewitch any man into wanting her. Word has it that she has a recipe for a special fly concoction that can incite men into a state of amorous frenzy. Perhaps she was able to slip a bit of it into Monseigneur’s drink in order to make him dance with her, who knows? At any rate, the deed is done, and our lord has just committed himself to something for which he may not be able to back out from. You can bet there will be changes coming our way soon."

John knew the sensible recourse was to keep his mouth shut, but he could not help himself. It was deeply unsettling to have Sally voice out the very thing he had been thinking and dreading. "And you really believe that?"

Sally shrugged, but the look she gave John was devoid of mockery, for once. "I know that it’s hard to believe, but nobody pulls a stunt like that in Court and gets away with it. Even the King is not exempt. He has put off the idea of remarriage for years by declaring that he shall have the Angrian Queen and no other. Perhaps he thought it was never going to happen, and now look at him— only a handful of hours left before his bachelor days are ended forever. You can bet Monseigneur will go down the same road, sooner or later. The brothers don't have a choice, you know. They may be good rulers but all they have achieved will come to nothing if they fail to secure the royal line of succession. You know what's coming; save yourself the heartache, John."

John's mouth thinned ominously at Sally's words but he managed a tight smile. "You think there's still hope for me?"

"Of course," Sally said, sounding as though she knew everything that had happened between John and Monseigneur.

Of course, John thought with a sinking heart. How much speculation had there been among the soldiers who knew of his plight? Did they have lengthy discussions, or perhaps placed bets among themselves over what could be happening to him, John, within the thick walls of Monseigneur's Lair? How much did they know?

But what does it matter now? John said to himself. All the same, he asked in a tone as casual as he
could make it: "Got any tips for me then?"

"Sure," Sally replied readily. "Trust your soldier's instincts. If they serve you well in battle, they'll pull you through this. After all, conquest is conquest. Be bold, and always aim for the heart, John."

With that Sally turned away to receive her man's effusive greetings: "Ma très chère! Je suis désolé de vous avoir fait attendre!"

"Ne vous en faites pas."

Eyes wide, John watched them as they hurried away into the bushes, laughing.

The silence that settled after Sally’s departure was oppressive, heavy with new, unwanted thoughts. After a moment, John got up and resumed his interrupted tour of the gardens.

Don't think anymore, John said to himself as he marched down a series of stone steps that took him deeper into the labyrinthine gardens. There's nothing to think about. If Sally can pick up a bloke then and there while dancing, how hard can it really be?

Half an hour passed before he allowed himself to admit that it was much harder than he realized. The gardens stretched away before him, filled with hidden coves and little paths that led John nowhere. He’d come across people, fantastically dressed and almost surreal, but most of them were couples and the ones by themselves were not what John was looking for. A woman in a white, diaphanous gown and a richly feathered mask had actually approached him and murmured invitingly, "Bonsoir. Êtes-vous venu ici seul?"

John had understood her perfectly, yet he had hastily backed away from her as though she were an apparition and said, "Umm, no, actually. I...uh..."

She had flitted away before John could finish with his excuses. It was a shame, really, John thought afterward. He should have considered the option more fully before he opened his mouth.

It took a few more minutes of fruitless searching, of murmured “hellos” to passersby without gaining further ground, before everything sank in for John.

Oh God, who was he kidding?

John shuddered out a breath as he acknowledged that this— what he was about to embark on (Getting laid)

was out of his league. In fact, he was out of practice with the entire courtship thing. He could vaguely remember how he had wooed Mary. What they had shared was a sweet, gentle thing; fragile and full of mutual consideration. That was not what John wanted now.

The hunger that Monseigneur had stoked to life inside him was a terrible thing, a flame burning bright and fierce as it coursed within him, a fever in his blood. After he’d had a taste of what Sherlock had offered him, John knew he could have nothing else. He wanted raw, animal passion— dark as sin, rough and bruising and savagely sweet. He wanted to take as much as he was taken, to give as good as he got, to be treated without mercy like a warrior in battle. He would not break easily. What he wanted was something that he could not name; someone he could never have.

John was reaching the end of the gardens; it felt like he was reaching the end of his tether as well. He
stopped at the end of the path that led down to the river as he felt his confidence shrivel away inside him.

Shoulders slumped, he watched as an occasional boat—lighted and decked out in elaborate finery—glided by. From somewhere came the faint sound of music and laughter; a riverside picnic was in progress, perhaps.

He lingered for a moment longer, feeling the breeze from the river run cool, invisible fingers through his hair.

*John Watson, I've never known a bigger fool than you,* he thought, more resigned than angry.

All of a sudden he felt very, very tired. It was time he went home.

He was about to turn away when a solitary figure caught his eye. It was seated on one of the last of the stone benches farther away from John's view, partially hidden by the trees.

John froze. He could hardly make out the figure in the shadows, but it seemed to be studying John with as much interest as John was studying it. Then it tilted its head slightly and John was startled to see the gleam of a metal mask on its face.

A small shiver that was equal parts excitement and alarm passed through John as he recognized who it was.

It was that man in the silver mask that John had seen in the ballroom earlier in the evening, watching him as he danced with Molly. There was something about him that had caught John’s attention from the start, but John wasn’t sure what. Certainly it was too perfect a coincidence that he was here now.

There were only two options to consider: back away or meet the stranger head-on, yet John already knew that he wouldn’t pick the sensible one. The mystery of the man’s identity aside, John's instinct had kicked in, and it told him

*(That. Yes, that, please)*

that the man could be dangerous in the same way moths could sense flame.

Was he armed? John wondered. It was impossible to tell at this distance. His heart suddenly racing inside him, John made his approach. He was acutely aware that his movements, intended to be leisurely and nonchalant, were in truth verging on awkward.

He stopped a few feet away from where the stranger sat and cleared his throat. “Evening,” John said, his trembling hands knotted tightly together behind his back.

The stranger regarded John for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. Ignoring John’s choice of language, he replied in Gondalian, “On peut dire que cette soirée est relativement tolérable. Les divertissements sont passables mais l’atmosphère est agréable, vous ne trouvez pas?”

The words were a liquid rush of sound through John’s ears. The voice was beautiful but unfamiliar. Foolishly, he had half-expected a dark baritone, but the stranger’s voice was higher in pitch and pleasant as fresh air.

John smiled. "Sorry. I didn't catch all that. Gondalian isn't really my tongue."

There was a pause as the stranger noted John’s accent. He said, "you are Angrian?"
John's smile widened as he picked up the note of interest in the man's voice. "Yes."

John's companion stretched out a gloved hand and gestured gracefully for John to sit beside him on the bench. John sat down warily, his gaze sweeping over the man in a thorough once-over. The stranger did not carry a sword, and he was dressed in such elegant, tight-fitting clothes that were meant to exhibit rather than conceal. John could find no weapon tucked away anywhere.

So far so good.

Meanwhile, the stranger continued talking. He had a heavy Gondalian accent which sounded a trifle silly. It made his words slippery, dragging at some phrases and catching at the most inopportune syllables. That, along with the fact that the stranger’s voice was muffled by his mask, made it difficult for John to understand what he was saying. "You are from the Queen's entourage, perhaps?" he said. "T'is my first time to meet someone from the far North."

"Am I really that obvious?" John said, laughing. He saw no reason to contradict the stranger as the man wove a little story around his person. Good. That would spare him from having to invent one of his own.

"Pray what is your name?"

John thought for a moment before he said, "John."

"Jean," the stranger repeated in his own tongue.

It was startling how that single word, spoken that way, could affect John so powerfully.

"Of course, that is not your real name," the stranger continued.

"Of course not," John lied fluidly as he focused on the stranger's questions. He could get used to this; he found that he liked this game very much already. "And you? How shall—"

The stranger made a careless gesture with the fingers of one hand. "You may call me anything you wish," he said.

John looked at him, studying the man’s peculiar mask that covered his entire face. Up close, John was amazed to discover that it was shaped in the visage of a beast that he could not quite identify—a lion of some sort, but more fearsome. A mythical creature, perhaps? A gentle swell of the metal surface of the mask marked a snout where the nose ought to be, followed by an indentation to form a mouth below. There were fine grooves set with small, precious diamonds around the slanting eye holes. Beyond those eye holes lay shadows. What would the color of his eyes be? John wondered.

Noting John's rapt gaze, the stranger touched his mask with the fingers of a gloved hand and asked, "do you like it?"

"What is it?"

"It's a tarasque-- a dragonlike being said to dwell in the southern provinces of my kingdom."

"It doesn't look like something I'd like to come across in my travels."

The stranger laughed. "Indeed not. It's a terrible monster, fierce as the fires of hell, and according to legend, it can only be tamed by a saint."

John lifted his gaze to stare into the shadowy depths of the stranger's eyes. "Well, I shall call you
Tarasque, then," he said.

"Bien." From his voice, John could imagine the stranger smiling.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of laughter, followed by drunken carousing by unseen voices.

"Well, somebody's having a jolly time," John remarked.

"And are you not enjoying yourself, Jean? I would say the Gaaldinians have outdone themselves with this fête in terms of drowning everything in luxury; that buffoon Sebastian would not know good taste even if it bit him on the nose, after all," Tarasque said."To be fair though, t’is not every day that we see the King getting married."

He speaks as though he knows Sebastian Wilkes, that bloody fool. No doubt he is of royal blood as well. These people are all related, John realized. He remembered the Queen Mother saying her nephews were in town, which meant that this man was probably Monseigneur's cousin.

“You’ve not answered my question, Jean,” Tarasque reminded him. "What are you doing out here when you could be in the ballroom, dancing the night away?"

“The same as you, I would think,” John said, feeling a bit reckless. For the first time that night, he was beginning to let go and just enjoy himself. It had been a long time since he’d flirted with anyone. He was rusty.

“I see. Are you here for a rendezvous then?”

“Oh.” John’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’re waiting for someone.”

The stranger shook his head sadly. “T’is of no import. I do not think he is coming.”

John could barely hear above the sudden rush of blood through his ears. Let’s not jump to conclusions here, he told himself reasonably; and yet there was no mistaking the meaning behind the man’s words, spoken so softly, so bleakly.

He’s waiting for a he…

John cleared his throat. “I’m not actually waiting for anyone. At least, not anymore. But, of course, if you’d prefer to be alone—”

“No,” Tarasque said quickly. “Stay. Please.”

John felt such a warm rush of gratification at Tarasque's words that he was embarrassed.

“You’ve had a quarrel,” he heard himself say. “It happens all the time. He’ll be back.”

“Not in my case, I don’t think so,” Tarasque said slowly. “I’ve driven him away more times than I can count, and now I’ve lost him. I don’t know how I’m going to get him back.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“I do, I’m afraid.”

John opened his mouth to say more and then thought the better of it. What did he know of the man’s quarrel with his lover anyway? John did not even know why he was advocating for reconciliation when he wanted the man for himself.
There was a brief silence save for the faint strumming of a lute. Then somewhere close by, somebody started to sing.

“Foy porter, honneur garder

Et pais querir, oubier

Doubter, servir, et honnourer

Vous vueil jusques au morir

Dame sans per.”

The sweet voice drifted softly but clearly in the still night air. Tarasque tilted his head to listen. “Beautiful,” he said. “T’is one of our more popular songs, made for dancing.”

John licked his lips as an idea instantly came to mind. He felt his heart racing madly inside him as he plucked up the courage to ask, “Would you like to? Dance, I mean?”

Tarasque regarded him for a moment before he said, “I’d love to.”

“Car tant vous aim, sans mentir

Qu'on poroit avant tarir

La haute mer

Et ses ondes retenir

Que me pusses alentir”
It took a while for them to find their rhythm and when they did, John was surprised to find that it was perfect time.

“You dance divinely,” Tarasque said, and John had to bite back a shy smile of pleasure.

They moved as one, slowly, as though they had all the time in the world. John stared at his hand, so small a the memories.

They’d danced like this, too, once upon a time. First they had fought, then they had danced, and afterward,

That final time they made love, they had danced first.

John’s throat was threatening to seize up once again and he turned away brusquely, aware that Tarasque's v as though something had got into them.

Fuck you, John, he said to himself savagely. You are damned if you let fall a single drop in front of this stra

“Sans fausser; car mi penser,

Mi souvenir, mi plaisir

Et mi desir sont sans finer

En vous que ne puis guerpir n'entroublier…”

Breathe. Just breathe, John told himself. He did, breathing in long and deep, inadvertently taking in the stranger’s scent, a warm combination of musk and spice; distinctively foreign, oddly soothing. John could feel the heat emanating from the man’s body and the strong throbbing of his heart, almost against John’s own.

Please God, just let me have this, he thought. Just let me go for tonight so that I shall not care about him anymore for the rest of my life.
John's mind was not yet done torturing him. How would things be after Monseigneur was married to that woman? John imagined people leaving: Lady Hudson retiring to a convent, Molly married off to Billy, who would one day depart for his uncle's domains. Everyone had a place to go to, except John, who belonged to Monseigneur who, in turn, would belong to somebody else one day. John was bound to a master who would never let him go no matter what the circumstances.

“*Il ne'est joie ne joir*

*N'autre bien qu'on puist sentir*

*N'imaginer*

*Qui ne me samble languir…”*

John's head was throbbing. He did not realize that his head was resting on the man's chest until he felt the smooth silk of the man's surcoat against his face. Tarasque went still for a moment—he must be astonished—before he wound his arms around John tentatively, gathering him in. It felt so good to be held, and without a word John gave in to the warm darkness of a stranger's embrace.

“*Quant vo douceur adoucir vuet mon amer:*

*Dontloer et aourer*

*Et vous cremier, tout souffrir,*

*Tout conjoir, Tout endurer*

*Vueil plus que je ne desir Guerredonner.*

*Foy porter . . .”*

God, he was making a fool of himself. Here he was, his head buried against a stranger's chest, his hands fisted into the man's clothing with enough force to tear the delicate silk and velvet.

Through it all, the arms around him never wavered. At this point John could not trust himself to speak, but he felt intensely grateful for the man's silence. The song wound to a close but they hardly noticed. They stood there, locked in their embrace long after the song was finished and John recovered. His eyes were dry when he finally lifted his head.

*Bleeding Christ,* he thought, feeling slightly dazed and completely mortified. *I'll never be able to live*
John felt too ashamed to look at the man directly, but then he did not need to. Tarasque was whispering in his ear, his voice low.

“I did not realize you were hurting so much as well, my dear Jean.”

Abashed, John mumbled an apology. Nicely done, this. He did not know what had come over him. He was becoming maudlin.

Tarasque shook his head and merely said, “I am… touched.”

Before John could say anything, Tarasque continued, “your lover. He has hurt you badly, has he not?”

John remained silent, staring at the jeweled brooch that held the man’s cloak in place over his shoulders. He was barely breathing.

“He is a fool, Jean.” Tarasque’s voice was a hard whisper. “He does not deserve you. Laissez-le et suivez-moi.”

This time, John lifted his head.

“Suivez-moi, Jean. Forget your lover if only for tonight and come with me,” Tarasque whispered again, entreatingly, and John felt the first frisson of desire run through his body.

God, when he speaks like that...

John let out the breath he was holding. Then he reached for the man’s nape with one hand, pulling Tarasque's head down so John could touch the cold, sculpted mouth of that masked face with his lips. Tarasque froze against him for an instant before John felt those long, lean arms tighten around him possessively, holding him closer.

John finally lifted his head from the strange, indirect kiss. His gaze was fierce and his voice was perfectly steady as he said, “I don’t care where. Just take me somewhere.”

Translations:

Guy: Ma très chère! je suis désolé de vous avoir fait attendre! ("My dear! I’m sorry to have kept you waiting!")

Sally: Ne vous enfaites pas. ("Think nothing of it.")

Masked lady to John: Bonsoir. Êtes-vous venu ici seul? (Good evening. Are you here alone?)

Masked man (Tarasque) to John: On peut dire que cette soirée est relativement tolérable. Les divertissements sont passables mais l’atmosphère est agréable, vous ne trouvez pas? (“I suppose so. The entertainments are passable, but the moon is lovely, is it not?”)
Tarasque: Laissez-le et suivez-moi. (Forget him and follow me.)

Author’s Notes: Éire is Irish for Ireland.

The Princess Irene's magic potion (as told by Sally) is based on the properties of the Spanish fly, an ancient aphrodisiac. (source: Wikipedia)

The legend of the tarasque is reported in several sources, but especially in the story of St. Martha in the Golden Legend. A fearsome creature with a lion's head, six, short, bear-like legs, an ox-like body with a turtle's shell, and a scaly tail ending in a scorpion's sting, it devastated vast areas along Nerluc in Provence, France, until it was tamed by Saint Martha. Its story bears a resemblance to the legends surrounding the unicorn, a mythical beast that can only be tamed by a maiden. (source: Wikipedia)

The lyrics of the song featured in the chapter are lifted from Guillaume de Machaut’s Foy porter.

Text about the composer and translations of the song by Paul Brians. For more information on Medieval love poems and songs, please visit his website at http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/love-in-the-arts/medieval.html
Refrain:
Foy porter, honneur garder
Et pais querir, oubeir
Doubter, servir, et honnouer
Vous vueil jusques au morir
Dame sans per

I.
Car tant vous aim, sans mentir
Qu'on poroit avant tarir
La haute mer
Et ses ondes retenir
Que me peusse alentir
de vous amer.

Sans fausser; car mi penser,
Mi souvenir, mi plaisir
Et mi desir sont sans finer
En vous que ne puis guerpir n'entroublier

II.
Il ne'est joie ne joir
N'autre bien qu'on puist sentir
N'imaginer
Qui ne me samble languir,
Quant vo douceur adoucir vuet mon amer:
Dont loer et aourer
Et vous cremier, tout souffrir,
Tout conjoir, Tout endurer
Vueil plus que je ne desir Guerredonner.
Foy porter . . .
Chapter 41

Special Thanks: To PlumpPushu, my French connection.

Please read the tags before proceeding. Yes, there will be blindfolded sexytimes ahead! (goes off cackling.)

More author’s notes at the end.

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Come, my languid, sullen beast,

Come lie upon my heart;

I want to plunge my trembling fingers

Into the thick tangle of your mane.

I want to sleep in the drowsiness

as sweet as death.

There I will spread my unrepentant kisses

Over your skin as smooth and lustrous

as copper.

For nothing swallows my sobs

Like the gulping abyss of your bed:

Oblivion lies in your mouth

And rivers of forgetfulness flow

from between your lips…

--Charles Baudelaire

33 of Fleurs du Mal

DuJauc translation, 1889

~~~~~~@

It’s happening, John thought. This is really, finally happening.

He found himself repeating the words over and over in his head because it seemed as though he were in the middle of a waking dream. It was unbelievable yet here he was, docile as a lamb as he was led
by the hand through the dark labyrinth of the garden paths. A curious detachment pervaded John even as his senses tingled with anticipation. Astonishingly, there was neither fear nor uncertainty as he allowed himself to be steered along by a complete stranger who held onto him tightly, as though the man could not bear to let him go. John sensed the silent urgency of Tarasque’s touch and felt an answering need stir within him.

Not for the first time that night, John wondered if he had lost his mind. Vaguely, he knew that he was doing something extremely foolish, not to mention dangerous, yet what was it about Tarasque that had disarmed him so completely? Was it that combination of desire and desperation—genuine and discernable through the layers of subterfuge enveloping Tarasque’s person—which had struck a resonant chord within John?

He had to admit that he was flattered by Tarasque's attention, yet while it felt good to be wanted, there was something else—something more—about the man that John found irresistible. Aside from the intriguing mystery of his identity, everything about Tarasque felt right. Standing in the close circle of his arms, John had felt safe. More than that, for the first time since coming to Glasstown, John had felt as though he actually belonged.

Who was this stranger who could make him feel this way?

John could not quite put his finger on it, but for some reason, this surreal episode reminded him of his dream on the night he had been forced to pledge his loyalty to Monseigneur. He had dreamed of himself as a penniless soldier, freshly arrived in Glasstown, having an amorous encounter with a richly dressed, masked stranger in a dark alley in the midst of the royal wedding celebrations. In that curiously ambiguous state of consciousness to be found only in dreams, John had known who the stranger really was even if they had never met before.

The dream had been so vivid that John found himself recalling its details from time to time. Why should he remember it now, all of a sudden?

*You’re still thinking about him,* John said to himself disgustedly. *You know it’s never going to happen, but you still think the crazy bastard is going to appear right here, right now, and make a proper scene.*

Perhaps it was guilt settling in, though to be fair to himself, putting in a shock appearance would be right along Monseigneur’s alley, John reflected wryly. The git did love to be dramatic, after all; but John knew that the scenario was impossible in the same way that he knew Tarasque could never be Monseigneur. Thanks to his little spectacle, Monseigneur was effectively trapped in the ballroom with that accursed woman. At this rate, he’d never be able to extract himself from the crowds, much less get himself away from the ballroom and into the gardens. Besides, in the course of the past few weeks, hadn’t Monseigneur made it absolutely clear just how little he, John, meant to him? Sherlock had cast him aside; it was time that John did the same.

Still, his sound arguments did little to prevent John from imagining Sherlock here, suddenly appearing in front of himself and Tarasque. John allowed himself a moment of savage glee as he envisioned Monseigneur, frozen in his tracks, his masked face still with shock. What would he eventually say, what would he finally do upon finding John in the company of another man?

Just then Tarasque turned slightly to look at him, and John realized that in his abstraction, his fingers had tightened around Tarasque’s hand in a biting grip. Quickly, he relaxed his hold while he nodded his reassurance: no, he was not having second thoughts. No, he would not run away. John needed this to happen and, God help him, he found that he actually wanted this man.

Tarasque nodded back. "It won't be long now, Jean," he said, his voice muffled by the silver mask
Tarasque had told him that he had rooms in the mansion, and it seemed to John that it was taking them forever to reach those chambers. Tarasque had chosen a circuitous route out of the gardens that ensured they met no one. After what seemed like a long time, they finally left the gardens behind and the rear end of the mansion came into sight. As they made their way stealthily along the endless, empty corridors of the great house, John could feel Tarasque repeatedly glancing back at him, as if reassuring himself that John was still there.

He need not worry, John thought.

Yet for all his self-assurance, John hesitated when they finally arrived inside Tarasque’s chambers. Once again, the opulent surroundings reminded him of his would-be lover’s position. He was an important enough guest to be given richly tapestried rooms within the stately home of one of Gaaldine’s most prominent families— that much John realized. Would he, John, be willing to involve himself yet again with somebody who may wield enormous power to cause a considerable amount of mischief?

Before he could continue along the path that his thoughts had taken, John was seized from behind. The man’s arms were hard bands enveloping him and for a moment John stiffened in alarm— belated, useless at this point— before he forced himself to relax, to not show his excitement as he felt an unmistakable hardness pressing into the small of his back.

Tarasque leaned in and whispered a warning: “silence is the name of the game.”

John was hardly breathing as Tarasque continued, “Jean. Mon cher Jean, I thank you for coming this far with me, and now I must ask for your indulgence in one more thing; one last thing.”

“Anything.” John wanted the talking part over and done with as quickly as possible.

“You see, there is a curious custom amongst us, about seeing our faces…”

John nodded. “I know,” he murmured. Dear God, did he know. He’d been down this road before and look where it had got him. “I can’t ever see your face.”

Tarasque’s reply came as a surprise: “Unless, of course, you actually want to; in which case I will not stop you from seeing my visage.”

John turned his head but he could only see the side of that polished, silver mask. He was not sure if he had heard aright the words as well as the hint of wistfulness in the man’s voice. Already, John was finding it hard to focus, especially when Tarasque’s gloved hands had started to roam over his body. He finally shook his head. He did not want the burden of responsibility that came with seeing the man’s face and knowing his identity.

“That is very wise, but problematic,” Tarasque said with a sigh, “especially as I was hoping I can kiss you.”

Bloody Christ…

John licked his lips and considered. “You can opt not to remove your mask,” he said slowly. Damn it, but he wanted some kissing, too. “Or…or, I can just shut my eyes. I promise not to look at your face.”

Tarasque laughed softly. “Jean, comme vous êtes adorable. Actually, I have something else in mind that will make things easier for us.”
“Oh yeah?”

“I’m going to have to blindfold you.”

_Ohbloodyfuckinghell…!

“Umm…”

A gloved hand reached up to caress John’s cheek. “You’re not afraid, are you?” Tarasque said softly. “Somehow I don’t think you’re the type who is very easily daunted, Jean.”

When John remained silent, Tarasque continued soothingly, “you’ve trusted me this far. I want you to trust me all the way. Will you give me a chance, Jean?”

John reasoned that, indeed, it would have been far easier, not to mention a lot less messy, for the man to pull a knife on him in the darkness of the gardens than inside these rooms. Still, this was definitely not a good idea. John was already treading on dangerous ground with his eyes wide open, what chance did he have if his sight were taken from him? Did Tarasque think he was this big a fool to agree to such an outlandish proposal?

While John was relieved to find his mind in good working order, wretchedly, his body had other ideas. It always did. To his mortification, but with very little surprise, John could already feel himself growing hard at the mere thought of a blindfold around his eyes and the possibilities of a game not even Monseigneur had ever broached with him.

However, reason mercifully prevailed and John said, “I can’t.”

"You have nothing to fear from me, you know that, Jean,” Tarasque murmured in his ear beseechingly. Then his soft tone suddenly turned teasing: "Or perhaps you'd want to conduct a body search first to satisfy yourself of my sincerity?"

John had to smile at Tarasque's words, but he pushed on, "I just… I find it just a bit too much. I don't even know you—"

There was a pause before Tarasque whispered, “I understand.”

Those long arms began to disengage themselves gently from John, leaving him suddenly bereft.

“Wait,” John said, before Tarasque could step away from him. A moment more and his shoulders sagged. “I…all right.”

“Jean…”

John stared into that cold, hard mask of a face and continued, “let’s just take what we both want.”

The relief in Tarasque’s voice was almost palpable: “Merci.”

John shuddered out a breath as if to steady himself. There, he’d made his decision. He was going to regret it, he was sure, but he did not want to think about it further. He was done thinking and agonizing. He wanted to be set free, and this man had promised him the kind of oblivion that he needed.

John could feel his fingers trembling so he balled his hands into fists, wondering what was going to happen next. He watched closely as Tarasque produced a large square of dark silk from his sleeve—at least the man was nothing if not considerate—and began to fold it into a long, narrow band.
“You might want to close your eyes, Jean. This will only take a moment.”

Even though he was expecting it, John was not prepared for the absolute darkness that engulfed him as the blindfold came over his eyes. He tried to keep still as he felt Tarasque tie the band of black silk into place quickly, firmly, behind his head. Gentle fingers adjusted the fabric over John’s eyes, testing to make sure that it sealed away John’s vision completely. When Tarasque was done with his task, John was effectively blind.

With his sight gone, fear instantly kicked in.

God, he was insane to agree to this. He was insane!

John could feel the uncertainty giving way to panic. Instantly, he stretched his arms out in front of himself as he took a few, hesitant steps forward. His hands met empty air.

“Tarasque…”

There was silence all around him— thick and heavy, sentient, enveloping him in an ominous void. Beneath the blindfold, his useless eyes were already playing tricks on him: fantastical patterns of various colors bloomed and burst before him in the darkness as his body gradually lost its sense of direction.

With his sight gone, John’s imagination swiftly took hold of him: Tarasque may as well have vanished. There was nobody there; there was somebody there— perhaps there were even ten of them (all with knives and swords drawn) in the room, hovering just out of John's reach. Again, who was Tarasque exactly? What power did he exert over John, enough to make John lose his head like this?

He could not believe that he would trust a stranger so instinctively. His present vulnerability was deeply frightening, and John decided enough was enough. Yet before he could raise his hands to his face to remove the blindfold, he felt bare hands upon him, and lips, soft as velvet against his ear. Tarasque had unmasked himself.

“Mon précieux Jean,” he whispered.

John swallowed his panic. “For a moment there, I… I thought—”

"That I've left?"

John nodded, his breathing uneven.

“I can never leave you, Jean. Mon trésor. In giving yourself to me, I shall see to it that you will be cherished.”

Really, the endearments heaped upon him were lavish, almost embarrassingly excessive, yet like a starving man, John found himself yearning for more. And that voice! It was the voice that enthralled him. The light, frivolous tone was gone, replaced by a caress of sound— deep and achingly familiar yet hushed, almost reverent. Together, the tender voice and the honeyed words could not fail to move John. With his heart pounding and his protests dying out before they could reach his lips, John felt Tarasque take possession of his hands as he was led across the room towards the huge canopied bed.

“Sit down, Jean. The bed is just behind you.”

He did as he was told. As soon as John sank down on the plush surface of the bed his hand shot out in front of him, blindly seeking reassurance. It met with the clothed surface of Tarasque’s chest and
John could feel the heat emanating from the firm, muscled flesh just beneath the thin silk. John realized the man must be kneeling in front of him. Before it could explore further, John’s hand was captured in a firm grip. He felt the soft, fleeting caress of lips over his knuckles before his hand was turned over, and he drew in a startled breath as he felt the first touch of a moist, open mouth on his palm.

“Tarasque…”

“Lover,” the man corrected John. “I’m your lover now. I want you to forget everything and cast aside all your doubts and fears. Will you do that for me, Jean?”

John let out a ragged sigh. “Yes.”

He bit back a moan as he felt the tantalizing touch of a wet tongue tip tracing a line from his palm to his fingers. John shuddered as that practiced tongue lapped at his fingertips and he cried out as soft lips encircled his middle finger, drawing the digit into a warm, waiting mouth that sucked and teased before gliding back up to release it.

“Oh my God…”

John could not believe that he would get so easily excited, yet the feel of that gorgeously sinful mouth was something that he did not think was possible. In the absence of sight, his other senses had filled in, magnifying the sensation that shot straight from his middle finger to his groin.

Without thinking, John lifted his other hand to cradle the man’s head. He froze as his fingers swept across thick, short hair—far too short to sport any curls.

*Of course,* John thought, swallowing hard. *Of course.*

What the hell was he thinking? John was a fool to continue harboring this particular fantasy. It was time he freed himself from it; from *him.*

Sensing the abrupt change in John, Tarasque quickly pulled his head away. “Jean…”

“It’s all right,” John said, quickly reaching out for him again. “I want this. I want you.”

“Lie down then, Jean, and let me take care of you.”

John shook his head. “I remember your saying something about a body search,” he said, astonished at his own boldness.

Tarasque laughed softly. “And indeed you may perform one on me, mon cheri; as soon as we rid ourselves of these impeding garments.”

Heedless of Tarasque’s words, John raised his hands to touch and stroke anywhere he could reach even as Tarasque began to undress. It was very strange how sensitive John’s fingers had become; he glowed in the feel of silk and flesh and the sounds of approval and encouragement that met his exploration of Tarasque’s person.

In picking Tarasque, he’d chosen well, John realized, pleased, as his hands swept over a long column of throat and down onto the newly bared expanse of chest, lightly dusted with fine hair. When his fingertips accidentally brushed against a flat nipple, John was gratified to hear a low groan of pleasure. Unseeingly, John moved forward and replaced his questing hands with his mouth on his lover’s flesh.
“Aah, Jean…”

Long-fingered hands were on his head, moving down to stroke his shoulders, his back as John nipped and licked. It was strange how, in all his time with Monseigneur, John not been able to touch Sherlock all that much. He’d not been allowed to. Of course, he knew the placement of every mole and freckle on that long, pale body, but without his vision, John quickly realized he wouldn’t know Monseigneur’s body from another man’s. At least with Tarasque, he was free to do as he liked, and he sought to memorize the marvellous body he could not see with his hands and lips. He took in Tarasque's scent— a mixture of spice and musk; the taste of salt on his skin; the delightful hardness of a toned, slender body contrasting with the softness of skin and hair and lips.

And above all, there was the voice— deep and rich— that John could not quite get enough of, especially as it murmured to him invitingly. “There, Jean, my faithless one. Are you not satisfied with your body search?”

John felt Tarasque take his hand once more, brushing it lightly down the length of the man's naked torso to rest on the bulge of heated flesh between his thighs, still encased in tight, silken trousers.

Oh, fuck, John thought.

God, the man was huge.

Tarasque whispered, “I did promise that you need not fear me. I carry no blade except, perhaps, this.”

Before John could say anything, he felt himself being tipped back until he was reclining on his elbows as Tarasque moved to straddle him. Fascinated, John glided his hand over Tarasque's erection. He kept his touch light; he had learned enough from Monseigneur’s techniques to know how devastatingly effective it could be. The sense of power that he felt was new and heady as Tarasque’s frustration mounted: the lazy, grinding motion of his hips against John’s hand quickened and turned into short, hard thrusts.

“Oh, mon Dieu, Jean, ce que tu peux me faire ressentir…”

John heard a sharp groan of disappointment as he suddenly withdrew his hand and he realized this was the moment that Monseigneur craved for, but it was not for him. He had promised himself that he was never going to be cruel. Before Tarasque could think to struggle, John rose up and deftly brought the larger man down onto the bed, effortlessly pinning him there with his knees and hands.

“Jean.”

“Let me have you.” John’s voice was a hard rasp, his fingers rough as he tore at Tarasque’s trousers. “Please, just let me have you.”

"Claim me then, Jean." Tarasque's voice was a low, silky purr. "Intrigue-moi. Émerveille-moi. Ensorcelle-moi."

John felt Tarasque's hands join in on his clumsy, blind efforts to rid him of his pants, and John heard a low moan as he wrapped his hand around the man’s cock. John glided his trembling fingers over the length of that slender, hard shaft and felt moisture already leaking from its tip. Instinct took over, and John brought his head down to taste.

John had never done this before. He’d never given Monseigneur this pleasure, but he had been taught well, and he was gratified to hear his new lover shout his satisfaction into the pillows.
John had not known what to expect, and he feared very much that Tarasque might ask him to do something he had no idea what, but he seemed to be doing it well enough. He remembered in detail Monseigneur’s use of his tongue and fingers—the flickering licks over the head, the caresses up and down the shaft. It was a difficult task, given that he could not see, and Tarasque was moving so much. John was in danger of choking and gagging at every irregular thrust until a hand came up to his head to guide him, and John learned to relax his mouth and jaw and simply take him in a light clasp as Tarasque began to thrust in earnest.

“Jean, Jean,” chanted Tarasque. “My clever, wonderful Jean. Je suis si près... oh, mon Dieu... Jean...ahhhh—!”

At that moment, as though sensing his time had come, John closed his mouth around his lover’s flesh and sucked. He never let go, but bore the waves of his lover’s orgasm as it flooded his mouth and throat. All the while, John heard that wondrous voice as it turned deep-throated and full, almost like Monseigneur's; but it was not him. It was never, ever going to be him.

Dazed and with a dripping mouth, it took John a moment to realize that Tarasque had withdrawn from him. He felt himself being hauled up, and for the first time that night, John found himself being kissed hard on the mouth.

"Oh, bien joué, Jean. My turn now." The words were a low growl.

“Beast,” John found himself saying, breaking into a smile. “Come on, then.”

Who would have imagined that such pleasure could exist? John thought as he gave himself up to his lover’s gentle savagery. He would have bruises in the morning, and marks all over his body.

Who would have thought that a little encounter in the gardens could lead to this? Sitting there in the dark when John first beheld him, Tarasque and his fearsome mask had reminded John of a monster from one of Molly’s tales from those people who lived long ago and far away: the mythical Minotaur—half man and half bull—brooding in his labyrinth, waiting for his sacrifice of flesh.

Instead...

“Jean, avez-vous la moindre idée de ce que vous avez fait de moi?”

At the very least, John had half-expected an assassin, and instead...

“Comment avez-vous réussi, Jean? Comment avez-vous su capturer mon cœur ainsi?”

Inflamed by that voice, and understanding only a little of the words, John pushed his lover back into the bed as he positioned himself over him. It was time.

A large, dexterous hand was on his swollen shaft now, coating him in scented oil, readying him. John threw his head back, hissing in a long breath of delight at the feel of those clinging fingers. He felt himself being guided onto that tight ring of flesh, felt for an instant that maddeningly delicious sensation of his glans rubbing at the entrance, and with a deep groan of satisfaction, he pressed in, firm and steady, sinking deep into that warm, quivering body until he was sheathed to the hilt.

“Jean...”

"Good," breathed John. "You feel so fucking good."

They moved as one in a rhythm made as though only for them; their very own dance— languorous at first, gradually building to a frenzy of ecstasy. John burned with a need to possess—it was the
only way to exorcise the demon who held his heart.

“Jean, Jean…” a broken plea.

“Mine,” panted John. “Will you be mine?”

“Yours. Yours, always.”

John gratefully moved to take his lover’s mouth, his hands like claws on his lover’s chest, clutching at the sweat-slicked flesh with enough pressure to bruise as he pounded into him. God, he was so close. He could feel the pleasure coiling within himself, building, gathering force, and still he held off, desperate to prolong the moment.

He felt Tarasque’s arms wind around him, gripping hard and drawing him close.

“Come. Come inside me, Jean.”

Those words, whispered so tenderly in his ear, were what sent John over the edge. He finally let go, his back arching and his mind soaring free like a winged being in the heavens before it splintered under the waves of pleasure. He came again and again, pouring himself, seemingly endlessly, into his lover’s body.

Later, much later, John felt Tarasque shift from under him, turning them over so that he lay on his back with Tarasque's head pillowed on his chest. Sighing, he lifted a hand to caress his lover’s hair, his back. Sated but still sightless, John felt reason gradually return and, with it, the first stirrings of anxiety.

Regret was still nowhere in sight, but with this act of defiance, John was conscious of crossing a line. This was something he could never walk back from.

He was not exactly a free man to do as he pleased. He'd sworn an oath of fealty to Monseigneur.

You will never betray me...

Yet a voice inside him countered with fierce gladness: He can do what he wants with me now and he will never be able to break it— my heart. I've given it away. Even if I were to die for this, I shall die unrepentant.

No, he was not going to feel regret, John thought. Not now, not on the morrow, when the sun rose to chase all the night shadows away; tomorrow, which was still a world away.

For now, he had this, and he was going to treasure it as very soon, it will be nothing but a fond memory: the deep glow of contentment, almost of happiness, and the lover of his dreams who lay upon his heart and whispered, “Je suis votre prisonnier, Jean.”

Translations:

Tarasque: Mon cher Jean. (My dear John)

Jean, comme vous êtes adorable. (Jean, how adorable you are.)

Mon précieux Jean. (My precious Jean.)

Merci (Thank you.)
Oh, mon Dieu, Jean, ce que tu peux me faire ressentir...(Oh, my God, Jean, what you do to me...)

Intrigue-moi. Émerveille-moi. Ensorcelle-moi. (Mystify me. Delight me. Enslave me.)

Je suis si près...(I'm so close...)

Oh, bien joué. (Oh, well done.)

Jean, avez-vous la moindre idée de ce que vous avez fait de moi? (Jean, have you any idea of what you’ve done to me?)

Comment avez-vous réussi? Comment avez-vous su capturer mon cœur ainsi? (How did you do it? How did you manage to capture my heart?)

Je suis votre prisonnier, Jean. (I am your prisoner, Jean.)
It was a day before his wedding, but the King was far from being a happy man. From outside the castle windows, he could tell that the festivities were already in full swing all over Glasstown as it was certainly the case with the rest of the country. Morosely, he was also quite certain that among his merrymaking subjects, only a man sentenced to the gallows could fully understand how he felt. Mycroft may be the king of Gaaldine, and while he was entitled to many great privileges, marrying for love was not one of them. Perhaps what was particularly galling was the knowledge that no matter how good he was as a monarch, all his achievements would come to nothing if he failed in his primary obligation to produce an heir for the kingdom.

Ever since the death of his young wife (his first marriage, arranged when he was a child, had been so fleeting that he sometimes wondered if he’d merely dreamed it), he had successfully dodged the issue of remarriage, but with the recent widowhood of Anna Thea (whose own marriage had ended in very much the same circumstances as his) he could no longer dodge the issue. Angria was too great a prize to ignore. Throughout history, the kings of Gaaldine had set covetous eyes towards those vast lands in the north. Uniting both nations into one kingdom had always been a goal and an opportunity that had eluded Gaaldinian rulers until Mycroft came along; yet he was well aware of the amount of work needed to ensure the success of such a union. Angria was not a country at peace with itself, and Mycroft was under no illusion as to Anna Thea’s reasons for finally giving in to his proposition. Given the haste in which the marriage had been arranged, they had yet to get to know each other better.

To complicate matters, a rowdy gang of royalty and dignitaries from far and near had swept into Glasstown to witness the King’s stunning coup of finally getting the Queen of Angria to marry him, and Mycroft was not a fool to believe that his illustrious guests all wished him and his bride well. The strained smiles and grudging congratulations said it all. Beneath the forced joviality simmered anxiety, jealousy and resentment over the new and powerful alliance. Mycroft expected nothing less to come out of traditional rivalries between the royal houses whose members were all related to him by blood or through marriage.

As the King felt the noose of public expectation tightening inexorably around his neck, there was nothing he would like more than to shut himself into the quiet confines of his study, to be away from all the noise and the people, but it simply could not be. In fact, he had yet to have a word alone with Gregory Lestrade. They had made their farewells often enough in the past only to find themselves thrown back together in each other’s company, but the King knew this was going to be different: this was the last time he was saying goodbye, and to his despair he found that he had no time to do so.

These days, it seemed as though he’d barely time to lay his head upon his pillow and when he did so, sleep eluded him. When dawn finally came, his royal presence was expected at Mass, that holy service which exempted no one, not even a sovereign, from attending. Afterward, the never-ending tasks of kingship awaited him, and with his impending marriage came the inevitable social obligations—elaborate, tedious and perpetually grating on his nerves. Even mealtimes were a form of torture nowadays, given the restrained menu and the many prohibitions, not to mention the safety measures undertaken on his food—all to ensure that he would look his grandest on the important day that lay ahead.
All throughout, the King kept his marvellous composure and his cool graciousness masked his underlying anxiety that ranged from his future wife to his brother and the many issues that lay in between these two persons. He would have to deal with Anna Thea and her country's problems for the rest of his life once they were married. As for Monseigneur, the King had barely enough time to sit down with him since they had hatched their little plan. An update was required and so the King, despite knowing Sherlock's eating habits, had duly summoned him to breakfast.

As he sat down for the first meal of the day, the King glanced at the empty seat beside his and felt a stab of annoyance. Noting the direction of his master’s gaze, Sir Bruce Partington announced with suave diplomacy, “Monseigneur has sent his apologies and begs to inform Your Majesty that his arrival will be delayed.”

Mycroft doubted very much if Sherlock was sorry to be such a nuisance, but their meeting could not be postponed. Unless Sherlock would consent to attend to him while Mycroft took his bath (and Mycroft could already envision Sherlock and his insolent mouth elaborately pursed around a "no"), there was no other chance for them to talk privately during the rest of the day; and there were so many things that warranted a serious discussion between them, beginning with the news he had received early that morning of Monseigneur’s antics the night before. All of Glasstown was talking of nothing else save the extraordinary scene at the Wilkes masquerade.

The first of their carefully laid plans was beginning to bear fruit at last, and the King was impatient to hear of Monseigneur’s findings. Given the dangerously high stakes and Monseigneur’s propensity to change plans at the last minute, the King was naturally worried; yet these thoughts went through his head without so much as evincing a ripple of expression on his features. He merely gave a curt nod as he washed his hands in the silver bowl of rosewater proffered by a young page.

Yet Monseigneur was not too late. The King had barely raised a goblet of ale to his lips when the great doors were flung open and Monseigneur— no, bounded— into the hall, followed closely by his tired-looking page.

“Good morning!” Monseigneur’s effusive greeting was enough to stop everyone, even the King, in their tracks. “Ah, there is nothing better to start the day than to break the fast. Gramercy for the invitation, brother dear.”

The King carefully lowered his goblet. He watched in silence as Monseigneur sauntered over to the dais and the dining table, rubbing his hands together as if in anticipation of the meal. By the time Monseigneur sat down with a soft grunt of discomfort beside him, the King had finished his deductions and was reeling from the conclusions he had drawn.

So Sherlock had indeed made some last-minute changes to their plan— complicated changes.

The stab of annoyance the King felt was fast swelling into a wave. Still, he held off. He waited impassively for Monseigneur to be served before he dismissed the servants and courtiers. “Including you, Master William,” the King said kindly to Billy, who had changed much since the King last saw him. “I see that some breakfast will do you good.”

When they were finally alone, the King turned to his brother and said delicately, “Well, well. I see you’ve had a wildly enjoyable night, to judge from your mood and your tender bottom. I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“Oh, rest assured that I am,” Monseigneur said smugly, thoroughly unabashed as he helped himself to fresh bread like a man famished.

The King resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I hope you realize your sudden diversions cannot come
at a worse time. I need not remind you that we have engaged a madman to lock horns with us. The incident last night—"

"—Went according to plan, you need not worry; but I had to make a detour. It was absolutely necessary," finished Monseigneur.

"So you left Master William to fend for himself with the Woman inside that den of iniquity while you went off on a tryst of your own?" Mycroft was fast losing his kingly composure. "That’s not part of the script, is it?"

Monseigneur actually laughed. "It is now, and the plan to have Billy trade places with me was made entirely with your express knowledge and permission, in case Your Majesty has conveniently forgotten," he drawled. "Therefore, I find it astonishing that you've not taken the attendant risks into consideration, though you need not worry. If needed, Billy can fend for himself. He’s protected from poison and has had plenty of sword practice, thanks to John Watson. Besides, Billy pulled it off marvellously last night. You should have seen him. He was quite safe, masquerading as yours truly. The target's attention was turned elsewhere at the last minute, hence my sudden change of plans."

"No matter how hard we try we just can’t keep John Watson out of the picture, can we," the King said dryly. It was not a query.

Monseigneur was silent for a moment before he murmured, “No. He’s a crucial part of the picture now. He always has been.”

"And what of the target?"

“All good things to those who wait,” Monseigneur said as he downed a goblet of ale. “Although this much is certain: Moriarty means to destroy me, and he will outdo himself by employing a method that is particularly cruel and unusual. He will not hesitate to use John to get to me. John must be protected at all cost.”

The King scoffed. “I can just have him arrested, you know. Nephew of the Pope or not, he cannot be allowed to wreak havoc in my kingdom.”

“And you know very well that he and his minions have the means to unleash death throughout Glasstown and beyond if you lay a finger on him,” Monseigneur reminded the King. “We don’t have enough of the antidote and you can’t protect every single river, stream or water well within the kingdom if he wishes to deliver poison en masse. I can assure you that he has the means to do so. For now, he wants me; only me. It would be easier for us to give him what he wants. He’s deployed the Woman as part of his scheme to destroy me, fine. I’ve risen to his bait. We await his next move. So you see our plan is coming along quite nicely. It’s got your style written all over it, by the way: the illusion of control you give to others by letting them think they’re getting their way.”

The King said nothing more as he lifted a hand to rub at his temple wearily. If only tomorrow were not his wedding day. Aloud, he merely said, “we haven’t much time, and we are far from done with our discussion. The session with the court astronomers will follow immediately after our little repast and I would like you to be present.”

Monseigneur snorted in disbelief.

“Physically, at least,” the King said, glaring at Sherlock. “You’re not the one who is getting married. The least you can do is to play your part as you’ve promised.”

Hackles raised, the King waited for a retort, but Monseigneur merely drawled, “I am, as ever, your
humble servant, Your Majesty.”

As the King of Gaaldine, and soon, Angria, Mycroft was virtually omnipotent, but even he was powerless to curb the ancient practices which court protocol was deeply entrenched in. The court astrologers and soothsayers were virtually an institution, and they were consulted in all crucial matters of state, most especially when it was an affair as important as a royal marriage.

Monseigneur knew that his brother relied on tangible information from his spies, not the stars, but Mycroft was also a true statesman. Theirs was a superstitious age. There would be talk if it became known that the King did not believe in prophecies sent from above, and Mycroft knew better than to waste valuable time and energy by defying protocol when it would be far easier for him to sit and listen to a bunch of predictions.

At any rate, the wise ones had nothing but good news and auspicious signs for the King and his attending counselors. The wedding would go ahead smoothly, they proclaimed. Furthermore, the union would be a happy and fruitful one. Monseigneur watched in silent amusement as Mycroft struggled not to wince while one old crone proceeded to inform him, based on her expertise with a mirror said to have magical powers, of the number and, most importantly, the sex of the children that he would have with his new wife.

Apparently the King was going to have quite a large family, announced the old woman.

Monseigneur withstood a few more minutes of these ridiculous prophecies— made after months of watching the nighttime heavens to note the alignment of the stars and planets and even by studying the pattern of moles on the King’s body (Monseigneur did not care to ask if the bride had also been subjected to the same kind of physical examination)— before he drifted away, leaving the session behind and retreating gratefully into his mind palace.

After everything that had transpired, he’d not had time to go back and think. He’d hardly slept, but now he had an hour to indulge in the memories of the previous night, and of John.

Monseigneur opened a door in his mind palace, and he was back in that stuffy, overcrowded ballroom, gliding through the sea of masked faces, his own identity a secret, carefully wrapped inside a leonine mask while Billy took his place publicly. Their course of action, so meticulously planned, so delicate that a single, careless mistake would be its undoing, had finally been set into motion.

As they had intended, Billy-as-Monseigneur had yet to appear with the Princess Irene, and Sherlock had time to scan the nighttime heavens to note the alignment of the stars and planets and even by studying the pattern of moles on the King’s body (Monseigneur did not care to ask if the bride had also been subjected to the same kind of physical examination)— before he drifted away, leaving the session behind and retreating gratefully into his mind palace.

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As they had intended, Billy-as-Monseigneur had yet to appear with the Princess Irene, and Sherlock had time to scan the people around him, slowing down or speeding up the action in his mind palace as needed in order to catch certain conversations while dismissing others. All the while, a spider and his minions lurked within the jostling, chattering crowds. It would only be a matter of time before they surfaced. Until then, Sherlock bided his time, taking in detail after detail of the people around him that he may have missed the night before. Couples danced to a lively tune in front of him; he kept his attention on the perimeter of the milling crowds, until suddenly, John and Molly whirled by. Sherlock remembered his first reaction— the way his heart had leaped at the sight of John, richly dressed and so lightly disguised by a simple mask around his eyes that he may as well not be wearing one. As always, when it came to John, Sherlock felt that distressing contraction of the heart; that feeling of walking on unsteady ground, and his usual steely resolution a puddle at his feet. As always, these sensations never failed to alarm and annoy him.

No matter how much he wished to deny it, he knew what it felt like now, this dangerous
disadvantage that John had managed to stoke to life within him. The first time he had realized it, he had been so overwhelmed that the tears had come. He had not wept since he was thirteen. It was not a good sign. Something had to be done.

His heart was such a recent acquisition, and he'd been told often enough that he did not have one, so he figured disposing of it wouldn't be much of a problem. Thus, over the past few weeks, he'd done all he could to rid himself of it. He had tried to suppress it, to throw it away, to act like it did not exist, yet there was no way for him to unknow it. Try as he might, he could not fall out of love, and if he needed proof of his failure, it was this: throughout their separation, he could not stop thinking of John. He could not stop missing him. It felt like dying a little inside every day. It was quite ghastly.

And yet it felt even worse to see John again, to have him misunderstand about the Woman and not be able to do anything about it because John’s (and everyone else’s) confusion was vital to their operation. It was proof, Sherlock thought, that their plan was working.

Regardless of what he thought, his heart continued its painful throbbing, and Sherlock had little recourse but to watch as John danced with Molly and enjoyed himself. Sherlock had never seen John so carefree, and aside from that new and anomalous beat of his heart, he felt a lump form in his throat. Watching John from afar, he was torn between intense pleasure and pain—sensations that were becoming increasingly and distressingly familiar.

Despite his mask, John had a look of such open, marveling curiosity at the dazzling scenery before him, but then he had to turn and glance at Sherlock. It was unnerving, the way John’s gaze held his; it seemed to burn into him. For a moment, Sherlock felt as though he had been unmasked. He was sure that John had recognized him; but then John danced on, and Sherlock moved away, relieved and troubled at the same time. After the dance had ended, he took care to track John among the throng of chattering people as he continued his surveillance.

Not now. Not now, Sherlock thought as new fears gripped him—fears concerning John and the very likely possibility of his getting entangled in the spider’s web. It was astonishing how love could mess with one's judgement. Sherlock should never have let John come to Glasstown; he should never have allowed himself to fall in love with John in the first place, but it was all too late. He realized belatedly that the only chance he ever had of securing himself was if he had never pressed John into his service, and that was impossible. It was unthinkable.

Imagine if he’d never met John, if Fate had never brought them together on that windswept and rain-soaked field. He would have been poisoned all those months ago. But then John had come along—John, who had saved him and given him a heart that bled and suffered. How he wished he could do away with it all and go back to how he had always been, when things had been crystal clear and brutally simple. There was never going to be a good time to have a heart, especially not now when so many things hung in the balance.

Just then a frisson of astonishment ran through the crowds, and Sherlock turned to watch closely as “Monseigneur” made his appearance with the Woman at last.

Over the course of the boy’s apprenticeship with him, Billy had proved to be an apt pupil. Sherlock remembered meeting him as a child for the first time and how, despite the fact that he was Lestrade's nephew and had come to the Lair with the backing of the King himself, Monseigneur had almost turned Billy away until he discovered that the boy had a gift for mimicry that mirrored his own.

Despite Billy’s painfully shy and awkward nature, Sherlock had seen some of the youth’s chameleon-like abilities during those inevitable moments when he caught his page off-guard. It turned out that Billy was quite a natural actor, able to shed his personality entirely to don on another person’s voice and manners. It also helped immensely that, over the years, Billy had grown to match
Sherlock’s own height and build. After years of hard work and discipline, their efforts were beginning to pay off. With Billy as a heavily masked Monseigneur, there was no shyness, no hesitation, as he took the Woman in his arms and began that shockingly inappropriate dance.

“My, does Monseigneur not look ravishing tonight?” Sherlock heard a soft voice say, and he turned to see his one-time friend, James Moriarty, the newly minted Bishop of Westwood, standing several feet away. “And here we all were, wondering what became of him since the spring when word got around that he was quite ill.”

Sherlock watched the people around Moriarty laugh as the chatter steadily grew within the room. It had been months since Sherlock had last seen him, but Moriarty looked the same, with those dark, bland features that had initially fooled even Sherlock. Standing there amidst all the covered faces, Moriarty had no mask to shield his face; but then he did not need one. His naked face was nothing but a mask in itself. One could peel away layer after layer of his person and still not know him for who he was, but Sherlock knew. After their last encounter, he knew.

The dance continued, but Sherlock’s attention could not be drawn to the dance floor. There would be time for another look later, because now, something momentous was about to happen that required his full attention. Just then, as though his nightmares had come true, Sherlock watched as John, with Molly in tow, hurried past Moriarty. Obviously, they were taken in by Monseigneur's bold moves on the dance floor. They were fleeing through the crowds, confused, sickened. John's face was an open book, white and drawn, and then he came within an inch of James Moriarty. That comical grimace that Moriarty pulled as John passed by was all Sherlock needed to know, yet there was more to come.

Sherlock watched intently as Moriarty turned away and nodded, seemingly to himself, a smile edging its way across those dry, pale lips. Moriarty had given a signal, and Sherlock scanned the crowds until he saw a couple of well-dressed, heavily masked men detaching themselves and moving discreetly after the rapidly departing figures of John and Molly.

It was time to get a move on. Billy would be safe from Moriarty so long as he followed instructions and did not engage with him.

There was a long moment as the three men drew back, waiting, as John and Molly extracted a hapless Lady Hudson from the group of matrons, shrill as buzzards with their questions over Monseigneur's intentions with the Exinian princess. It was with difficulty that they managed to get themselves to a carriage, all the while unaware that they were being tailed. The two men were like shadows, falling away a safe distance as John bundled the ladies into the carriage and shook his head no, he wasn't going with them. From his own corner, Sherlock watched as the men watched John, his John, standing all alone in the moonlit courtyard, head down and hands on his hips, long after the carriage had departed. He seemed to be gathering himself in.

*John, what are you thinking about?*

When John lifted his head again, it was with newfound resolution. Sherlock felt dread trickle down his spine like ice water as he noted John's grimly determined look, the tense set of his shoulders. He was unprepared for the agony that ripped through his heart as he realized John's intention.

*John, John...oh, John, what are you going to do?*

Was it not obvious?

John set a brisk pace as he retraced his steps to the great house, still oblivious of the shadows that trailed after him, while the shadows were unaware that they, too, had a silhouette of their own. John
kept away from the ballroom; instead, he quickly went down the steps to the vast gardens. Sherlock found he had to run to keep up, panic welling within him at the thought that he might lose John in that dark maze. He kept to the trees, mindful of the two men ahead who, in turn, stalked John. All the while, he felt his heart breaking.

*Oh, John. John…*

John was going to find himself someone for the night, and Sherlock had nobody but himself to blame for bringing the situation about. All these weeks he had pushed John away and now he had succeeded spectacularly. It was useless to tell himself that this was all part of the plan. From somewhere at the back of his mind, he remembered a conversation he had years and years ago, back when his tutor had been alive. It had to do raptors, about how one could only go so far with them before one broke their spirit. It was strange how he had not thought of Sir Thomas Hooper for years and yet he was the first person that came to mind when Sherlock’s own heart was in pieces. All the while, danger lurked just around the corner for John. He’d never anticipated that there would be too many factors that were beyond his control.

There were people milling about in the gardens which added to the unpredictability of the situation. Were there more of Moriarty's men out there? On the other hand, Sherlock was certainly alone; he'd not bothered to inform anyone else about his scheme, not even Lestrade.

Tensely, he waited behind the trees as John made his awkward foray into the unknown. It would have been amusing if only Sherlock did not feel like dying, but there was very little he could do save to hang back and watch. If those men emerged, then he would pounce, but they, too, kept away and merely observed as a masked lady floated up to John, who was obviously startled at being propositioned. Whoever she was, Sherlock would have gladly wrung her graceful neck. He breathed a sigh of relief when nothing came of the encounter.

The next one to come around was somebody disturbingly familiar, and although John seemed prepared to be more receptive this time, his hesitation was still plain enough to see.

*Ah, John. John, you've lived in the Dark Ages long enough. You've not met any of the ladies from Gondal yet...*

Sherlock had never hated his thought processes until that moment. He shoved the idea of John and the ladies away as he focused on the masked harridan standing before John. He could hardly believe his ears as he recognized Sally's nasal tones, and indignation surged within him at the prospect of Sally (yes, he knew all about Anderson's cowardice) making her moves on John. *His* John.

His suspicions proved unfounded, yet he chafed as the two got down to talking, getting all comfortable as they sat on a marble bench at a distance which ensured that Sherlock could hear their voices but not their words. He did not need to listen; to judge from her shrill tones, he was sure Sally was pouring forth on Anderson's treachery, though Sherlock wondered if John might share his own confidences with her. At any rate, it seemed Sally had moved on. She’d snared herself a bloke who appeared a few minutes later to whisk her away, leaving John once again to himself.

*Please, John, just go home…*

It was not going to happen, of course. After a while, John shook his head as if to clear it, and he got up to resume his interrupted tour of the gardens. Yet his steps were slower, more uncertain than ever, as he got down to the river. Sherlock watched as John stood for a long time on the end of the pathway before the river began, lost in his thoughts. Sherlock had moved to sit down on a bench in the shade of the last of the trees, the better to observe John and the minions still tailing him.
And that was when John lifted his head and saw him.

Again, there was that *frisson* of awareness, but then Sherlock was sure John could not see him properly in the shadow of the trees. Despite himself, Sherlock felt a rush of wild hope.

*Come have a closer look, John. Come to me.*

Sherlock could see John debating with himself as his left hand— the one with the intermittent tremor — began to twitch by his side. John was probably unaware of it, but Sherlock had noted his habit of clenching and unclenching that left hand of his whenever he grew nervous. John was definitely nervous now, and perhaps a little desperate, yet it was curiosity— that naughty, irrepressible part of John that had led him to lift Monseigneur's mask to take a peek at his face— that won over reason yet again as John made up his mind and moved to approach someone whom he must think was a complete stranger.

It was just as well that he started towards Sherlock then. At that particular moment, one of Moriarty’s minions had detached himself from the shadows and moved towards John. The man checked himself abruptly as John moved away and made a beeline for Sherlock. By the time he got to Sherlock, the figure was gone, melting back into the thick shadows of the gardens across them.

“Evening,” John said pleasantly.

For a moment, Sherlock’s heart was in his throat, choking him. Still, he remembered to put on his well-rehearsed falsetto though he was only half-aware of the words that escaped his mouth: some inanity about the party and the moon that John nevertheless thought quite amusing. He gestured for John to sit down beside him and John’s look of avid interest as it ranged over his person was almost enough to make Sherlock throw caution to the winds.

*Be still my beating heart…*

They made conversation, such conversation that Sherlock was sure to forget, so impatient was he to get things over and done with. In that moment when John moved to approach him, Sherlock had reached an important decision. He was ten kinds of fool to have reacted the way he did over John. He had fallen in love with the man and there was no helping it. All he’d done in his panic was to drive John away and rip his own heart to shreds, and he’d found that he could not stand a moment more of it. It would kill him to lose John, and apparently, John could not help it any more than he, Sherlock, could.

Sherlock remembered John's threat the evening he'd arrived: "That is the last time I'm kissing you." John had made a conscious decision to move on, and yet here was proof of John’s love, as deep-seated as his. Without him knowing it, John had picked Sherlock out of all the masked people in the crowds as surely as Azrail would in an entire garrison of soldiers.

And John had shown Moriarty his reaction to Monseigneur and the Woman. The spider was now on to him. Sherlock must get John to safety, and he began to think that perhaps he ought to reveal himself to him.

But just then the music came, and with it that love song. And they danced, with John gradually leaning in to Sherlock to bury his head against his chest. Sherlock feared that his heart might give him away, so strong and fast was its wild beat. John was sure to notice, yet he was so still and silent. Sherlock never knew if John wept, though he thought he might have. It did not matter. All Sherlock knew was that this man had the power to touch him as nobody else can, and all those times he'd called him *mon couer*— how right he'd been if he'd only paused to consider it. John was his heart, and John's pain was Sherlock’s agony.
When John finally recovered, Sherlock found that he could deny himself or John no longer.

“Suivez-moi, Jean,” he whispered. “Come with me.”

For a moment, he thought he'd overstepped himself, yet John’s only response was to kiss him on his mask. “I don’t care where, just take me somewhere,” he whispered fiercely.

Were Moriarty’s men still nearby? Doubtless they were, though he had frightened them off. Still, Sherlock took no chances as he and John took that long and winding path out of the gardens to shake off their pursuers. It took a while before Sherlock managed to get them to a suite of rooms in the great house that he knew would be empty. The revelers still had a few more hours to indulge themselves before they hit their beds.

What followed next was his way of atonement—a poignant, sensual feast of confirmation and ownership so long withheld. He would have wanted John to see him then, but it was too soon; John was not ready, and his sudden emergence might jeopardize everything. Still, he gave John a choice, yet John decided against seeing him; but then he did not need to, as it was evident that John saw him so clearly with his heart.

Was it possible to feel so many conflicting feelings as he blindfolded John and took off his own mask? He could not say; indeed, he found that he could not utter a word, so moved was he to find John so trusting, so willing. All he could do was to bring forth his trembling hand so that his fingers skimmed over John’s features, almost but not quite touching his face, his lips, as John moved about uncertainly in his blindness.

Sherlock could see that John was becoming uneasy, and he found himself speaking the truth when he said, “I can never leave you.”

With his emotions unmasked, he found himself giving voice to the thoughts that he could barely bring himself to acknowledge all these weeks. He did not know himself to be capable of it, yet Sherlock meant every loving word he uttered as he allowed John to take full possession of him at last. And John, oh, John! How the man surprised and delighted him as John cast aside his hesitation to take the matter in hand; to take him in hand, to kiss Sherlock like he’d never done before, to take his body with such rough assurance, the powerful warrior claiming his spoils in a battle that John had won long ago, as Sherlock had only belatedly realized.

I am your prisoner, Jean…

He’d never imagined himself surrendering to anyone, yet the words carried no fear, no sense of defeat.

Afterwards, Sherlock helped John carefully back into his clothes. He felt a deep-seated tenderness at the sight of John, disheveled and more than a little embarrassed. “I’ve never done anything like this before…”

Sherlock merely said, “And now you have.”

He smiled as he watched John’s face flush a dark red. He would have wanted to lift John’s blindfold and tell him everything then, but he must be patient for a few days longer, until such time as he could trap Moriarty in his own web of deadly intrigue. Until then, John would be watched, his every action and reaction carefully studied. If Sherlock’s plan were to succeed, they must continue their little charade for a little while longer.

Only a few days more, John. Then all will be revealed.
Sherlock left John to sit on one of the window alcoves of the great house. Before he could leave him, John, still blindfolded, made to grab at his hand.

“Will I see you again?” John whispered.

“Oh, Jean,” Sherlock said with a hint of a smile in his voice as he caressed the side of John’s face one last time. “I have no doubt whatsoever that our paths will cross again soon. Don’t go looking for me. I will come for you.”

It took a while for John to take off the blindfold after Sherlock left him, and it took him even longer to stand up and finally walk away, his gait unsteady, as though he were drunk. Sherlock saw it all happen as he stood behind a dark pillar a few feet away.

Pain.

All a sudden and seemingly from a great distance, Sherlock felt pain lancing into his hand, and he surfaced quickly from his mind palace to find his brother leaning towards him, pinching hard at the web of flesh between the thumb and forefinger of one his hands.

Sherlock hissed in a breath as he batted away Mycroft’s hand. "Don't ever do that again!"

“At last,” said Mycroft, completely unruffled as he took his seat. "I tried calling you several times. You were unresponsive and I haven’t got all day. What was I to do?"

Sherlock looked around and found himself and Mycroft alone in the chamber. The ministers had left along with the astrologers. “How long was I gone?”

“Almost half an hour,” Mycroft replied.

“I take it the prophecies have been pure rubbish.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

"You don't need me to point that out to you."

“No,” Mycroft agreed, glancing back at Sherlock. “So down to business, then, little brother. Your predictions for the next few days, please.”

Sherlock obliged. "Moriarty has made his appearance last night at the masquerade though he has yet to initiate any contact with me. I've asked Billy to ignore him, and doubtless he will attempt to capture my attention today to stir things up before the wedding. Contrary to what the astrologers have predicted, you may want to tighten the security around yourself and the Queen as an attack is imminent. No doubt, Moriarty’s confidence has been bolstered by all the erroneous bits of information we have planted to set him at his ease—"

"That wound you incurred the last time."

"Correct. I wasn't poisoned by a mere wound. That would have been far too obvious for him. His method of administration was far more insidious and personal, but there is no harm in making him think he's ahead of us."

"You should have faked your death all those months ago if you really want him to believe that he's ahead of the game," Mycroft said dryly.

"No, I don't think he meant for me to die then. To fall gravely ill, yes. To weaken me, definitely.
He's flirting with me. He wants me on my knees. I am certain that he expected me to beg him for help in finding a solution for my predicament, something that is conveniently in his possession, and since I never did, he will want to investigate what we may have in our arsenal."

"John Watson."

"Yes. John."

"And that also means that he may know of our antidote."

"Let us hope not, or else he may change tactics at the last minute."

"And the Woman? Do you think she can be trusted?"

"There is no other way except through her. We need her to cooperate for the time being for the sake of appearances. If it becomes absolutely necessary to move things along, I will propose to her, though it won't matter at all. The Woman will die regardless of the outcome of events."

"You make it sound so easy. Let us hope things will turn out according to expectations," Mycroft said shortly. "As for John Watson, I will make sure to have him under surveillance, though I take it you’ve briefed him about the plan after your tryst last night."

Sherlock hesitated for a fraction of a second too long, and the King let out a weary sigh. "You’ve not told him," Mycroft said, his voice gone dangerously soft. "So what was your tryst all about last night? The masquerade…"

It took another second for him to piece it together. "I don’t believe it," Mycroft finally said, his voice flat.

"Last night, he didn’t really know he was with me."

"I don’t want to know what happened between you last night."

"He wasn’t ready. I had to blindfold him—"

"Change the subject now!"

"Have you got a better idea then, Mycroft?" Sherlock snapped.

When Mycroft said nothing, Sherlock continued coldly. "We know John’s history more than he does: the upheavals of his childhood and the way he’s blocked them from his mind; the way he’s blocked me from his mind last night…can you really not see it for what it is? This ability of his to know and not know at the same time, it is his way of coping. It’s a survival tactic. Deep down in his heart he knows instinctively, yet his mind can play tricks on him by denying everything on a conscious level. Can’t you see its advantage? It will be John’s best protection against the spider. Everything must be authentic in order to fool the likes of James Moriarty— John's reaction, most of all. If I can get John out of harm’s way by making him less conspicuous to Moriarty, then so much the better. Anyway, John will know everything after a few days, after we get to Moriarty and discover the full extent of his web. We can't arrest him now when we still don't know enough. He will only slip away; but you already know that."

It was clear that Mycroft did know and he did not wish to go over everything again. He only said, "You do realize what this makes you?"

"A cold, heartless bastard," Sherlock replied readily, as though reciting the line from memory. He
smirked. “Says the man made of ice. I know deep down that you approve.”

Mycroft deftly changed the topic: "And I do hope it's worth it, getting your hair cropped like that."

Sherlock touched the curling hair, false but so remarkably life-like, that covered his head. "It is but a small sacrifice."

Mycroft pursed his lips. He was about to say something more but he changed his mind. "Are you really sure you want to go ahead with this?" he asked.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. The plan is insane," said Sherlock, smiling in that particular way that Mycroft always associated with trouble, "which is why it's going to work. It's the only way to deal with a madman. Let the game begin."

Author's Notes: The methods of predictions as described in this chapter are lifted from the biography of Catherine de Medici by Leonie Frieda. Catherine de Medici was obsessed with the powers of the occult, and aside from consulting well-respected seers such as Nostradamus (it was he who foretold the rise of Henri of Navarre by looking at the moles on the future French king's body) and the leading astronomers/astrologers of the day, she indulged in shady practices that involved her tracing pentagrams on the floors of her chateaus and consorting with ruffians known to engage in black magic. The detail of the magic mirror is one such example, where the Queen got a seer to predict the number of years that each of her sons would rule France by counting the number of times each of her son's faces would revolve around the mirror. All her maneuverings were in vain, as the House of Valois died out with the last of her sons, to be replaced by the House of Bourbon beginning with Henri of Navarre (Henri IV).
Chapter 43

Author's notes at the end.

Moriarty, at last.

The familiar voice—couched faintly in the accents of Eire and tinged more obviously with reproach—reverberated along the narrow stone corridor: “I gave you my signal. I was waiting for you all these months, Your Highness.”

Monseigneur's long strides slowed until he came to a halt in the middle of the deserted corridor. It was a day before the wedding, and the castle was crawling with armed sentries everywhere except this private passageway, where priceless suits of armour from the King's personal collection stood as mute, ineffectual guards against the walls; where footfalls were muffled by a thick carpet beneath one's feet.

Nevertheless, it was a place of myriad possibilities, Monseigneur decided. He was not duly worried. Having this castle as a childhood playground had its advantages: he knew this passageway like the back of his hand. He knew all the entrances and exits as well as the hidden nooks and crannies from where assassins could lurk unseen. Besides, there were plenty of weapons for him to choose from to fend off an attack, and even more materials to create a ruckus with in case he needed to attract attention. At any rate, Moriarty would not deign to soil his hands by using weapons as crude and common as a sword, and Monseigneur was certain that Moriarty did not intend to kill him just now. That would have to be relegated to the near future, and executed with very special means. Right now, the man was here to rant and to make a scene.

He’d kept Moriarty waiting all these months—long enough to break the patience of any man and to drive him from fuming silence to helpless rage, yet true to form, Moriarty had not taken the bait by revealing his hand as Monseigneur retreated to the Lair. It was not Moriarty’s style, but now…now there was movement along the spider’s web and his moment had finally arrived.

As with everything he did, the present scenario bore all the hallmarks of Moriarty's ingenuity, his subtle menace. The King’s chambers, where Sherlock had emerged from their meeting a mere five minutes ago, were only two corridors away. That was part of the message: two corridors and Monseigneur were all that stood between James Moriarty and the King. If he so wished, Moriarty could traverse the remaining distance and no door in Gaaldine, no matter how well guarded, could ever bar him from entering. No person, however highborn, could ward off Moriarty’s advances. Monseigneur had learned that lesson all too well. What had transpired between them the last time they were alone together was not something that could be easily forgotten.

So now Monseigneur turned, his back straight and his movements unhurried, as a slight figure detached itself from the shadows of a corner alcove a few feet away.

"Let the game begin," Monseigneur had told the King. He had been preparing for this moment. He had imagined often enough how it would unfold, what games awaited him from this man who resembled him closely in terms of cold intellect and ruthless calculation. He remembered looking forward to this encounter, of walking into it with sure, firm steps, but that was Monseigneur from three, perhaps even a month, ago. Now he knew that he was not the same man as he had been; he had nobody to protect, then. The current feeling of walking on thin ice was not appealing and he had yet to get used to it, but this newfound vulnerability could be put to good use rather than let it remain
as the full, flat-out disadvantage that he thought it was.

On the other hand, Moriarty had not changed a bit. The first of Monseigneur’s predictions had come true, yet this meeting, within striking distance of the King's chambers, showed Moriarty’s capacity to surprise even Sherlock. This was one of the things that Monseigneur had admired and liked about him. If he knew anything about his former friend, Monseigneur was certain that Moriarty had taken care to ensure that they would not be disturbed while they had their little exchange.

“James,” Monseigneur said, his voice cool and betraying nothing— certainly not the fervor that had marked those few, febrile weeks of friendship with this man. Now all that lay between them were the ashes of what was never meant to be.

“You were very rude last night,” said Moriarty as he moved into the early morning light that slanted in from the tall, latticed windows, highlighting his raven hair even as it failed to catch in his obsidian eyes.

In the time Monseigneur was absent from court, Moriarty had acquired a fresh carapace, and he’d chosen to appear in front of Monseigneur wearing the vestments of his new office. His rich apparel proclaimed Moriarty as no lowly priest, but a cardinal, an earthly representative of the Lord of lords and the King of kings. Tucked away in the folds of Moriarty’s clothes were no less than three holy relics, Monseigneur was sure, and underneath those expensive fabrics lay flesh that was sore and bleeding, mortified from regular bouts of self-flagellation that accompanied Moriarty's morning prayers. Sherlock wondered whether Moriarty still retained the practice of wearing a hair shirt, though he was certainly not wearing one right now.

It was, all in all, an impressive disguise, fiendishly clever. Moriarty, who knew the powers of intimidation, had chosen his camouflage well. He could fool just about everyone except Sherlock, who knew the twisted nature that fed on pain which dwelled just behind the polished, saintly mask. A demon cloaked in the trappings of immaculate holiness was the most dangerous being of all. Yet Moriarty was not here to impress. He had tried that months ago when he’d first arrived at court. This spectacle confronting Monseigneur was something else. Moriarty was sending him another message, clear as crystal: a Prince of the Blood would do well to consider himself evenly matched against a Prince of the Church.

Moriarty now clasped both hands in front of him and continued gently, “could you really not spare a moment to greet an old friend properly last night?”

Monseigneur remembered his explicit instructions to Billy the previous night: If Moriarty comes forward, ignore him.

“You know how it was.” Monseigneur’s tone was nonchalant, almost flippant. “I was preoccupied with other matters.”

Moriarty’s features remained serene as he said, “of course. The Exinian princess. She’s a vision to surpass all visions, no? Was she really— what was the word that I kept hearing last night?— bewitching?”

Monseigneur did not answer immediately, his attention falling away from Moriarty’s words. Instead, he watched, seemingly transfixed, as Moriarty took out a small, golden box from the folds of his vestments and, with one fingertip, daubed at the substance inside. This he raised to his mouth, applying the salve on his chapped lips slowly, almost sensuously.

Monseigneur allowed it to happen. He let the thoughts unfurl, one after the other in logical order, as though they were occurring to him for the first time: in a fraction of a second before realization hit, he
remembered that everything about Moriarty had felt dry to the touch, as though he were a lizard. He remembered those cracked lips— pale and dry and perpetually in need of a soothing unguent. He remembered that salve, specially made from fine beeswax and tasting of honey. Sherlock had no choice but to remember these details and the last time they were together, in the midst of their falling out, with Moriarty’s mouth pressed viciously against his and the taste of that salve on his tongue.

“My parting gift to you,” Moriarty had told Sherlock as he tore himself away from Moriarty's hold, surprisingly strong.

The kiss, slick and unchaste, was a perversion of the customary practice of bestowing a kiss of peace upon reconciled parties. Moriarty's kiss was the signal that he had declared war on Monseigneur. It was the opening salvo, just as Sherlock had suspected all along.

In Monseigneur's eyes, the thoughts chased each other as everything came together and the mystery surrounding the circumstances of his poisoning was solved at last. He let the naked surprise flare into life before he tamped down on it, hard.

“Quite,” he hastened to say, sounding as though he were struggling to regain his equilibrium. He made to continue the line of conversation before it derailed completely: "she was quite captivating."

Moriarty made a noncommittal noise, indicating that he was no longer interested in the Princess Irene. "She's boring," he said in a languid voice, "though I must say that I liked seeing you dance."

Moriarty gazed at Monseigneur, his lips slowly stretching in a knowing smile as he watched his words hit home yet again. Monseigneur could see him getting back on track; they had something much more important to talk about than the Princess Irene.

So now you know about the salve, Moriarty's eyes taunted Monseigneur, but the game does not lie there. It lies on whether you can prove it— any of it. You've not been able to, with Carl Powers, and you won't be able to, with your own poisoning.

It was diabolical, not to mention brilliant: how could one accuse Moriarty of a crime that gave no tangible evidence of itself? How did one go about proving that Moriarty had poisoned him when it meant that Moriarty had to poison himself, first and foremost, with that lip salve? Yet here they both were, still standing. Of course, Moriarty had the antidote to save himself; but then, Sherlock also had found an antidote, and Moriarty knew that now, too.

Mycroft was right. The only chance Sherlock ever had of trapping Moriarty at his own game was at the very beginning, when he had been recovering from the poison. He could not have risked summoning Moriarty to his side then when so many variables were unknown to him: John's white flowers had yet to be tested for their efficacy, and Monseigneur had a Highlander to tame. Sherlock could not bring himself to say that the sojourn at the Lair was a mistake, because it was not.

The first round had ended with a draw, and now the game would have to shift elsewhere and find new ground. Sherlock watched Moriarty make his next move as he announced, “you're slipping, Sherlock, if it took you this long to figure it all out.”

"Bold as brass, are we?" replied Monseigneur coldly. "Was that the reason why you got sent back from your uncle's this past spring?"

Moriarty snorted laughter. “My uncle is growing senile,” he said. “He’s not going to last long. I’ve already been summoned back to the Eternal City, so you see, we don’t have a lot of time left.”

“What if I were to have you arrested now on the basis of your words alone? They’re practically half
a confession already. I'm sure the rest will follow after a day of interrogation at the Tower."

"Then you could cherish the look on my face." Moriarty pulled one of his shocked, comical faces—wide of eye, round of mouth—before settling back into his serene facade. "Because I would be surprised, Sherlock, if you can follow through with your wishes and have me locked away. I really would. To begin with, it would be your word against mine, and I can promise you that I'm not going to be the one to come away sounding like a fool. Besides, even if you were to be taken seriously, we can always think of a diversion."

Here, Moriarty pursed his mouth, and out came a liquid, gurgling sound as of a softly babbling brook. "Water, water everywhere in Glasstown," Moriarty chanted, "and not a drop safe to drink."

When Monseigneur remained silent, Moriarty's shoulders slumped as he said reprovingly, "oh, come on. I really thought you, of all people, would appreciate the brilliance of it. The planning—"

Monseigneur remembered all too clearly the contaminated wells in the abandoned villages, and his words, when they came out, were devoid of inflection: "People have died because of you."

"That's what people do!" Moriarty suddenly bellowed, his carefully cultivated mask dropping for a moment to reveal the monster underneath.

Then, just as suddenly, the rage was gone, and Moriarty resumed a tone of reproachful disappointment: "I really thought you'd get it. It's so odd for you to be so slow on the uptake; or perhaps the reason why it took you this long to catch on was because you've been so distracted these past few months that you simply forgot about our little problem? Was John Watson really this diverting?"

Here it was, at last; Moriarty's nebulous threat taking on form.

Moriarty's voice dropped suddenly and became soft as a caress: "Oh, yes. John Watson. Don't think I don't know all about him. I did wonder how long you were going to take, hiding in your lair with your new pet—" he almost spat the word out as his face scrunched up in distaste—"though he's a teeny bit too plebeian for your usual taste, wouldn't you say, Your Highness? Or perhaps that's an Angrian Highlander's chief allure. You must find him quite a novelty after all the silly, fawning creatures at court: venison after beef, that sort of thing. Still, I thought, well, let him have the brute, unpolished soldier. After all, what is droit du seigneur for? After having nothing but brioche day after day, a shank of coarse black bread must indeed be very satisfying. It shouldn't take a few weeks though, and afterwards, when my Lord has taken his fill..."

Moriarty's smile spread slowly into a knowing grin as he gazed at Monseigneur slyly from under his brows. "Whatever happened between us, it's already starting with John Watson, isn't it?"

Monseigneur's voice was a snarl of contempt: "I'm sure you will be getting to your point any minute now, James."

Moriarty laughed. "Oh, we're back to square one now, are we? The cold formality of proper names: James instead of Jim, as though nothing has happened between us."

Monseigneur made as though to turn away, his voice cold with revulsion as he said, "you repel me. Whatever it is you've got to say, just spit it out."

Moriarty gave him a look of exaggerated surprise. "I would think my point was rather obvious," he said. "I can stop John Watson, you know. Stop his heart."

Monseigneur let out a soft, dark chuckle as he shook his head pityingly. "Really, James. I didn't
realize you'd stoop this low, listening to rumors."

"Ah, the rumors, the rumors," murmured Moriarty, nodding his head sagely. "Yes, one did hear one or two of those. For instance, rumors have it that you make him sleep at the foot of your bed, and that you make him eat with you at table as though he were an equal instead of the servant you make him out to be. And then there are those rumors of John Watson in your dungeons. I wonder how long it took for you to break him in, or did he come running with a snap of your fingers, especially after he's got an eyeful of you and the Lair— you have yet to show me around, by the way, especially those famous dungeons of yours; but I digress. I will own that you've got what it takes to turn a head or two your way. So one does have to wonder: what is it about John Watson that has turned your head so?"

"You are quite mistaken to attribute that high a level of importance to John Watson," murmured Monseigneur. This statement, set in chilly tones, even as the aftermath of the previous night's lovemaking with John was upon Sherlock, still. Even as Sherlock remembered the way John had taken him, their joining made all the more exquisite with all inhibition cast aside.

"Mistaken? Moi?" Moriarty actually giggled. "I suppose there are ways to find out just how mistaken I am. But then, I probably won't need to lay a hand on John Watson, considering that you're doing such a fine job of demolishing him. That's what you excel at, by the way. You should have seen his face last night while you were out dancing. Oh, the pain of it. It was utterly delicious. I can't wait to see you break him down completely."

When Monseigneur spoke next, his voice was weary: "Why not speak your mind more plainly, James?"

"Speak for me then, Sherlock. I'd love to know what you have to say."

"You can stop torturing yourself with these twisted obsessions of yours. First it was Carl, and all he'd ever done was to laugh at you when you were presented at court, and now it is John. You will not hesitate to smite down anyone who you think will stand in your way towards me, when the truth is, there is no 'us'; there never was. You and I— it's never going to happen."

Moriarty laughed delightedly. "You flatter yourself, Sherlock," he said. "I suppose it has to do with being a prince all your life. Your Highness. How special you must feel, thinking everything is all about you. You actually think everyone wants you. Nobody wants you, my dear. They're just after the things that only you can give them."

"And what do you want from me, James?" Monseigneur asked softly, dangerously. "You want to kill me, is that it?"

Moriarty rolled his eyes. “Don’t be obvious,” he said. “Of course I’m going to kill you. Soon. I don’t want to rush it though. I’m saving it up for something special. Everything has been set and there is nothing you can do about it. Right in the middle of summer, it's going to be so messy and it's all going to start with you."

Moriarty whistled, a soft diminuendo of sound, before he resumed calmly, reasonably, "but first, let's have a bit of fun. I mean, we're supposed to be celebrating here! The wedding first before any funerals."

"And if I should get in the way of your enjoyment?"

"Oh, you don't want that to happen, Sherlock. Oh, no, no, no. Those investigations into the villages were more than enough interference from you. You see, I've allowed you a glimpse— just a tiny
glimpse of what I am capable of, and I shall not take kindly to any further meddling from you. If you get in my way again, I'll burn you."

Moriarty's face suddenly twisted, dark eyes flaring wide as he continued, "I'll burn the heart out of you."

Monseigneur's voice remained flat, almost bored, as he replied: "You're wasting your time. I've been reliably informed that I don't have one."

Moriarty smiled. "We all know that's not true. It's so sad, isn't it, Your Highness, to realize that you're nothing but a man, after all, the same as everyone else— with a mortal body and a heart that can be broken. I thought you were different, that you were like me. I thought we'll have a bit of fun together, you and I, but as it turned out, you're just like everyone else. Ordinary. You actually care. There's a heavy price to pay for disappointing me, Sherlock. Enjoy the wedding. There's so much to look forward to."

"Catch you later," Monseigneur said, articulating each word slowly, clearly, as he tracked Moriarty's movements down the corridor.

Moriarty's words were already echoing in singsong down the corridor as he disappeared into the recess where he'd emerged: "No, you won't."

With that, he was gone.

Monseigneur stood for a moment longer in the empty corridor, his mind far away. Yet this was not the time for reminiscing. He'd just delivered his first performance and there was more to come. There was work to be done and not enough time to do it.

With that, he turned away and prepared for his first task of the day.

He would need to get dressed.

Into battle, Monseigneur thought.

Author’s Notes: The kiss of peace was a traditional greeting dating back to early Christianity that was widely practiced during the Middle Ages. (Source: Wikipedia)

Droit du seigneur, or Right of the Lord, refers to a supposed legal right allowing feudal lords to have sexual relations with subordinate women (in our story, just subordinates will do). Also known colorfully as jus primae noctis (right of the first night), droit de jambage (right of the leg), or droit de cuissage (right of the thigh), evidence of its actual practice remained controversial in late medieval Europe, although it existed in other regions and times. (Source: Wikipedia)

The Eternal City, also known as Rome.
Despite the team of valets attending him, it took Monseigneur almost an hour to get dressed. Still, it was quite a novelty for him to be so docile as he silently allowed himself to be laced into the complicated court clothes of heavy brocade and velvet, embroidered with silver thread and ornamented with jewels. The valets took full advantage of Monseigneur's distraction to work quickly before Monseigneur could think to interrupt the process with his sharp tongue. A few feet away stood Dimmock, Monseigneur's secretary who, punctilious as ever, rattled off the day's itinerary before he, too, fell silent, waiting for the nervous young men to finish the job of strapping Monseigneur into his clothes. Beside Dimmock stood Lestrade with his hands on his hips, looking as though he were ready to punch someone. Judging from the way he was staring daggers at Monseigneur, it was not difficult to guess who that someone might be.

Indeed, Lestrade looked like he had been stewing in silent fury for hours, having spent that amount of time deflecting questions and watering down the comments ignited by Monseigneur's spectacular scene with the Woman the night before. He had not been in attendance at the party, and had just learned of Monseigneur's latest escapade. Worse, it seemed that he was the last person in the realm to do so. It was not a pleasant experience.

Lestrade did not have time for this. There was a royal wedding to see through, and all the while, a murderer or murderers unknown lurked in their midst. The entire situation was a security nightmare from the start, and there was no end of it in sight. Even before the wedding could take place, their agents posted all over Glasstown were already overworked and exhausted, trawling through one false lead after another. Everything seemed precarious, balanced on the edge of a knife, and the last thing he needed was Monseigneur complicating things and going off-script with a woman whose sole purpose in life was to make trouble.

It was one thing to leave Lestrade in the dark about certain things while they were at the Lair or even during campaigns— Monseigneur did it all the time, after all— but it was another thing to pull the stunt here, at court. How to make Monseigneur see the danger of the situation he was creating was going to be a huge problem, Lestrade realized, especially when all he, Gregory Lestrade, could think about right now was slugging the bastard.

All the while, Monseigneur appeared oblivious to the furor he had caused. Lifting absent fingers to adjust the purple silk that lined his slashed sleeve, Monseigneur appeared entirely at ease as he turned and met Lestrade's gaze, as though registering his presence for the first time.
"I didn't see you at all last night, my Lord Lestrade," Monseigneur drawled, sounding slightly amused as he took in Lestrade's thunderous expression. "I trust you've been busy."

"Well, I'm sure I've not been as busy as you, Monseigneur." Lestrade's voice was deceptively casual, but the pointed words could not be misinterpreted.

Unperturbed, Monseigneur’s gaze left Lestrade to rake across the room as he asked with maddening nonchalance, "where's John?"

Lestrade set his jaw at a stubborn angle. "He'll be along in a minute," he said tersely, refusing to be derailed. "Now that they are finished with their task, I think the entourage may be dismissed, my Lord."

As Monseigneur cast his eyes briefly heavenward, Dimmock piped in, “but Your Highness, His Majesty wishes you to accompany him in viewing the gifts—”

“Leave us,” Monseigneur said curtly, his cold gaze fixed on Lestrade as the others bowed and filed out of the room.

As soon as the room was empty, Lestrade said in a low growl, “now what the hell is all this about you and the Exinian Princess?"

It had been a long time since Lestrade had addressed Monseigneur so bluntly, and he refused to give ground as he returned gaze for gaze.

Monseigneur said, “you've got eyes, my Lord Lestrade, and I believe them to be in perfect working condition. What do you think is happening?”

"The same as everyone else. I think congratulations are in order, Monseigneur," Lestrade replied sarcastically. "On my way over, somebody had the grace to tell me that when it rains, it pours here in Gaaldine. After a decade of waiting for naught, we are to be inundated with not one, but two royal weddings! ”

When Monseigneur merely smirked, Lestrade rushed on, “My Lord, you seriously cannot countenance a possible union with that... that woman!”

“Heavens above, what century are we living in?” drawled Monseigneur. “I merely danced with her; I did not tumble her off to bed, my lord Lestrade.”

Lestrade fairly spluttered out, “well, you might as well have! You can’t dance that way with that sort of woman in Gondal, let alone here in Gaaldine, and expect people not to think a certain way! What am I supposed to tell everyone now? What am I to say to her Majesty, your mother?”

Indeed, it was the Queen Mother who had waylaid Lestrade first thing in the morning, after Holy Mass. No doubt she had heard the alarming reports of the night before from Lady Hudson. With her sons nowhere in sight, she had given vent to Lestrade, who was conveniently in her way, and frantically exhorted him to make Monseigneur see sense before it was too late.

Yet Monseigneur seemed unmoved by Lestrade’s plea. He merely replied, "good. Encourage the idea to take root. Tell anyone who wishes to know that— what was the saying?— I've been swept off my feet." Monseigneur punctuated his words with an elegant flutter of his hand. "Spread the word that she has bewitched me into falling in love with her."

Lestrade stared at Monseigneur, his jaw slack. Never had he seen a less ardent lover than the cold, calculating man who stood before him. When he spoke again, relief was plain in Lestrade's voice:
"So, you mean...you mean this is all—?"

Then, as if realizing that nothing had really changed, Lestrade railed, "you can't just drag a lady into this type of game and think you can emerge unscathed."

Monseigneur seemed much amused by Lestrade’s choice of words. "I thought you've just inferred that the woman in question is no lady."

"*Monseigneur!*"

"You worry too much, Lestrade," Monseigneur murmured, his tone growing languid with boredom. "Let us speak no more of it. Now, where is John?"

There was the sound of a throat being cleared discreetly at the far end of the room, and they turned to see John with Mike Stamford, having recently arrived in one of the side doors concealed by a large piece of hanging tapestry.

"Well, there he is," Lestrade said. Monseigneur did not wait for him to finish; he was already striding over to the newcomers.

"My lord, I have prepared everything that you asked for," Stamford began as he bowed in greeting.

"Good. I trust everything is in order," Monseigneur said, his tone clipped, nodding at Stamford in dismissal before directing his full attention on John.

"Well, well. I gather you'd had an interesting night," began Monseigneur without preamble.

Lestrade made his way over and was in time to see John open his mouth and shut it again as his eyes fell on Monseigneur's court ensemble, so very unlike his daily attire. He almost felt sorry for John as he took it all in: the strange, over-decorated doublet with the silk-lined sleeves in lieu of the familiar, flowing surcoat. It was almost comical to watch John’s gaze trail helplessly downward until it came to rest on the thing nestled between Monseigneur's black-hosed thighs.

“What’s the matter, John?” Monseigneur murmured. “Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a codpiece before?”

"No. I can't say I have," John replied calmly. His gaze, when it met Monseigneur's once again, was flat. “I didn’t know that it’s the height of fashion here for men to be padding their nuts.”

“*John!*”

John glanced briefly at Lestrade, his eyes bright with mischief and totally devoid of apology, just as Monseigneur snapped, “the practice is from Gondal, and you’re late. Doubtless you enjoyed yourself immensely at the festivities last night.”

To Lestrade’s relief, John fell silent at Monseigneur’s words, his gaze averted.

Another short, strained silence passed before Monseigneur turned and swept away towards the door, murmuring, “don't be late again in future."

"What the hell was that all about?" Lestrade demanded as soon as Monseigneur was out of earshot. “And where *were* you? I summoned you ages ago.”

“Sorry, sorry,” said John in a placating tone. “I…I got lost. Huge castle. Were it not for Mike here…”
“Just got in,” said Mike, shaking his head. “Horrendous traffic all over town. As you know, I have to put up with the Missus at her family’s little inn and—”

Lestrade nodded distractedly. “I know. There’s not enough room for everyone in the palaces, as it is. Mike, I will summon you later when Monseigneur needs you. John, come with me.”

“You’ve slept well, I take it. Woke up on the right side of the bed, at least,” Lestrade noted dryly and was slightly taken aback when John shot him a searching look.

“What?” demanded Lestrade.

“Nothing,” said John, turning away, his eyes veiled. “I…it’s nothing.”

“For some reason, everybody’s behaving more strangely than usual this morning,” muttered Lestrade. “I don’t know why you’re so frisky, and I am begging you to be more sensible, John, when it comes to Monseigneur in public. I am almost at the end of my tether here. I am sure you’ve heard about Monseigneur and the Woman from last night.”

“Oh, that,” said John, grimacing. He paused and peered closely at Lestrade’s stunned face. “You mean to say you’ve not heard?”

“Apparently, Monseigneur’s right-hand man is the last person to know!”

Taking pity, John gave Lestrade a brief and colorless rendition of the goings-on from the night before.

Lestrade eyed him incredulously when he was done. “The way you just told the story, you would have me suppose it’s happened to somebody else,” he said. “Do you mean that you’re fine with it?”

“What, you’re worried about me?” John said, half amused, as he eyed Lestrade.

Before Lestrade could bluster out a reply, John continued, “you need not be. I’m over him.”

Seeing Lestrade’s thunderstruck expression, John repeated slowly, for good measure in case Lestrade thought he had misheard him: “I am over Monseigneur. You should be glad that I’ve taken your advice.”

Lestrade shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. “Any minute now and I shall wake up in bed to find that this nothing but a dream.”

“Joooohn!!”

Monseigneur’s voice—a roar—bounded down the corridor, startling the two men.

“That doesn’t sound like a dream, does it?” John quipped as they hurried after Monseigneur. “It’s more like a nightmare.”

It was a nightmare, the way it unravelled.

The King. It had something to do with the King, as far as John could understand what Dimmock was saying.

They strode through a maze of corridors, following Monseigneur, until they reached the King’s
study, the door flanked by two soldiers.

Monseigneur did not wait but pushed the doors open himself.

Inside the room, all was deadly quiet. It took a moment for John to understand that the King was safe, standing along one side with his bride, together with his private secretary and some ladies. Several feet away lay the victim, twitching on the carpeted floor. Nobody dared to go near.

John looked at the great heaving body and recognized the dog immediately as the King’s own. “Baskerville!” he exclaimed.

The Queen stepped forward. “The healer is here,” Anna Thea said. “Your Majesty, you must let him tend the poor creature. John, can you not do anything, please?”

Everything was happening too quickly. As he knelt down beside the dog, John could hear Monseigneur behind him, barking orders: “All of you, out!”

As the ladies were ushered out, Monseigneur said to his brother, “I must know everything.”

The scenario was not too complicated. They were viewing the royal gifts, said the King in hushed tones. He had brought the dog along, and now, suddenly, this.

“John?” inquired Monseigneur.

It was not good. John reached down to pull out a few wads of chewed material from the frothing dog’s mouth. He saw the dog’s great eyes roll toward him, along with the familiar tail wagging in recognition. The shock melted from John, to be replaced by pain as Baskerville tried to lick his fingers, just as he had done months ago at the Lair.

“It’s poison,” he said, shaking his head.

Lestrade muttered an oath. “Your Majesties—”

“No, we did not touch anything,” replied the King, quickly.

“He’d been chewing on a book, as is his habit,” Monseigneur said, his voice cold and matter-of-fact. “Somebody has stashed poison among the wedding gifts, notably in a book. What does that say, Majesty?”

“He’s dying,” John ground out. He could not believe what he was hearing. He looked up and saw the Queen’s horrified face. Everything else receded into insignificance.

“Save him, please,” she said faintly.

“No,” Monseigneur cut in. “Let him die.”

John stared incredulously at Monseigneur, then at the King, and found the same shuttered expression on their masked faces.

For fuck’s sake, John mouthed viciously at Monseigneur as he quickly unslung his shoulder bag to fish something out of it.

“John, no!” Monseigneur's command could have stopped an entire Gaaldinian garrison.

The warning came too late. John held up Monseigneur’s ring emblazoned with his wolf crest and uncapped it. “Nobody’s going to die,” John said, addressing the Queen directly. “Not if I can help
He rubbed the medicinal powder he had made for Monseigneur onto Baskerville’s tongue, whispering to him soothingly in Angrian, and it was only a few minutes later that the thought sank in.

In defying Monseigneur, he might have committed a huge blunder, after all.

They left him alone afterward to tend to the beast while they engaged in damage control: Monseigneur and Lestrade to handle the secretaries, and the King his bride.

The frothing around the mouth had stopped, and the spasms had subsided. As John knelt beside the sleeping dog, his hand stroking the rough fur, he thought back on Monseigneur’s peculiar actions and felt, once again, that he had stepped all over Monseigneur’s carefully laid plans—whatever they might be—with muddy boots on.

If only the bastard would tell him what was going on, but he, John, should have known that the antidote was central to Monseigneur’s plans; and now he’d forced Monseigneur’s hand prematurely by revealing its existence.

He looked down at Baskerville, wondering why the King had thought to bring the dog along in the first place when the doors suddenly opened and in came Anna Thea, alone.

She raised a hand when John made to rise. “The King is trying to convince me that everything will be alright,” she said in Angrian, “but I told him that the answer I am seeking does not lie with him. It lies with you.”

John grew still as he continued to kneel before her.

“From the very beginning, everything has not gone well,” continued the Queen. “T’is obvious that there are forces working to stop the union of Angria and Gaaldine, and I will be honest with you, John. I am frightened of doing the wrong thing for Angria, and if I were to be informed merely by the behavior of your Monseigneur, I would have broken my engagement on the morrow, without hesitation.”

There was a heavy pause before she continued, “yet I have to consider that you serve him willingly. You are a good, decent man, John Watson, and yet you choose to be on the side of one whom we would call our enemy—a demon incarnate. You told me that you were lost, and that he found you, yet you can and will disobey him, if necessary. T’is clear to me that he does not rule you entirely. Advise me now, can I really trust these people?”

John was silent for a moment; it was hard to bite back all the bitter words that threatened to pour forth from his tongue regarding the hardships he had been made to endure at the hands of one man. Yet one thing was clear, despite everything that Monseigneur had thrown at him.

“Yes,” John said as he looked up at his queen, his gaze steady. “He’s got a plan; something—I don’t know. He never tells me anything, but I believe in Monseigneur.”

Anna Thea gazed down at him. “And I believe in you, John Watson,” she said.
They finally took the dog away.

John was sitting on the ledge of a window, pensively looking out, when Monseigneur finally arrived.

His words did not come as a surprise: “You disobeyed me, John.”

John pursed his lips and shrugged. “Well,” he said. “I got to save your brother’s precious marriage. That ought to count for something.”

“My brother plans to reward you handsomely, and insists that I should not punish you. He’s managed to convince her to play a little game with him on the morrow called Avoiding the Assassins. And so it begins.”

“That’s swell, then. The dog—”

“—Was brought along to soothe the Queen, John, and to lend a touch of humanity to my brother. Little did he realize that it would backfire in so spectacular a manner. Rest assured the King and I did not have any idea of the poison lurking among the gifts.”

“Well, now you know.”

“Now we know, and the antidote will no longer be of help to our cause. I will need to improvise.”

“You always do.”

After a moment, John said, “you could get word out that the dog indeed died, just to throw them off, or—or you have that other potion to make it look like—”

“That,” said Monseigneur, his tone suddenly sharp, “is meant for something else.”

“Right,” said John, after a pause. “Of course. I’m not supposed to know.”

“No,” said Monseigneur icily. “See to it that you don’t get in the way again.”

“If only I know what that way is,” muttered John, but Monseigneur was already gone.

Lestrade found him not long afterward. "Alright, John?" he asked.

John let out a gusty sigh. "Yeah."

“Don’t let him get to you,” said Lestrade, laying a heavy hand on John’s shoulder. “You’ve done the right thing and he knows it. Well done."

“I don’t care,” John said. All of a sudden he felt very tired.

“Well, that’s too bad,” said Lestrade. “There is still a lot to be done throughout the day and we will need to accompany Monseigneur around as soon as he calls for us. You might find some things of interest along the way. Bleeding Christ, John, this is a royal wedding, after all.”

“Yeah, all right,” said John, perking up at Lestrade’s words.

All the sudden drama had made him forget briefly that he had a person to find amidst the crowd.

Author's notes: A codpiece (from Middle English: cod = scrotum) is a covering flap or pouch that attaches to the front of the crotch of men's trousers and usually accentuates the genital area. It was an
important item of European clothing during the 14th to 15th century. Back then, men's hosiery consisted of two separate legs worn over linen drawers, leaving a man's genitals covered only by a layer of linen. As the century wore on and men's hemlines rose, the hose became longer and joined at the centre back but remained open at the centre front. The shortening of the cote or doublet resulted in under-disguised genitals, so the codpiece began life as a triangular piece of fabric covering the gap. (source: Wikipedia)
Chapter 45

**Author's Notes:** Dear lord, I promise this is no April Fool's joke! So sorry for the huge delay in updates. Life has not been kind, and the Muse has been sulky and intractable. I can't promise regular chapter postings, so please drop by my tumblr for teasers and updates.

As always, thank you so much to my lovely friends translating the story to Italian (Ellipse25) and Chinese (Ezio711), and to PlumpPushu who provides for the French passages. Thank you, my dears, for always being there!

Now, on with the story! More Author's Notes at the end.

“Where are we going, exactly?” John wanted to know.

“Out,” said Lestrade briefly, never breaking stride as they walked through countless corridors and down several flights of stone stairs.

“Considering all that have just happened, I thought we’re supposed to stick to him like a barnacle to a ship?”

“Monseigneur has asked to be left alone for a while,” replied Lestrade curtly, and by that, John understood that Sherlock had probably snapped at the poor man, demanding his withdrawal.

John shrugged. “Happy to oblige,” he replied.

Lestrade suddenly stopped and turned to him, his gaze searching. “Do you really mean it when you say you’re over him?” came his next words.

“Yeah,” said John.

“Well. Good for you, then,” muttered Lestrade as they resumed their brisk walk down the stairs, out of the castle and into the vast grounds where various tournament tents were already pitched.

John perked up immediately as he took in the fresh air and surveyed the sparring arena where they were clearly headed.

“It’s still early,” Lestrade said crisply. “Monseigneur won’t need us for another hour or two. I daresay you will need some exercise.”

John took a glance at the groups of soldiers warming up and broke into a grin. “Is this your way of making me feel better?” he asked.

“Why, I don’t know what you mean, John,” said Lestrade airily, doing his best to keep a straight face, “but somebody has got to represent Monseigneur among the fighters for Gaaldine.”

“Wait, what about you?”

Lestrade gave a shrug. “Too busy. Besides, we can’t have me or Sally win every tournament for Monseigneur. They want to see someone new. Word has got around quickly and they’re clamoring for you. Now, pay attention: those are the representatives of Gondal, and there—” he pointed to a small band of men already in armor and keeping gingerly to themselves—“are the Queen’s fighters, and your countrymen. So what say you, John?”
John could feel his grin widening. “Well, if you insist,” he said.

There were several familiar faces that John recognized among the group of Gaaldinians and Lestrade’s authority was instantly clear as they strode up to them. “Who’s going first among you gents?” he barked out to make himself heard above the din of clanking metal and loud chatter.

“I am, sir,” replied the tall, blond warrior that John had met yesterday—Sir Sebastian Moran, if he recalled correctly. He was already strapped into his armor. “We’ve already made the draw against the Angrian Queen’s champion. I heard he’s arrived only this morning.”

He nodded over to the other end of the field, where a hulking figure in full armor towered above even the tallest of the Angrians.

“No, you’re not fighting him, Sir Sebastian,” replied Lestrade easily. “He is.”

He gestured at John, and it took a moment for the idea to sink in among the men. Still, they gave way readily enough.

“Certainly, my Lord Lestrade,” said Sir Sebastian with a curt nod as he took a step back, all the while surveying John up and down with those icy blue eyes.

John cleared his throat as Lestrade continued to give orders, aware that everyone was looking at him. Some faces were quite friendly—Sir Athelney and those who knew him from several months ago who were used to him by now. The others clearly needed more time, and quite possibly a demonstration or two of his prowess to convince them of his worth.

John turned back to Lestrade after he was done. “Billy—?” he began.

“Billy—?” he began.

“He’s laid up with other duties,” said Lestrade, “so have the other lads help you with your armor, John.”

He was given time to warm up, and afterward he was strapped into gleaming Gaaldinian armor with Monseigneur’s colors draped over him. All throughout, the small band of Angrians kept close watch across the field. The huge man he was to fight never even bothered to take off his helmet.

When the time came for them to spar, he should have had an inkling of what was coming. At the very least, he should have been prepared to deal with Angrian fighting techniques, which were his own—shorn of any Gaaldinian or Gondalian artfulness and polish and aiming straight for the jugular, always. The man before him had the advantage of size coupled with the direct, no-nonsense ferocity of the sword that John could not say was similar to his way. No, it was exactly his way.

John knew that his style was unique, even among his own people, yet fighting this man was like fighting himself. He’d been spoiled all these months, cosseted among these highly refined Gaaldinians so that he’d made do without his claws. Yet this realization, when it hit him, did not bring perturbation. Instead, it brought something very much like relief, even exultation. Now, he could be entirely himself.

Clash after clash followed and John let himself go, casting off the superficial veneer he had acquired in the past few months and letting his real self come to the fore—a being savage and untamable who relished a good tussle.

The fight ended in a draw; there was no other way around it. John only became aware of the
deafening cheers and applause all around him when he and his opponent finally let down their swords and he started to remove his helmet.

He came forward, one hand outstretched, a wide smile on his lips, eager to shake hands with his formidable adversary. Then he saw the visage that emerged from the other helmet and he stopped short, his smile frozen on his lips.

The man was older than John, with deep, red scars that ravaged half of his lined face, extending to his forehead and a part of his scalp, partly hidden by close-cropped blond hair. Clearly, the man had survived a horrendous fire. It was a shock to behold, effectively halting John in his tracks. Time seemed to slow down to a mere trickle. The man was looking at him with steady blue eyes, his disfigured mouth forming a single word: “Iain.”

Before John could think to say anything, they were suddenly surrounded by spectators from all sides.

It was impossible to get a word in through the surging crowd, the many congratulations and pats on the back that followed. John was sure that introductions were going to be made but he could not bring himself to stay a minute longer in the field. All of a sudden he could not bear to look at the man standing a few feet away from him.

Out. He needed to get out of here.

It was fairly easy to put some distance between them as John backed slowly out and away within the crowd, until he was able to twist himself free from the knot of men.

Afterward, Lestrade managed to catch up with him as he walked away. “What’s the matter, John? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he remarked.

John merely let out an uneasy laugh and shook his head, because yes, this wasn’t the first time he’d seen that face.

He’d seen it over and over in his dreams, back in the days when he was young and had lost all memory of who he was.

They met Molly as they walked back to the castle. She had just finished archery practice in a different part of the vast grounds and still had her bow and arrows. John was immensely grateful for her presence as it prevented Lestrade from asking too many prying questions. It was clear that he did not believe that John had been taken aback merely by the man’s scars, horrible as they were. After all, as soldiers, they were used to seeing all sorts of unsightly injuries incurred in the battlefield, many of them fatal.

“Do you know him, John?” Lestrade had wanted to know in the brief time that they were alone, and John had shaken his head, no.

It was not exactly a lie, John told himself. John did not really know the man, except in the dreams he’d had as a boy. Short of him having the third eye, or a penchant for prophecy which he clearly did not possess, he really had no explanation as to how he could have ever dreamt of the man, with half of his face burned and bleeding profusely as he told him in guttural Angrian, “Do not forget who you are.”

But John had done just that: he’d forgotten who he was.
Seeing Molly for the first time since last night, John asked, eager to change the subject: “how are you?”

“Fine,” she replied quickly. “I’m fine.”

“How was practice? You all set for the morrow’s competition?” inquired Lestrade.

“Yes, my lord,” said Molly, her tone rather subdued, distracted. “I’ll be fine. For the morrow, that is.”

“That’s good to hear. It’s nearly time,” muttered Lestrade as he cast a glance at the sky and then at their shadows on the ground, growing very short. “Kindly go fetch Billy, John. I can imagine he will need a break from that woman, and soon. Northeast tower, topmost floor.”

“Sher--” John stopped himself before he could commit a major mistake. ”Monseigneur—”

“Yeah, leave him to me,” said Lestrade. “Go.”

“I’ll go with you,” Molly said, and John had to wonder about her tone, her set face.

Everything became clear the moment they stepped into the suite of rooms in the northeastern tower.

The spacious apartment was fitted out in luxurious trappings, with some courtiers whom John had never seen before standing respectfully by the sides. It was quite clear who the chamber belonged to. There, standing in the middle of the room, upon an exquisitely made carpet, stood the Exinian princess, engrossed in an exercise of some sort. John saw the familiar glove encasing her hand and his gaze shifted to Billy, standing on the other side of the room. Perched on Billy’s fist was Azrail and catching sight of her, John’s mouth thinned into a grim line.

In the silence of the room, the princess’s sharp voice cracked like a whip: “come on, we haven’t got all day.”

John glanced at Molly by his side, and he recognized the look on her face as similar to his own.

The princess’ intent could not be clearer. First, there was her dance with Monseigneur the night before and now this. At the wedding on the morrow, she would be parading Azrail on her fist, like certain fashionable ladies were wont to do with their intended’s pets. As the significance sank in, John felt something rise within him, black and ugly, and he had to remind himself that he no longer cared.

He no longer cared about Monseigneur. He had someone else now. Poor Molly, he thought.

And poor Azrail. It was clear that she was not enjoying herself. She twittered distressingly and could not be coaxed from Billy’s hand, no matter what the inducement.

“Surely you can control that bird better? You’re its handler,” said the Princess Irene to Billy after a while, exasperation ringing through her every word.

John had to stop himself from sniffing-- clearly a bad habit of his. He could already feel his nose twitching, his lips twisting in contempt as Billy murmured a polite suggestion on how the princess may use the treat in her glove to lure Azrail.

“Make it come to me,” came her next words, her tone imperious, and John had to turn his head a fraction to hide his rising eyebrows.
There came the grand flapping of wings, finally, but when John turned his head back, it was to see Azrail, not on the lady’s wrist, but flying across the room and headed decidedly toward his direction.

“No, no!” he said, shaking his head. He tried to dodge, to step aside, yet Azrail would have none of it and no part of John except his outstretched and reluctant arm.

 Fuck, he thought as he felt Azrail’s sharp talons through the thin fabric of his shirt sleeve. He was aware of all eyes turning upon him, the thoughts evident behind the collective gaze. Judging from their looks, it seemed that everyone knew him.

“Azrail, you silly lass,” he said in a low hiss as he tried to hand her over to Billy, who had hastily ran up to him, breathing apologies. Still, she would not budge, even with Molly’s assistance.

To Billy he said, “You alright? Your uncle is asking for you.”

“I don’t think I will be able to leave until we’ve made some progress,” whispered Billy unhappily. “The princess came upon the idea only this morning when she saw me out with Azrail. I’m afraid I will be here for quite a while, sir.”

“I’ll see what I can do with your uncle,” murmured John as he finally managed to transfer Azrail over to Billy’s arm.

“I’ll stay,” said Molly as John made to turn to the door. After a moment, he nodded.

It was with great relief when John managed to edge out of the room, the Princess Irene’s sharp blue gaze the last thing he saw upon closing the door.

The day was not turning out as John expected. At all.

But then, it was the day before a grand royal wedding, so it was not meant to be normal. After a late, hurried lunch, Lestrade let John tail him as he went about straightening one minor crisis after another. He’d merely grunted, annoyed, when John reported that his nephew was stuck with the headstrong princess.

“Let’s see if she’d still be enamored of Azrail when she shites on her. Let’s hope she does, and soon,” was Lestrade’s only comment before he turned away. “Coming, John?”

He’d wanted to ask where Monseigneur was but after a while, he decided against it. The git would ask for him if he was needed, and definitely, it seemed he was not.

Still, this was the perfect time for John to scan the crowd for that one person he’d been burning to meet, to unmask. So far, he was not in luck; but then, there weren’t enough royal personages in his path.

It was only then that it occurred to him that he should have stuck it out with the introductions earlier that morning in the sparring grounds. He’d not met any of the Gondalians and he was pretty sure that the man he was searching for was one of them.

Evening came, and still, there was no word from Monseigneur.

Lestrade did not seem particularly concerned and merely instructed John to wash up and to meet him in the Great Hall in half an hour’s time.
Lestrade’s instruction proved overly simplistic. By the time John arrived at the Great Hall, it was thronged with people, so much that it was difficult for John to navigate his way around, much less meet anyone that he actually knew.

Well, here, at last, was his chance. There were several richly dressed, masked figures in the crowd who may be Gondalian royalty, or who belonged to the nobility, at the very least. Yet they had entourages surrounding them, making them about as easy to approach as John trying to touch the sun, high in the sky.

_Damn_, thought John as he scanned the sea of chattering people crowded into the vast hall, growing in number as the minutes ticked by. He’d not realized it would be this difficult to look for the mystery man he’d spent last night making passionate love with.

His mystery man.

Of course, he hadn’t seen the man’s face– he’d been blindfolded, after all– but he’d somehow convinced himself that he would know him as soon as he met him. The ravishing voice, the shape of the slender, muscular body beneath his fingertips– these he would recognize instantly as belonging to the man whose unknown face his imagination had conveniently assigned Monseigneur’s features, almost by default.

Well, he wasn’t going to dwell on that git for a second longer, thought John as he looked hopefully this way and that. Yet it seemed he may not meet his stranger in the throng of illustrious people gathered for the feast tonight.

Suddenly, he felt someone tapping his shoulder, and when he turned, John found himself staring into the hard blue eyes and handsomely chiseled face of Sir Sebastian Moran.

“Looking for someone?” Sir Sebastian enquired, his voice a low drawl.

For a moment, John could not get a word out as a thought occurred to him: perhaps it had been premature to classify his stranger as _only_ Gondalian.

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**More Author’s Notes:** Interestingly enough, I just found out that **Ian** or **Iain** is a name of Scottish Gaelic origin, ultimately derived from the Hebrew name Yohanan and corresponding to the English equivalent, **John**. The spelling _Ian_ is an Anglicization of the Scottish Gaelic forename _Iain_. (Source: Wikipedia)

I think we all know who that soldier with the scarred face is…XD

**Here** is the **teaser** for the next chapter!
“Looking for someone?”

Sir Sebastian’s words were encased in a deep drawl, and John thought, why not him?

The man was not bad looking at all and he had the height, but the too-broad shoulders and the burly frame, heavy with muscle, made John hesitate. He remembered his stranger to be gracefully slender and light on his feet, just like Monseigneur.

There you go again, he thought disgustedly as he gave himself a mental shake. It wasn’t as though he’d had a good, long look at his stranger last night; it had been too dark in the gardens to be certain of anything, not to mention the fact that he’d been blindfolded afterward.

He wondered briefly if Sir Sebastian would mind if he reached out and touched him. Just a touch of that well-remembered bare flesh and he would know for sure.

He quelled the thought before it could properly take root.

“Pretty fancy, this,” John heard himself say as he gestured toward the crowd.

“A farce, all of it,” Sir Sebastian assured him in a bored, languid tone. “I prefer the basic honesty of the sparring grounds as I’m sure you would. I can tell we have a lot in common, John Watson.”

John willed himself to return the man’s penetrating gaze and not look away first. He wasn’t imagining it, was he? The intent was there in the words, mirrored by the obvious interest in those cold eyes, almost as pale as Monseigneur’s but entirely different.

“You did very well earlier, I must say,” Sir Sebastian added. “I’m quite looking forward to testing my mettle against you. Tomorrow, perhaps, in the tournaments?”

Was the man flirting with him? John wasn’t sure; he was too new at this game. He wasn’t sure how he ought to feel about this man, standing before him in all his brash, upper-crust self-assuredness.

John finally found his voice: “It was nothing. Today, I mean.”

“Well, I daresay you’re a welcome change over my Lord Lestrade— not that he’s bad, mind you, but he’s been Monseigneur’s sole champion for so long and his act does get old after a while. Then there’s that woman, Donovan.” Here, Sir Sebastian gave a derisive snort. “No offense to Monseigneur, but seriously now, His Highness can do better when he can have his pick of any male fighter in the realm; but no. He refuses to choose amongst us for the longest time. And finally, here you are; but how did he manage to acquire you, John Watson?”

John had looked away at the beginning of Sir Sebastian’s words, but now he glanced back at him with hooded eyes. “When the said woman Donovan gave me a neat clip to the head,” he said shortly. “You ought to try it sometime. It just might make you change your mind about her. Excuse
There was a firm hand on John’s arm as he made to turn away, and before he could wrench himself free, Sir Sebastian leaned in and said, “there is going to be a get-together tomorrow night, after the festivities. Just the knights and a few select lords. A Gaaldinian tradition, you understand. Come, John. You might find it…interesting. The west tower, after supper.”

John stared at Sir Sebastian but the man had started to move away. A moment more and the crowd had swallowed him up. It took a moment longer still before the thought sank in entirely on John. 

_Bloody hell_! had he just been propositioned? There was nothing in the words to suggest it, but Sir Sebastian’s tone was low, almost conspiratorial, and rife with hidden meaning. John fought the urge not to shiver in disgust.

Please God, let this man not be his stranger, thought John, casting his eyes heavenward. What was he thinking earlier?

Finding Lestrade among the crowd was like finding a needle in a haystack, and after a while, John gave up and decided to mingle aimlessly with the drifting crowd.

There were so many people, it was impossible to meet anyone among John’s limited acquaintances. Many of them were masked and richly attired, speaking Gondalian, their tongues loosened by the free-flowing wine served in fine goblets by liveried servants. And there was food, lots of it. At one point, John found himself seated before a table, squeezed in between a chattering matron and a dour, masked man who was more interested in the roasted meat before him. Amongst the sea of people, John had never felt so alone.

Where was Lestrade? Or the ladies? Probably in their chambers, or somewhere within this great hall. The King was definitely ensconced within his private chapel, praying before his wedding day. And Monseigneur? John had absolutely no clue what was going on with Sherlock and that woman, but one thing that git had made abundantly clear was that he, John, was not wanted.

John sighed as he looked up and down the tables. Perhaps it was better this way, he thought. It was better to not come across a familiar face, lest it be like the strange encounter that morning with that man with the heavily scarred visage, shocking for all the wrong reasons. John should not have recognized him, but he did. It brought him back to some restless nightmares he’d had since childhood, of an attack that came from nowhere and his narrow escape from a huge fire, and that man, his face charred and bleeding profusely, dragging him along, telling him he must not forget who he was.

He’d called him _Iain_, but that was not John’s name. It could not be his name.

_He’d mistaken me for someone else_, John thought, bracing himself with a hopeful reassurance that he was far from feeling.

Whoever that man was, John reasoned, he was important enough to have come from Angria for the royal wedding and to fight under his queen’s banner—the same queen who had taken valuable time to sit down with him and tell him that outlandish tale of some important Angrian lord, lost in mysterious circumstances a long time ago. And then there was that lady in the queen’s entourage who had fainted upon seeing him.

He did not know why these people would think to subject him to this kind of attention. It was all hogwash as far as John was concerned, but he could not help feeling like a noose was gradually tightening around his neck as the pieces of a dark, ominous puzzle fell into place, one by one.
It was all most confusing to John and he would have wanted to tell someone: Lestrade or even Monseigneur. Perhaps it would have been possible a few weeks back, but he knew very well now that he could not; not when Monseigneur was with that woman and Lestrade was nowhere to be found.

John looked down at his food and fought the wave of bitterness that threatened to engulf him. To think he had been looking forward to coming here with Monseigneur to witness all the pomp and splendor of a royal wedding and embark on the adventure of who poisoned him all those months ago. Back at the Lair, it had seemed so simple and straightforward. He’d thought they’d do it together, side by side, and have one hell of a time unmasking the culprit. He had been so excited, so ready to give his heart to this man who’d become his entire world in the space of a few short weeks.

He’d been so eager, so obvious. He’d given in to Monseigneur too easily, and now he was nothing more than a conquest.

*You’re a fool,* John thought as he held onto to that feeling whenever he thought of Sherlock—a clenching of the heart—for a moment more before he let it go.

All of a sudden he felt very tired and no longer hungry.

He only meant to take a walk and avoid the crowds after he left the table, but when one detour led to another and John found himself in a series of quiet, darkened corridors, he realized that he may have got himself lost in the labyrinthine passages of the huge castle.

*Great,* he thought as he tried to retrace his steps. *Just great.* *This is where it happens, the stuff of nightmares— that man with the scarred face appearing out of nowhere, or worse.*

He was expecting assassins tucked away in every nook and corner. What he did not expect was a woman’s voice calling his name. It was enough to freeze his blood.

He started and stood there uncertainly for a moment, squinting into the darkness, until the figure materialized from the shadows and he felt his shoulders sag.

The Princess Irene.

“This is a strange part of the castle to be wandering around in, John Watson,” she remarked. She sounded like she owned the place.

“I would say the same of you,” said John. He remembered himself after a moment: “Your Highness.”

“You weren’t with your master earlier.”

“He would have called when he needed me.”

“We did need you, earlier,” said the Princess Irene as she raised an arm toward the moonlight, and it took John a moment to see the claw marks on skin as white and perfect as alabaster.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a scratch and I had my maid attend me,” she assured him. “Unfortunately, it didn’t take to me so much, the poor thing, but it will. Tomorrow.”

“Some things just can’t be forced,” said John, his voice tight. He was suddenly worried about Azrail. If he thought this would be the end of their curious discussion, he was wrong. She seemed intent on
lingering in a darkened corridor, carrying out a conversation with a man she deemed to be a servant.

“He’s very attached to it, your Monseigneur. Incidentally, do you know what he calls it?” asked the Princess Irene in a conversational tone.

John could not help but bristle: “*Her name is Azrail.*”

*His Monseigneur,* indeed.

“Mon Coeur,” returned the Princess, as though he had not spoken at all. “He calls it his heart. It’s quite touching, really, and I find it quite extraordinary that it seems to know you and trust you explicitly.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you, John?”

John couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “What? Are you jealous?” he asked as the thought hit him. He was aware that he was overstepping his bounds and not caring.

“What do you think?” She smiled rather sadly.

“She’s a hawk,” John said, nearly spitting out every word. “Why would you be jealous of her flying towards me? In fact, you had her on your wrist this morning.”

She shrugged her elegant shoulders. “It had to be chained to my wrist most of the time, as it would be on the morrow. That doesn’t mean a lot.”

“Well, you’re with him. A lot!”

There, he’d said it. Any more from him and he was going to land into so much trouble.

“And yet that doesn’t count for much, either,” she said. “Not when his heart lies elsewhere.”

John could feel danger closing in around him yet again, like a net. “What do want from me?” he said shortly.

“I need your help with him,” she said.

He had not expected it, and the strangeness of her request robbed him of speech for a moment. Then, he said, “if you think I hold any sway over him, you are very much mistaken.”

There was a pause before she replied thoughtfully, “You honestly believe that, don’t you? I can see why he likes you. Despite that tough outer shell, you have this…innocence about you, this basic goodness.”

Surprised into silence yet again, John merely stared at her askance.

She clarified: “I don’t think you know your actual worth.”

“I’m nobody.”

“No, you’re not,” she replied with maddening calm. “You may not realize this yet, John Watson, but you are the key.”

John scoffed. “To what? His heart?” he asked sarcastically.
“To everything.”

“That’s…I can’t believe I’m listening to this,” he finally said, after several seconds of trying and failing to think of anything as a suitable reply. She had Monseigneur wrapped around her finger. What could she possibly want from him, John?

“Help me,” she said beseechingly.

He was beginning to shake his head when a flicker of movement caught his eye. He turned his head sharply to stare at the corridor to his left, bathed in moonlight and shadows before he turned back to the Princess Irene.

“Did you—”

She was gone.

So yes, she’d seen the eavesdropper as well.

Any sane man would have run away, but John found himself running down the corridor, toward the spot where he thought he’d seen the man’s silhouette briefly. He had his dagger with him; if it came down to a fight he would take his chances. What he really needed now were answers to a seemingly endless series of questions.

There was nobody there. Whoever it was had vanished.

“Zhuhn.”

Or not, thought John as he felt the hairs on his nape stand on end.

But this was one voice he knew.

“What are you doing here?” he said as he made to step toward the sound of that beloved voice. “Who are you?”

From the depths of a shadowed alcove came the soft reply, almost a whisper, “someone who loves you.”

“Why hide from me? Show yourself,” said John. “Please! I want—”

“Know that, Zhuhn. Whatever happens,” continued the voice as it drifted farther into the shadows. The man was walking away.

“Wait!” John cried as he tried to follow. “What are you doing here? Why can’t you just tell me who you are?”

“In due time,” came the voice as it grew fainter and fainter, as though the owner of that voice were hurrying, putting distance between himself and John. “Right now, a friend needs you.”

“What?” John emerged from the shadowed maze of corridors to find another alcove under a moonlit window, where a man sat, slumped over the side.

Lestrade.

“Greg!” The name was out of John’s lips before he realized it as he bolted toward the figure.

*He’s breathing, thank god,* thought John as he ran an anxious hand over Lestrade’s shoulder, his
torso. He did not appear to be injured, but he did reek of wine. He laid both hands on the man and shook him roughly. That seemed to rouse him.

“John,” Lestrade slurred as he squinted up at him. “What--”

“Did someone make you take anything, drink anything?” John cried, his voice loud and urgent in the stillness of the corridor.

“Oh,” said Lestrade. “No. I…just drinks…with a dear friend…to say goodbye.”

“Bloody Christ, so you’re what? Drunk?” said John as he felt relief wash over him.

“I’m not so drunk, mind you,” said Lestrade defensively as he tried to swat at John’s hands feebly. “I couldn’t send a word out to you, got summoned last minute. Just a few drinks.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Sitting,” replied Lestrade as he leaned his head tiredly against the wall once more, and that was when John saw the tears drying on the man’s cheeks. “And thinking.”

“About what?” John asked quietly, careful to keep his dismay from showing in his tone.

There was silence for a while, and when John was sure that Lestrade had fallen asleep, he heard him mutter, “how lucky you are that you’re over Monseigneur. Please God, John, let your words be true. You’ll thank yourself afterward.”

“You’re not making any sense,” said John, “and I think it’s time you went to bed. This part of the castle isn’t safe to fall asleep in.”

“Help me, then,” said Lestrade as he raised an arm for John to take.

“In the morning, I’m going to tell you that you heard nothing from me, got that?” Lestrade continued in a semblance of his old self as he was hauled to his feet. He leaned on John heavily and allowed him to steer their way down the corridor.

“All right,” said John, his mind already racing over what he had just heard.

Drinks with a dear friend, to say goodbye. Lestrade, normally so sturdy and sensible, drunk and in tears.

*So the rumors about him and the King are true,* he thought. *Poor Greg.*

“I didn’t hear anything,” John assured him.

Lestrade dipped his head and let out an extinguished sigh. “Thank you, John.”

Author’s Notes: Here are some musings on tumblr, and working on the teaser for the next chap now!

Here’s the teaser for the next chapter! (Please don't kill me.)

**Works inspired by this one:**

*Coverers inspired by "Captive Hearts"* by bbcsjohnlock

*(Science_of_Induction)*, *Azrail and the Beast* by nosetothewind94
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!