Names for the Galaxy

by evadne

Summary

Sci-fi AU. Sherlock Holmes is a recent arrival to 22nd century earth, and determined to find out who he is and where he comes from. John Watson has the unenviable task of teaching him how to be a normal human being.

Notes

There are further warnings which which I have chosen not to put in the tags because they are spoilers. If you are worried please feel free to message me on livejournal (parachute-silks.livejournal.com) or leave a comment on the fic with a way to contact you, and I can let you know what they are. There are also additional chapter-specific warnings posted at the beginning of each.

This story was started before Series 3 aired and isn't compliant with it. Mostly it's so AU that doesn't make much difference, but in particular it should be noted that my versions of Mary Morstan and Sebastian Moran are not based on those who appear in the show.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: hints at some possible suicidal ideation, references to alcoholism

E.L.I. headquarters is at its most alive at this time of day. The sun’s about to go down, the staff are about to go home, and strains of Hammersmith Bridge’s sunset music are just starting to become barely audible through the open windows.

John always chooses this time to check in when he can. Admittedly, this is an office block, and there is no time of day at which it is ever going to resemble the outer starline during a Gliesan laser rush. John’s been here three months; he’s had two assignments already; he’s had time to come to terms with all this. But the atmosphere at the beginning of sunset is at least happy, even if it’s not thrilling.

‘John!’ Mike Stamford calls from his desk. ‘You’re in luck, I was just about to go home. You’ve finished with Percy Phelps, right?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘He’s all done, and I’ve had a weekend off, so…’

‘Contractually you’re allowed a week off after the end of an assignment,’ Mike points out.

John shrugs. ‘I was bored.’

He doesn’t say: even living in a government flat teaching a stranger how to be human is better than sitting in my own flat alone, watching a red light flash invitingly in the dark.

‘Great,’ Mike says, looking and sounding genuinely delighted. ‘I’ve got someone really good for you this time.’ He presses the display on his hand with his thumb, sending the information to John’s own handchip.

The whole meeting is a bit of a charade: Mike could as easily do this were they a thousand kilometres away from each other, but the government encourages fleshworld contact between
E.L.I.s and the staff at headquarters. An Earth Life Instructor’s job is to teach afters how to be normal, and mostly they do that through leading by example. Spending all their time with afters might mess with their essential normality, and having to check into headquarters for new assignments means that they have to see at least a few befores on a regular basis.

Of course, most of the E.L.I.s have friends and families, usually entirely made up of befores, and as a result the checkups are a bit of a joke. John, though, is glad of them. His social life outside work is pretty much nonexistent. Mary and Bill are the only friends he really has now, and they aren’t currently even in the same planetary system as John.

‘Well?’ Mike says. ‘What do you think?’

John studies the data file on his hand. His prospective student is a man calling himself Sherlock Holmes, and those two names are already pretty weird all by themselves. Like all afters, ‘Sherlock’ will have been given a list of suggested names common amongst people of the age he looks like he should be, and he’s obviously chosen to ignore that and make something up himself. Sherlock. It might even be that it’s a name he remembers as his, though it’s unusual for afters to remember anything as clearly as that.

As for Holmes; well, taking the surname of the Afters Coordinator seems pretty much like pure cheek. Then again, new afters never know much about social norms; maybe it was supposed to be a mark of respect.

The first note in the file is enough to make John raise his eyebrows. ‘He’s already run through two E.L.I.s?’ he says. ‘Did he reject them, or –’

‘He rejected the first one,’ Mike says. ‘That was Athelney Jones. They had the usual introductory lunch, and at the end of it Holmes says Athelney “thinks at approximately the speed of oxidising iron” – that’s a direct quote – and then insists that it’s painful to watch and he can’t possibly spend another second with the man.’

John manages not to grin; feels guilty for wanting to. ‘So who replaced Athelney?’ he asks.

‘Molly Hooper,’ Mike says. John knows her; he’s seen her around headquarters a few times and made conversation. She seems nice. ‘They made it to four days; then she showed up here sobbing and saying she couldn’t cope with living there any more.’
'And now you’re asking me,' John says. ‘Jesus. You said someone really good; how is a total bastard really good?’

‘You found both Pike and Phelps boring, I could tell,’ Mike says. ‘They weren’t what you were expecting when you signed up for this. People expect reps to be weirder than they actually tend to be.’ At John’s look he adds: ‘Sorry, not reps, afters. Didn’t know you were such a stickler for political correctness.’

‘I’m not,’ John insists. ‘But reps is…they can’t help being replacements. They’ve got no more control over what happens than anyone.’ That isn’t technically completely certain, but as far as John’s concerned, innocent until proven guilty is as true for afters as anyone else, and there’s no evidence at all that they are in control. They certainly all claim not to be.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know. Just slipped out. Anyway. We get quite a few ex-soldiers here, you know. They miss fighting aliens, so they show up here hoping to meet some.’

‘We don’t even know if the afters are aliens,’ John says. ‘And in the army my entire contact with aliens consisted of trying to kill them. It’s a bit different teaching them how to type and use ovens.’ (His hand clenches itself into a fist; he forces it to unclench. What he’s doing now is useful and important. He may not be saving lives, but he’s helping a much discriminated against group of people fit in with a world they’ve been thrust into against their will. That matters. He still matters.)

‘You could do with some excitement,’ Mike insists. ‘Give him a try.’

*  

Introductory lunches take place in the miserable housing block on Montague Street where afters live till they get an E.L.I. John rings Sherlock Holmes’s flat from outside and is buzzed in without a word. When he steps out of the lift the door to number 26 is wide open, and the corridor beyond is empty.

John hesitates outside, wondering whether to offer the politeness of knocking even though the door is open. Around afters it’s crucial to watch every action, mindful of what you’re teaching them about the world, about society and normal behaviour. As he’s deciding, a voice calls out from somewhere to the left of the corridor in the flat, ‘Come in. I’m in the lab.’

The voice is rich, deep, kind of posh. There’s a huge variety of accents among afters; as a result
one popular theory says that they don’t come from the same place, but are falling through gaps in space and time to reach here from a multitude of times and locations and universes. But that leaves far too much about all the things afters have in common with each other unexplained; John’s never bought it, personally.

He assumes he misheard ‘lab’, since temporary government accommodation for afters in processing definitely doesn’t include a laboratory. But when he steps inside and enters the door on the left on the corridor, it turns out that the standard-fit kitchen’s been ripped apart mercilessly and rigged up into, yes, a kind of makeshift lab.

Sherlock Holmes in person is even more striking than in his file photograph. Like all afters, he’s attractive in a slightly disconcerting way, like looking at a beautiful painting where the angles are all slightly off.

He doesn’t even look up at John when John enters. Greetings are normally something afters are fairly OK with, but then judging by the file this one is particularly clueless about appropriate earth behaviour. John’s already suspecting that if Sherlock consents to take him on as an instructor they’re going to need longer than the standard month.

John waits for Sherlock to speak first. He’ll already have been told John’s name, but no more than that: it’s been found that relationships between afters and E.L.I.s work better when they’re allowed to develop naturally. So John expects questions, and wants to give Sherlock an opening to ask them.

He categorically does not expect the specific question he gets, which is, ‘Starline or spectral field?’

John stares. There is no way on earth they’ll have told Sherlock about John’s military history. That would be a breach of confidence, of – everything. He feels cold all over, and his hand isn’t shaking, but it should be. ‘Starline,’ he finally manages to say. ‘How did you know?’

‘The same way I know about your brother’s abuse of alcohol and her recent separation. Observation.’

John just keeps on staring. There was nothing, nothing about this in the file. ‘What did you observe?’ he demands.

Finally, Sherlock looks up. His eyes are almost vicious in their focus. John can’t look away, and,
search of support, leans slightly harder on his cane. Sherlock says, ‘I watched you when you were coming in.’

*And then looked down again before I could see you watching, John thinks. You're going to be tricky, aren't you? ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘And saw -?’*

‘Your limp,’ Sherlock says. ‘You forgot about it. You walked in here without leaning on your cane at all. It was only when you stopped, when you were ill at ease waiting for me to speak, that you started using it for support. So it’s psychosomatic, but persistent – you take it for granted, it’s clearly something you’ve had time to adjust to – and that means it was almost certainly caused by a psychebullet. You’d only encounter one of those in combat, so you were either attacking the spectral fields or defending the starline. Had to ask which, can’t deduce everything, but the rest was obvious.’

‘And –’ John starts.

Sherlock cuts him off, evidently in full flow now. ‘Your sister?’ he says. ‘Easy. You left your handchip set on public.’

John glances down at his hand, and yes: the display’s on the back of his hand, rather than the palm, easily visible to anyone. He must have flipped it by mistake. It’s currently showing a picture Harry sent him of her partnership ring, engraved simply: ‘Harry Watson and Clara Mortimer, 2151’. Underneath the picture Harry’s written, ‘hye rllt bussy rite nowq, canu get ths valued 4me?’

John’s as yet unsent reply is visible beneath that. It reads only, ‘OK, I’ll look into it.’ He’d spent the journey over here in the tube car trying to figure out how to make it sound less brusque, though he’s honestly not sure he cares.

‘Ring with two names on it, and a date. That suggests that something significant happened involving those two people on that date. Something happy, something they wanted to be reminded of on a regular basis – a ring is worn on the finger, where you would frequently have to look at it while using a handchip, where other people can easily see it too. Now your brother doesn’t want to be reminded of it any more; she’s asking you to help her sell his ring. What could have changed? Surely only his relationship with the other party. Alcohol abuse was more of a shot in the dark, but I’ve been out into the city in the evenings and alcohol is used frequently for altering one’s emotions and perceptions. Discussions I’ve heard suggest that some find the ability to do so addictive. The people I watched drinking started to lose fine motor skills after consuming large quantities of alcohol; typing would have been very difficult for them. I suspected that your brother must have been drunk when she wrote that message. You don’t tease her about his typing in your reply, or indeed mention it at all, which rather suggests that his messaging you drunk is neither atypical nor something you find very amusing. Therefore: addict.’
John is utterly lost for words. Afters don’t know this stuff. They’re very good on science and technology, but they don’t know about addiction or partnerships or anything social. And Sherlock Holmes’s file suggested he was worse than most. Yet here he is, effortlessly spouting truths. True, he has the same confusion about gender that afters nearly always have, but apart from that – he’s making logical leaps by observing what is completely unfamiliar to him. In the end John spouts a truth of his own, the only thing he can say: ‘That was amazing.’

Now Sherlock is staring, apparently completely taken aback. It’s his turn to take too long to reply, and when he does, he says, ‘You really think so?’

‘Of course it was,’ John says. ‘It was extraordinary. Quite extraordinary.’

‘No one’s said that so far,’ Sherlock says.

‘What have they said?’ John asks.

Sherlock shrugs. ‘Usually “What the fuck?”,’ he says.

John cannot help laughing. A moment later, Sherlock laughs too. Then he smiles, and his face is suddenly bright. ‘So,’ he says, ‘when do we get our flat?’

*

The flat is on Baker Street, which is by far the nicest location John’s ever lived in. The government worker who’ll be checking up on them twice a week to see how Sherlock’s getting on is a chatty woman called Ms. Hudson, who assures them they can message her any time if they need anything. John messages Mike to say that he’s happy with all the arrangements, and goes to his flat to pack a suitcase.

When he lies down in his new bed that night, he starts up his usual ritual of switching modes on his handchip and staring at its blinking red light till he falls into sleep with it still on. It’s a stupid thing to do; the laser could go off in the middle of the night and kill him. But he can’t sleep any other way.
Tonight, though, he finds himself getting distracted, thinking about his strange new assignment/flatmate. John has never met anyone like him before. Mike was right: this is much closer to what John was hoping for when he took this job. Inasmuch as he was capable of hoping for anything at that point.

John freezes as he hears footsteps outside. Is Sherlock up? He probably won’t come in here, even if he is, but –

John should have had the military functions removed from his handchip when he was invalided home. A weaponised handchip in the civilian world is both dangerous and very, very illegal. It had taken a lot of bribery and a terrifying number of really close shaves to keep it. He’d felt, at the time, that he had to; he would have felt unbearably stripped without it. But if Sherlock sees the laser light shining in the dark, John’ll be spending the next five years in criminal rehabilitation. He switches modes hurriedly.

But there’s no knock on the door, or uninvited entry. Sherlock’s footsteps creak away again, and John falls asleep waiting for them to come back without ever switching the army mode back on.

*

The morning after they move in, John rings a technical services company to see about getting someone in to connect either his or Sherlock’s handchip to the viewing screen in the living room.

‘Don’t bother,’ Sherlock calls from his room. ‘I’ve already connected mine.’

John apologises and hangs up, then knocks on Sherlock’s door. Granted entry, he explains patiently that the polite thing, when there’s two people and one screen, is to toss a coin to decide who gets to connect. Sherlock just nods absently to this, and leaves the room. John follows him to the kitchen.

On the countertop there is a large bowl filled with what is, by the smell, blood. Whether natural or lab-produced John isn’t sure. Next to the bowl are a variety of pipettes containing different coloured liquids. Sherlock is holding one and letting drops of its contents fall slowly into the bowl.

John looks over the liquids, curious. It’s a long time since he studied chemistry. Though one he does recognise: ‘Is that heparin?’
‘Mm,’ Sherlock says. He puts down the pipette he’s holding and takes up another.

‘You were doing something like this in the Montague Street flat yesterday,’ John says. When Sherlock doesn’t reply, he tries a direct question: ‘What exactly are your experiments for?’

Sherlock continues to say nothing, focusing intently on what he’s doing. John says, ‘It’s considered rude to ignore questions.’

‘What if they’re idiotic questions?’ Sherlock says, watching a bright blue drop vanish into the red.

‘Even then,’ John confirms.

‘I experiment to obtain knowledge or confirm theories,’ Sherlock says. ‘Obviously.’ Another drop falls. Sherlock is somehow contriving to look simultaneously fascinated by the now bubbling liquid and bored by John. John is almost impressed.

‘What knowledge?’ John asks. ‘What theories?’

Sherlock’s handchip beeps. He sets the pipette he’s currently holding down and looks at it. His face transforms, suddenly highly focused, and then, a split-second later, ecstatic. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Yes, yes, I knew he’d come to me before long.’

‘Who?’ John says.

‘Lestrade,’ Sherlock says, now getting to his feet and striding purposefully through to the living room.

John makes a note in his assignment file – *Serious work needed on how to answer questions* – and then goes after him. Sherlock is sitting on the sofa, tapping his handchip. He’s wearing an internet headset, which means he’s fully embedded in the online world; trying to talk to him out here will be no use. John’ll have to go online himself if he wants to do that.

The viewing screen is showing a forum, its header bar showing the title *Stimulus*. There’s a hub in the centre off which tunnels lead to different sections. There’s no detail, just shimmering darkness,
through which icons move swiftly from place to place.

John doesn’t know what Sherlock’s icon looks like or what the attached username is, but then he spots what looks like a honey bee with the username *sherlockholmes* floating below it. As he watches, it flies down a tunnel marked *General Chat*.

At the end of the tunnel a hundred or so icons are conversing. John ignores the text rapidly appearing beneath each of them and focuses on the corner towards which Sherlock is heading, which is sealed off by shimmering blue police lines, and *DO NOT CROSS* written over and over in bright flashing letters. Within, three official police icons – looking like badges showing name and rank – are hovering by an icon that looks like a pink handbag. Its username is *jenlove*. Text below the handbag states that *This user has been inactive for four hours*.

Sherlock’s icon flies straight over the police tape and comes up to the police icons. In the fleshworld, Sherlock’s fingers move over the viewing screen’s keyboard, and words appear beneath his icon. *This is the fourth so-called suicide?*

John frowns at the screen. He has absolutely no idea what is going on. Sherlock’s file declared that he’d made no friends since his arrival; had mostly stayed holed up in his rooms. And anyway, this clearly isn’t a social call. So what is he doing?

Yes, writes the most senior of the police icons, *d-i-lestrade*. They continue, *Her name is Jennifer Wilson. We traced her fleshworld location; Gregson’s team are there now. Their medical officer says she died from an overdose of some kind of e-stimulant. Her handchip’s still on; you can see she’s still online here, and her body’s on the sofa in her study at home, seated and facing a viewing screen.*

John’s beginning to feel stupid, because he’s still completely confused. Sherlock is obviously not a member of the Metropolitan police, so why is he being given this information? If Sherlock has some sort of connection with them, why wasn’t it in his file? Then again, John still doesn’t know why the file didn’t mention that Sherlock might potentially deduce John’s entire life story on first contact. There’s certainly something odd going on there. Someone’s contrived to keep certain information out of the file; though who would do that and why John has no idea.

*She was killed here, then,* Sherlock writes. *With all these people about? No. Impossible, so – the killer cleared the area somehow. Virus scare? Site down for maintenance?* While his fingers move rapidly over the keyboard the rest of his body remains perfectly still, his eyes gazing emptily into nothing.
Site down for maintenance, D.I. Lestrade replies. It was shut down about half an hour before she died. She must have got on somehow anyway, along with whoever killed her.

Sherlock writes, *I assume you’ve investigated whoever announced that the site needed to close.*

*Yeah. The head admin posted the message; I’ve checked and it really was her.*

*You cannot seriously believe it was a coincidence,* Sherlock writes.

The D.I. gets as far as typing *Well* before more words appear below Sherlock’s icon: *This is a very large forum. The head admin clearly doesn’t do all the maintenance herself. He’ll have maintenance workers in her employ. One of them must have told her that the site needed to close. Have you investigated them? Don’t bother answering that, just get on and contact them now.*

The letter *f* appears below one of the other police icons, *sgt-donovan,* but is then deleted.

*I’ll be at the new flat,* Sherlock writes. *221b Baker Street. You have my handchip i.d.; message me when you find out which one of the maintenance workers has disappeared.*

The D.I. types *Disappeared?*, but Sherlock logs off without answering, and the screen goes blank. Next to John, Sherlock removes his internet headset, blinking at the sudden brightness of the fleshworld after the forum’s rippling darkness.

‘And what,’ John says, ‘was that?’

Sherlock gives John a long, considering look. Then he says: ‘I estimate that in about half an hour I’m going to be breaking into a serial killer’s flat. Want to come?’

‘We should talk about how to respond to questions,’ John says.

‘People are vague in how they ask questions,’ Sherlock says. ‘When answering, the correct response is to determine which specific detail the asker *really* wants out of all the possible options their phrasing allows for, and then to provide them with it.’
‘Unless there’s a good reason not to,’ John says. ‘And Sherlock, if you actually know all that then why –’

‘“Good” is subjective,’ Sherlock says. ‘Do you mean something I consider a good reason, or something I believe the person asking would consider a good reason?’

‘Uh –’ John says.

‘And you’re a poor example of question-response etiquette,’ Sherlock adds, the barest possibility of a smile suggesting itself at the edges of his lips. ‘You still haven’t answered mine.’

‘Oh,’ John says.

‘I’ll have to repeat myself. Very rude of you, John, by your own standards. But I’ll let it pass. So: serial killer. Break in. Are you coming?’

‘Why are you asking me to?’ John says.

‘Is answering a question with another question appropriate?’ Sherlock asks, the hypothetical smile sliding sideways into reality.

‘Er – not generally. Sometimes, if – you can ask if you need a question clarified.’

‘I’d have thought mine was clear enough.’

‘Whatever it is that you’re doing – helping the police – I don’t see how I can be any use.’

‘You were in the army,’ Sherlock says. The intense focus John encountered yesterday is back again, frightening and exhilarating. Sherlock is looking at John exactly how he looked at the bowl of blood earlier. It should be unpleasant. He goes on: ‘But my experiment – you recognised heparin. The other chemicals were familiar to you but you didn’t name them. You were concentrating, trying to remember what they were called, but couldn’t quite get there. You’ve
studied chemistry but lately have only used certain kinds of chemical knowledge. Heparin: blood coagulation. Medicine. You’re a doctor.’

‘Was,’ John says. ‘In the army, I was a doctor. But my training’s very narrow. Army can’t afford to provide a full medicine course. I’m not qualified to treat anything but combat injuries.’

Sherlock takes a step closer. John remembers to breathe. ‘But when it comes to your field of specialisation,’ Sherlock says, ‘are you any good?’

‘I was,’ John says. ‘Very.’

‘I’ve heard that defence on the starline is even bloodier than the spectral field attacks,’ Sherlock says. This is an understatement, but John doesn’t say anything. Sherlock goes on, ‘You must have seen a lot of injuries, a lot of violence and death. A lot of trouble.’

John’s blood quickens. He thinks of riding medic beside Mary while she fired and he attached and reattached her limbs every time they were sliced clean off by the lines of deadly light. He thinks of all the times he had to defend the hospital against raids, standing outside firing his handchip and shooting a gun from his other hand, yelling abuse at the sky that would never be heard or understood.

‘Of course,’ he manages to get out. ‘Yes. Enough for a lifetime. Far too much.’

Sherlock seems to loom somehow even nearer. ‘Want to see some more?’ he asks.

John is well aware that this is just Sherlock’s earlier question rephrased, that he’s still really asking do you want to help me break into a serial killer’s flat? And Sherlock still hasn’t answered any of John’s questions, hasn’t said what use John could be.

Even so, there is only one possible answer.

* 

That answer has Sherlock throwing on a long black coat and sweeping out the door, John hurrying
“Aren’t we waiting for that police officer to message you or something?” John asks.

“He’ll have done so by the time we reach the bottom of the stairs,” Sherlock replies; and sure enough as John steps off the last step Sherlock’s handchip beeps.

“Jefferson Hope logged out of the forum four hours ago and we can’t get hold of him”, Sherlock reads aloud. ‘And by the way,’ he adds, ‘aren’t you forgetting something?’

John turns and looks around, puzzled. He pats his pockets. He glances up the stairs.

The stairs. There are seventeen of them; he knows because when every step is an effort counting is a way to avoid screaming in frustration. He’d heaved himself up them only yesterday, keeping his face blank, pushing down on his cane. The cane which he is not currently holding.

He stumbles, and his leg gives out. As he’s falling forward, Sherlock’s arms encircle his waist from behind and pull him upwards. He finds himself leaning back on Sherlock, and feels a hot burst of humiliation. He tries to pull away, but Sherlock holds on, and murmurs, ‘John. Your reactions make it obvious that there’s some kind of social stigma attached to what you’re going through. But whatever prejudices exist here, I’m not subject to them. You really don’t need to be embarrassed.’

There’s a horrible second when John thinks he’s actually going to have to shove Sherlock away and then apologise, but Sherlock lets him go. John sits down on the second step from the bottom.

‘Psychosomatic,’ Sherlock says, brightly. The words told you remain unspoken.

‘I know that,’ John says. He cranes his neck upwards to meet Sherlock’s eyes. He has to look up at Sherlock even when he’s standing, but not like this. He burns even redder. ‘I’m a doctor, remember? I know what fucking psychebullets do.’

‘You don’t know,’ Sherlock says. ‘What did they tell you at the hospital?’
John sighs. ‘The psychebullet was lodged in my leg when I got there,’ he says. ‘It made me feel as if I was in agonising pain, and unable to walk. I knew it wasn’t real, but that made no difference.’

‘But it isn’t as bad as that now,’ Sherlock says. He looks insufferably pleased with himself.

‘No,’ John says. ‘They got most of it out at the hospital, but there’s a tiny piece still in there. It happens a lot. Psychebullets fragment; they’re hard to get out completely.’

‘They didn’t tell you how to counter the bullet’s effects,’ Sherlock says.

‘Because it can’t be done,’ John says.

‘Of course it can,’ Sherlock says. ‘Psychebullets act on the brain; there’s a channel there, clearly. All you have to do is work out how to make your brain use that channel and act on the bullet in return.’

‘If that were a possibility I think the hospital would have told me.’

‘If they knew,’ Sherlock says. ‘Evidently they don’t.’

‘I know I sometimes stop limping when I don’t think about it,’ John says. ‘Don’t think about it is what my therapist says too. If that’s your advice –‘

‘There’s more to it than that,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve seen you stop limping twice. What did those scenarios have in common? The first was when you met me. I imagine you’d been told that I was unusual and difficult, and you weren’t sure what to expect. That’s even more the case now; all you know is that we’re breaking into a flat belonging to someone I believe to be a serial killer. Not why, or what we’re going to do when we get there. You need that uncertainty; the danger inherent in the unknown. You need mysteries. It’s only when you’re trapped in one familiar place with no new and risky territory to stride into that you limp.’

‘Stop analysing me,’ John snaps, but he isn’t sure he means it. That concentration, those eyes staring straight at him, staring into his head as if there’s something worth looking at in there. Sherlock smiles. John elects to change the subject before he loses any further composure: ‘Shall we go, then?’
'You’ll need to get your cane, now that the limp’s reasserted itself,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ll send Hope’s address to your handchip and meet you there.’

And he walks briskly out through the front door, leaving John sitting on the stairs.

John manages to get all the way up without resorting to crawling, ignoring the burst of pain every time he has to put weight on his bad leg. It isn’t real, he tells himself over and over. At the top he has a moment of panic when he thinks he doesn’t have his key, but then he remembers that it’s in his jacket pocket. He leans against the door while he unlocks it, pressing one arm against the wall so he doesn’t fall through when the door opens.

His cane is leaning against the sofa. John takes it, and wonders whether he should just sit down and give up on whatever mad adventure Sherlock’s off on. What Sherlock described didn’t sound like real life at all, and definitely didn’t sound like something John belonged in the middle of. Limping around after Sherlock and being useless isn’t an appealing prospect.

Then again, neither is sitting around here waiting for Sherlock to come back. John makes his decision, and heads for the door. There’s a tubes entrance not ten paces from their front door. It won’t take him that long to catch up.
Chapter 2

John doesn’t make it to the tubes. As he’s about to go underground, the e-screens lining the wall opposite him begin to flicker, and suddenly the adverts and blogs and news updates on them vanish, and the display on every one of them suddenly reads:

JOHN WATSON

He stops. Stares at them. Then his handchip begins to ring. He presses accept call, and a silky voice in his ear says, ‘Hello, Captain Watson. Watch the e-screens closely, please.’ There’s no video on the handchip to accompany the voice. John looks at the e-screens, and their message changes again:

GET INTO THE AVIA

‘How are you doing this?’ John asks. The owner of the voice, whoever they are, cannot have hacked into London’s public internet display. That’s completely impossible.

‘Please do cooperate,’ the voice says.

‘What avia?’ John says.

The question is answered a second later when a sleek black avia comes into the view over the nearest block of flats, and descends to the ground in front of John.

Private vehicles are under tight restriction due to fuel consumption, and none more so than flying ones. Only the police, hospitals and high up government employees get avias. John stares at it.

‘Get into the avia, Captain Watson,’ the voice on his handchip says.

John glances at the e-screens, and concludes that he doesn’t really have much choice. He gets into the avia.
It’s piloted by a gorgeous woman who refuses to answer any of John’s questions about where they’re going. He figures he may as well try his luck, even if she is the sidekick to some kind of supervillain, but gets about as far as could be expected. The journey takes around ten minutes, and the avia pulls up outside some kind of warehouse.

When John steps into the warehouse, he finds himself in a large, empty room. Empty, that is, except for a man. A man John recognises.

‘Mr. Holmes,’ John says. ‘With all due respect: what the hell?’

Mycroft Holmes, Afters Coordinator, smiles. ‘Mycroft, please. And I apologise. It seemed the most efficient way to get you here. I want to talk to you about your new assignment.’

‘We do have a headquarters, you know,’ John says. ‘And an online office.’

‘I’d prefer your new friend not to know about this meeting just yet,’ Mycroft says. ‘This method seemed more conducive to secrecy.’

‘My new – you mean Sherlock.’

‘Indeed,’ Mycroft says. He seems, then, to be hesitating for a moment, but John’s met him before, and considers this highly unlikely. Everything Mycroft Holmes does is calculated down to fine detail. ‘He’s – unusual, this one. I’d like you to submit your reports on his development directly to me, rather than to headquarters.’

‘I’d have to inform Sherlock if I did that,’ John says.

‘I’d be happy to pay you a meaningful sum of money on a regular basis were you to refrain from informing him,’ Mycroft says.

‘That’s generous of you,’ John says. ‘I’m not interested.’
‘You’re not a wealthy man,’ Mycroft says. ‘With all the injured soldiers, army pensions are stretched a little thin, aren’t they? And E.L.I. jobs aren’t especially well-paid.’

‘That’s true,’ John agrees.

‘I’m not asking for any information beyond that which you’d normally put in a report,’ Mycroft says. ‘You won’t be deceiving Sherlock as to the fact that you’re compiling and distributing information about him. You’ll only need to avoid mentioning to whom you are delivering it.’

‘Still no,’ John says.

‘I haven’t mentioned a figure,’ Mycroft says.

‘Mycroft,’ John says, ‘You’re my boss, and we need to have a decent working relationship, so I’d really like it if you’d drop this.’

Mycroft seems amused. He often does. ‘You’re very loyal, very quickly,’ he says.

John doesn’t say anything to this. Mycroft looks at the display of his own handchip. ‘Your therapist’s files on you say you have trust issues,’ he says. John grits his teeth. ‘But apparently you’ve decided to trust an after you’ve just met.’

‘Who says I trust him?’ John says.

Mycroft’s smile becomes wider, thinner. John dislikes it a great deal. ‘You don’t seem the type to make friends easily,’ Mycroft says.

John cannot take this any longer. He’s always got on perfectly well with Mycroft Holmes, but right now the man is making his skin crawl. ‘Are we done?’ he says.

‘We don’t know anything about the afters,’ Mycroft says. ‘There is no secret government file with all the information on it kept from the public, whatever you might have heard. No one knows why
they’re here. No one knows who – or what – they really are. Doesn’t that worry you?'

John again says nothing. His posture is upright, his hand curled tight around his cane.

‘Interesting,’ Mycroft says.

Despite himself, John asks: ‘What?’

‘Your left hand,’ Mycroft says. ‘It’s perfectly steady. You have an intermittent tremor, which your
therapist believes is triggered by stress, but current data would suggest not.’

John almost wants it to shake, to prove Mycroft wrong, but he prides himself on utter stillness in
the face of aggression. And this is aggression, even if it’s a veiled, elegant, shadowy kind that John
hasn’t encountered much before.

‘Most people,’ Mycroft says, ‘blunder through this city. They see streets and shops and e-screens,
and nothing more. They know there’s a war on, but they think it’s kilometres away, beyond the
atmosphere. That it never touches them. They don’t see the battlefield they’re living in the middle
of. But Sherlock sees everything. And you will, too, John, if you stay with him.’

John feels the magnetic pull of those words against his will. He hears lasers in his head. The thumb
of his right hand unconsciously starts to stroke the place where the laser light would be if he had
the military mode of the handchip enabled. He stops it, hopefully before Mycroft notices anything.

‘Your therapist thinks you’re haunted by your memories of your military service,’ Mycroft says.
‘Fire her. She’s got it the wrong way round. You’re not haunted by the war, Captain Watson – you
miss it.’

The lasers get a little louder. John wants to punch Mycroft, or fire a gun, or swear in literated
Gliesan, or lie still and bleed. He wants to be almost dead and furiously alive. He wants to watch
deadly light patterns in the sky, to hear alien noises that ring in human ears for hours after they
sound, atonal and beautiful. He wants to see Sherlock.

Mycroft leans forward, just a little. ‘I would say welcome back,’ he says. ‘But the truth is, you
never really left.’
The same beautiful woman who dropped John off at the warehouse drives him, on request, to the address Sherlock’s sent to his handchip.

There’s no obvious sign of how Sherlock got in. Hope’s flat is, according to Sherlock’s message, number 22, on the second floor.

Fire escape, John decides, and starts to mount it with infuriating slowness. When he reaches the second floor, though, he sees the door to number 22 straight away through the glass panel in the fire exit.

The fire exit door is locked – Sherlock must have got in some other way. After a surreptitious glance around, John switches modes on his handchip and uses the laser to cut a hole in the door, through which he can reach to push down on the bar. The door swings open, almost pulling him with it. He feels slightly guilty for the property damage, but this is about helping to catch a serial killer, isn’t it?

The door to number 22 is locked as well – how did Sherlock get in? – but fortunately not double locked, allowing John to use the same trick again. He promises himself that later he’ll contact the building and pay to have all this repaired.

The flat is eerily silent as he steps in. ‘Sherlock?’ he calls. ‘Sherlock, I’m here.’

Nothing. John checks each room, but there’s no sign of anyone. Has Sherlock been and gone without waiting for him? It doesn’t seem particularly unlikely, all things considered.

But then John sees it. The block of flats is right next to another, separated by only a narrow alleyway full of recycling bins. The bedroom window looks out onto this alleyway, and across it John sees someone else’s living room, in which Sherlock and another man sit face to face, looking not at each other, but down at their handchips.

John’s got the wrong block. The two are side to side and confusingly numbered; it was an easy mistake to make. But now he’s here, and Sherlock is there, eyes glazed and body twitching with repeated convulsions. John can only see a bit of the other man’s face, but the edge of a very unpleasant smile is just visible there. There seems little doubt about what’s going to happen to
Sherlock within a very short space of time.

John opens the bedroom window. He raises his hand, palm up. Once, many years ago, that gesture would have meant stop or I surrender. Would have indicated submission. That was before militarised handchips.

_Murder, _John thinks. _Killing another human being. Not an alien, not an enemy in war. Can I really_ –

But then Sherlock’s face contorts with clear pain, and John fires without completing the thought.

_*_

‘I’m fine,’ Sherlock says, for what is now at least the fifth time.

‘You took about thirty e-stim pulses,’ John says. ‘Forgive me for being slightly concerned.’

‘I had it all under control,’ Sherlock says.

_Yeah, _John thinks. _It really looked like that. _He doesn’t say that, though: his story is that he hadn’t yet reached the flat by the time he got Sherlock’s message telling him that Hope was dead. Instead he says, ‘Well, you do seem OK. What exactly happened in there?’_

Sherlock stretches out on the sofa, lying back. John takes the chair. Sherlock says, ‘Hope was a maintenance worker on a forum which posed as a general social hub but was really a fairly poorly disguised cover for illegal e-stim trade. He’d single out particularly desperate addicts and tell them to meet her online at a particular time. Promise them the chance to win immense quantities of stimulant. Then she’d get the forum closed for maintenance, allowing access only to his prospective victim. She’d propose a game, or at least that’s what he did with me.’

‘What sort of game?’ John asks.

‘He and his victim both take e-stims till they drop, essentially,’ Sherlock says. ‘She promises the victims that if she dies first his handchip’s programmed to send them the address of the site where
she keeps her supply. But he had a brain aneurysm, and was completely immune to the e-stims’ effects. He never died first.’

‘OK,’ John says. ‘I know e-stim addiction fucks with your head like nothing else, I’m willing to believe that addicts would agree to something that mad. But why the hell did you play?’

Sherlock, for the first time since John met him, looks almost – embarrassed? ‘I had a plan,’ he mutters. ‘I thought I could outwit Hope, that there was an eventuality he hadn’t foreseen. I managed to redirect the e-stims – create a sort of loop. Unfortunately, he’d anticipated that move.’

‘You’re an idiot,’ John says. ‘God. You’re lucky someone decided to shoot him. Er – do the police have any idea who did that?’

‘He was found with a hole running through him, as if from a laser, but no sign of the killer anywhere around,’ Sherlock says. ‘The only people in London with laser guns are criminal gangs. The most likely explanation is that Hope was a renegade member of one of those, and her ex-comrades came after him.’

‘Ah,’ John says. ‘Makes sense.’

‘At least,’ Sherlock adds, ‘that’s what I told the police. I also told them that I wasn’t interested in assisting that investigation any further, since the shooter saved my life.’

‘OK,’ John says, slowly. ‘Er, right. Good. Yes, I suppose they did.’

Sherlock grins. ‘Incidentally,’ he says, ‘I can show you how to set up a stealth mode for that military handchip of yours, if you like. Could be a bit awkward if the police ever asked to have a look at it.’

John meets his gaze. He could deny it. He could keep on denying it, and Sherlock would never be completely sure. There’s no evidence.

Or he could decide to trust an after he’s just met.
‘Thanks,’ John says. ‘That’d be great.’

*

They get takeaway, and sit on the living room floor eating it. Then Sherlock asks, unexpectedly, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Course. What do you mean?’

‘You’ve killed plenty of Gliesans,’ Sherlock says, ‘but you’d never killed anyone human before, had you?’

John shakes his head, slowly. ‘No,’ he says. ‘But it’s not – I mean. I think a lot of people would find it different. Bill – mate of mine out there – always said there was no way he could ever kill another human being, that he couldn’t imagine how people used to in intra-earth wars. But I…I don’t know. It’s not like the Gliesans aren’t people. They’re as complex and intelligent as we are. And I knew that, when I killed them. I thought it was worth it. I still think it was. Tonight wasn’t any different.’

Sherlock nods. He looks contemplative. ‘In the army you were ordered to kill,’ he says. ‘This was a matter of private judgement.’

‘I guess,’ John says, ‘but even if I didn’t have to make decisions like that when I was actually in the army – I still had to make the decision to join in the first place. I don’t know how much you’ve heard about what people think of the war, but it’s pretty controversial. I didn’t impress many people I knew when I decided that fighting in it was the right thing to do.’

Sherlock nods again. The contemplative expression is still there, and John doesn’t quite know what to make of it. ‘OK,’ he says. ‘Now your turn to share. What exactly were we doing today? I mean – well, what’s your connection with the police, to start off with?’

‘I didn’t realise earth had an information barter system,’ Sherlock says. ‘Am I expected to supply an amount exactly equivalent to what you gave me?’

‘No, it’s not that –’ John starts, and then notices Sherlock’s expression and realises that he was joking. A day into this job, and John’s already been wrongfooted more times than in the entire
duration of his previous assignments. Exactly what Sherlock knows and what he doesn’t is proving very difficult to estimate.

‘All right, information,’ Sherlock concedes. ‘You’re aware from my file that I was attacked on arrival?’

John nods. The woman Sherlock ‘replaced’ – that is to say, who disappeared immediately before he appeared – had a partner. When the man came out of the bathroom to find that his partner had vanished and a strange man was standing on their bed, he immediately realised what must have happened, and wasn’t happy about it.

Afters being attacked on arrival isn’t unusual. Which is hardly surprising. John can’t imagine how he’d react if someone he loved vanished, never to return, but he suspects that if someone conveniently appeared out of nowhere to take the blame it might be quite difficult to treat them reasonably. The police take the same view, and those who commit violence against newly-arrived afters under these circumstances get light sentences, if they’re charged at all.

But John still feels angry, more than he can account for. Sherlock is clearly fine, and his file records that he got away with few injuries. And John doesn’t even know him, not really.

‘Once I’d been picked up and registered as a new after I was taken to the police to report the attack,’ Sherlock says. ‘While I was in the station I overheard Lestrade talking to another officer about a case. When I managed to solve it from the details I’d overheard, I thought I should inform him. He was – rather irritated at first, but when she realised I was right…well, actually he thanked me and then told me to get lost. But I knew that next time she needed help he’d be tempted to come to me again. And I was right.’

‘Seems to be a habit of yours,’ John says, and Sherlock grins.

* 

John dreams, that night, of the pit, and wakes up shaking. He doesn’t know if it’s better or worse than the nights when combat memories fuse together into fast-paced montages of friendship and adrenaline. Those nights, he wakes up in the morning desperate with loss. Today, he is at least glad to be awake.

But the pit dream is disturbing. It rarely changes much. Mostly it resembles the reality of what
happened pretty closely – the darkness all around, John bleeding, and the Gliesan reaching out to stroke his forehead gently with the brushes on its lower arms. In the dream, though, it always turns out to have been painting messages onto his skin, and he tries furiously to understand them, certain that if he can it’ll somehow enable him to escape. He always wakes up before ever getting close to deciphering them.

He won’t get back to sleep now, so he goes downstairs to the living room, where he finds Sherlock focused intently on the viewing screen, scrolling through what look to be police files.

‘Morning,’ John says.

‘Working,’ Sherlock says.

John sighs, and sits down in the armchair. He updates his social profile first – his therapist says he has to do at least two full-length entries a week – and then starts his report on Sherlock for headquarters. Though he honestly isn’t quite sure what he’s going to say.

In the end he writes a few bare-bones lines, just noting that he and Sherlock have settled into the flat and no particular issues have arisen so far. Then he turns his attention to compiling teaching materials. Once he’s got a pack together, he sends it to Sherlock’s handchip. It beeps; over on the sofa Sherlock opens the message and frowns at it.

‘Mostly standard stuff,’ John says. ‘There’s up-to-date information on politics, some cultural discussion, some stuff on after biology and sex. And –’

Sherlock interrupts. ‘Have you read all this?’

‘No,’ John says. ‘We get our own pack. Um. It’s not always the same information – I mean, E.L.I.s need to know certain things that aren’t that directly relevant to afters themselves, and, uh, vice versa.’

Sherlock studies him. ‘You’re embarrassed. Why is – ah. It’s sex, of course, it must be. That seems to be the only topic here that can produce the sort of expression you’re wearing now.’

John nods, wondering why he is so embarrassed. Though Sherlock’s right to identify sex as a subject which people are often awkward about, John himself has never had any difficulty
discussing it frankly. Now, though, he’s having to fight an impulse to look down at the floor, and might even be close to blushing. ‘E.L.I.s aren’t allowed sexual relationships with their students,’ he says. ‘It’s considered unethical. We’re not encouraged to think of you – er, them – sexually at all. So we don’t get given that particular booklet.’

‘I see,’ Sherlock says. He looks slightly amused.

‘I’ll just leave you to get on with the reading, then,’ John says, slightly faster than he’d intended to say it. ‘Let me know when you’re done and if you have any questions.’

Safely back in his room, John lets out a breath and wonders what, exactly, that was about. The awkward sex conversation and the explanation of the rules regarding E.L.I.-student relationships are a standard part of the early days of an assignment. John’s done it twice before without any discomfort.

John thinks of Sherlock downstairs, reading about his own sexuality. What might arouse him, how the experience of sex might feel. How would Sherlock react to the information? Scientifically minded, would he want to test it out immediately? And John really is flushing now, unpleasantly warm, breath coming just a little too fast.

*Oh, John thinks. So that’s it. What now?*

* Actually, the answer to what now is relatively straightforward, encoded as it is in the E.L.I. rules. John’s handbook states clearly that, should an E.L.I. find themselves sexually drawn to a student, they should utilise the techniques for dismissing attraction that they learned in training. If, after three days, the techniques have failed and the attraction persists, the E.L.I. should inform their student of the situation and explain that they will have to give up the assignment. They are then expected to contact headquarters, who will reassign them and assign the student a new E.L.I.

John’s never been attracted to a student before, but the issue is a common one, and really, it was only a matter of time. It’s nothing to be excessively concerned about. He has three days. He’ll avoid unnecessary physical contact, keep up a professional manner, and sort out the problem. He’s been trained to deal with this, after all. It shouldn’t present any serious difficulty.

*
John usually starts his teaching with popular culture, because it’s fun and relatively easy to pick up – playing games, watching films, reading novels or listening to songs that depict and reference social interaction is a good way to ease students into learning how to navigate social interaction for themselves. But the approach does not go down well with Sherlock.

‘This is abysmal,’ he declares. ‘I can’t believe you downloaded this rubbish onto my handchip.’

‘Well, yours is the one connected to the viewing screen,’ John reminds him. Sherlock glares; John fails to suppress a small smile.

‘And you’re telling me this is some sort of classic,’ Sherlock says.

‘It’s the hundredth Bond film,’ John says. ‘A landmark moment in one of the most popular film series ever made – yeah, it’s a classic.’

Sherlock shakes his head sadly, apparently despairing of the taste of 22nd century earth dwellers.

On screen, Bond is tapping frantically at the teleportation device hidden in her collar and muttering damn it, Q. This is the opening to one of John’s favourite scenes in the film, so he decides to ignore Sherlock and just enjoy it.

Unfortunately, Sherlock has other ideas.

‘I’m not watching this,’ he announces, getting to his feet. ‘Some of this dialogue might embed itself in my brain and numb it permanently.’

‘You have to give it more of a go than this,’ John protests. ‘It’s amazing. I think it’s the best of all the Bond films.’

‘I can only imagine what the others are like, in that case.’

‘Shut up,’ John says.
‘You’re supposed to acknowledge my preferences and my difficulties in adjusting to earth culture graciously,’ Sherlock says. ‘I did the reading.’

He’s right. *Shut up* appears exactly zero times in the list of suggested phrases for E.L.I.s to use during teaching. But the people who wrote the handbook hadn’t met Sherlock. Two days in and John’s already come close to strangling him more than once.

‘Stop talking and watch the film,’ John says.

Sherlock heaves a great put-upon sigh, and sits back down. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘I’ll watch it. But after that you have to find something at least marginally stimulating to occupy me.’

John’s mind offers up a suggestion as to a stimulating occupation. John firmly rejects both the idea and the mental images associated with it. ‘Deal,’ he says.

*

The film finishes, and Sherlock attempts to elicit a promise from John never to inflict another Bond film on his consciousness again. John refuses to make any such promise. Sherlock grumbles, then messages Lestrade asking if there are any cases Sherlock might be able to assist with.

There aren’t. Sherlock runs his hands through his hair, paces the room furiously. John suggests that they go to an e-bar and do a lesson on social interaction; Sherlock throws a mug of tea across the room.

‘What about those files you were looking at earlier?’ John asks. ‘Wasn’t that for a case?’

‘I was trying to find a case,’ Sherlock says. ‘I failed. At least, I failed to find anything of any interest whatsoever. And now I’m just – here – with nothing to do, nothing to think about – it’s intolerable.’

‘It’s been a day,’ John says, trying not to raise his voice. ‘You solved a case less than twenty four
hours ago. Are you seriously telling me you can’t go that long without one? Because if that’s really
true then we need to talk about – it might be a tempo thing, you might be having trouble adjusting
to the pace of things here –’

‘You’ll be shocked to hear this,’ Sherlock says, quietly but with venom, ‘but reps are actually
individuals, different from each other – we don’t all have an identikit set of problems – you can’t
just look in your handbook and fix me. This isn’t an after problem, this is my problem, my mind
works this way, it rebels at stagnation, it cannot function like this. You have no idea what you’re
talking about.’

‘I wasn’t trying to imply – I meant –’ John breaks off. Adjusting to the pace is, in fact, a phrase
straight out of the handbook. Sherlock raises an eyebrow at him. He looks down. ‘Sorry,’ he says.

‘Inevitable that you’d lapse into that way of thinking, given your job,’ Sherlock says. ‘And most
people have proved worse, so far. But don’t repeat the mistake of thinking that my mind is like
anyone else’s.’

‘Anyone’s?’ John says. ‘Isn’t that a bit – um, arrogant?’

‘Oh yes, modesty,’ Sherlock says. ‘I imagine I’m due for a lesson on that at some point. I don’t see
that deliberately understating one’s abilities is different from any other variety of lie. It’ll be
interesting to see whether you can persuade me otherwise.’

‘We could do that now –’ John starts. Sherlock gives him a disgusted look and sweeps into his
room, letting the door bang in a very final way.

John settles down to read Harry’s social updates – commenting on each other’s profiles is basically
the only communication they have with each other these days. He gets about half an hour to
himself before Sherlock suddenly bursts back into the room, looking more manic than ever.

‘What is it?’ John says, slightly alarmed.

‘I have a case,’ Sherlock says. ‘Of sorts, at any rate. Not a conventional case, but it should occupy
my mind for some time.’

‘OK, good,’ John says. ‘Er – what is it?’
‘Me,’ Sherlock says. ‘Us. The replacements. Who we are, where we come from, why this is happening. I’m going to solve the mystery of the afters phenomenon.’
Chapter 3

John tries – gently – to point out that earth’s best minds have been trying to work out why people are disappearing and why the afters are appearing to replace them for over thirty years now, and that the chances of Sherlock discovering something new are not enormous. Sherlock, of course, waves this away with self-satisfied complacency.

‘Oh, fine,’ John says. ‘Where are you planning to start?’

‘I want you to tell me everything you know about it first,’ Sherlock says. ‘I need an idea of how the phenomenon’s perceived generally.’

‘OK,’ John says. ‘Um, well – so, the first disappearance happened in…2125? 2126? Something like that. Soo Lin Yao, her name was. She was walking down the street and she just vanished. A dozen people saw it happen. And within a second, another woman had appeared where she had been. Looking totally confused. There was panic, the newsblogs were all over it, and then within the week it happened twice more. I was only a kid then, obviously, but I remember it pretty well. No one knew what to do.’

‘And then?’ Sherlock says.

John shrugs. ‘Well – eventually it became commonplace, I guess, as horrible as that sounds. It kept happening, and no one could stop it. At first there was a lot of suspicion, people thought the people appearing might be like – robots created by the Gliesans to come and spy on us, or something. The early ones were all interned. But then they were tested and they all proved to have human D.N.A.

‘Why “robots created by the Gliesans”?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Why didn’t people simply think we were Gliesans?’

John grins. Gliesans are a blind spot for afters, for some reason; generally the afters know all about the war, especially military technology, but nothing about the enemies earth is actually fighting. ‘Gliesans would have a tough time blending in with humanity,’ he explains. ‘They have four arms and no tongues, and half of their fingers are basically paintbrushes. I’m pretty sure we’d have noticed if any of the afters look like that. Having said that, though, I have met people who are still convinced the afters are Gliesans. But that theory’s mostly confined to bigots who’re really pissed off that they can’t hate the afters for being robots any more and wanted a new reason.’
‘The logic being that the technology exists to fool a D.N.A. test into reading an organic life form from one species as from another, but not into reading an artificial one as organic,’ Sherlock says, mostly to himself. ‘So it’s impossible that we’re robots – and frankly, even aside from the D.N.A. tests, if the Gliesans really had the technology to make robots complex enough to pass for organic life forms they’d surely be using that technology in the war. But anyway, though the robot theory won’t work any more, if it ever did, there is still a slight possibility that we could be aliens.’

‘Yes,’ John admits. ‘But it is pretty much impossible that you’re Gliesans. You’d have to be from some other species that we haven’t discovered yet – and if there’s a humanoid intelligent species out there, why wouldn’t they make contact in...I dunno, a normal way? This is a pretty bizarre way of making our acquaintance, if that’s what’s happening.’

‘It seems improbable,’ Sherlock agrees, ‘but we can’t rule anything out at this stage. What happened after the reps were proved not to be robots?’

John says, ‘When, after five years or so, there was still no evidence at all that any of them had any malicious intent towards us, the government set up a division to look after them and help them adjust to their new lives. Grief counselling was made available for the people who had loved ones disappear and – we all just...got used to it, I suppose. God, we sound callous. But there wasn’t really much other choice.’

‘Has anyone ever come back?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Of those who’ve vanished, I mean.’

John shakes his head. ‘Never. After the first ten years they started being officially registered as dead.’

‘And the reps?’ Sherlock says. ‘What can you tell me about us? What we have in common?’

‘Well, it’s always adults that appear,’ John says. ‘Usually between their mid twenties and late thirties. They wear quite similar clothing – different colours, but always pretty simple cotton trousers and t-shirts. They remember nothing about where they were before or who they are – at least, occasionally some have very hazy memories, of feelings rather than events.’ He pauses. ‘Do you – can you...remember anything?’

‘Maybe,’ Sherlock says, slowly. ‘A little. Only – feelings, as you say. Nothing concrete. And in any case I have no idea how reliable these memories are. They could have been artificially induced.’
'Why would anyone do that?' John asks.

‘Impossible to know without having the answers to several other questions first,’ Sherlock says.

‘OK,’ John says. ‘Um…not sure what else to tell you. Afters are usually knowledgeable about science and technology and the military, and confused by a lot of social and cultural stuff. Almost always really clever, though maybe not compared to you. And they always speak the language of wherever they land perfectly. Apart from that…I can’t really think of much else. Most other things differ a lot.’

‘Good,’ Sherlock says, pacing. ‘Interesting. All right. Next I’m going to need access to the government’s files on the subject.’

John blinks at him. ‘I can’t get you those,’ he says.

‘I’m not asking you to,’ Sherlock says. ‘Do you know where they’d be kept?’

‘I suppose on the gov.uk website somewhere,’ John says. ‘In a secure area. But Sherlock –’

‘All right, never mind, we’ll start in territory you’re more comfortable with. The main theories about the reps, what are they?’

Stop saying reps, John wants to say, but knows very well that he has no right to. Even if his discomfort is completely obvious. ‘The most popular one is that you’re from the future,’ John says. ‘At some point in the future someone invents time travel, and sends people back to see if it works. But there’s an unintended side effect which is loss of memory, and you can’t remember how to get back.’

‘Why choose 2126 as the start date, in that case?’ Sherlock says. ‘Did anything particularly significant happen in that year?’

‘Not that I can think of,’ John says. ‘But maybe there’s something that we don’t even know was important yet. I dunno. It would explain why you don’t know about the Gliesans – maybe the war’s over by then – or popular culture. It’s slightly weird that our military and scientific history is taught quite as thoroughly as it is then, but maybe there are reasons.’
'Mm,' Sherlock says.

‘Like I said before, another theory is that you’re aliens. And there’s one that says you come from all over the place, that time’s been distorted,’ John says. ‘Or, there’s always the more cracked theories that say the government’s kidnapping people and experimenting on them and turning them into different people and wiping their memories, or…something. I dunno, I don’t pay that much attention to those ones.’

Sherlock nods. He doesn’t ask which theory John subscribes to. In fact, John doesn’t really know, but he leans slightly towards the time travel theory, unlikely as it sounds. Everyone thought particle transit was impossible pretty much right up until it happened, so really who knows? Besides, all the theories regarding the afters are unlikely. The whole thing is unlikely.

‘What do we do now?’ John asks. ‘Please say anything other than hack into government files.’

‘No, we’ll leave that for now,’ Sherlock says, smiling. ‘We may as well exhaust any legal avenues of investigation first.’

‘Which means what?’ John says.

‘My memories,’ Sherlock says. ‘Whether real or not, they’ll be a good starting point. I’m going to tell you what I remember and I want you to ask me questions; that may help bring further recollections to the surface.’

‘What kind of questions?’ John says.

‘Whatever comes to you. I’ll let you know if they aren’t any use.’

Yes, I’m sure you will, John thinks. ‘All right,’ he says. ‘I guess we can try that.’

‘Good,’ Sherlock says, and launches straight in. ‘The principal thing I remember is a feeling of – urgency. There’s something I was supposed to do.’
'Do you have any idea what sort of thing?' John asks.

‘No,’ Sherlock says. ‘Except that it wasn’t my idea. I remember – instructions, I was ordered to carry out a task, told how to go about it. But I don’t know what the task was.’

‘Any idea who was giving these instructions?’

Sherlock’s brow wrinkles. ‘Someone important,’ he says. ‘Someone who – agh!’

John jumps in alarm. Sherlock is reeling backwards, his face suddenly twisted in pain. ‘Sherlock?’ John says, stupidly. There’s no answer. Sherlock sinks to his knees, and a moment later crumples to the floor.

John kneels down, wincing as he puts more pressure than intended on his bad leg, and turns Sherlock over. He’s lying completely still, his eyes closed. John brushes his finger gently against Sherlock’s eyelashes and Sherlock’s eyelids flutter, which suggest he’s not fully unconscious. And his pulse and breathing prove to be normal. But he certainly isn’t responsive, so John puts him in the recovery position, stands up, and tries to decide what to do.

The obvious answer is to call an ambulance, but Sherlock doesn’t appear to be in immediate danger, and John also knows that the nearest hospital with a doctor qualified to treat afters is at least a thirty minute flight away.

He runs through everything he’s ever learned about after health in his head and comes up with nothing. Certainly, E.L.I.s are advised to be careful when discussing the subject of what remains of their students’ memories, but for purely psychological reasons – it can be upsetting for afters to have their attention drawn to how much of their minds they have lost. No one ever said anything about anyone collapsing.

John tries to think. Sherlock was in his room for half an hour before he came bursting out with this idea. And John already knows enough about Sherlock to know that there’s no way he was just sitting in his room doing nothing for all that time. In which case maybe he’d already made a start. Maybe he made some notes on his own memories. And if John can find those, and figure out what was going on in Sherlock’s head before he collapsed, it might help in finding a way to revive him.

John lifts Sherlock’s hand and finds the right place to apply pressure in order to switch his handchip on. Encouragingly, when the screen lights up the skin of Sherlock’s palm it shows a
document entitled ‘THE AFTERS PHENOMENON’. John scrolls down, trying not to tickle Sherlock’s hand too much – ridiculous, really, when Sherlock seems so entirely unable to respond to anything.

And then – yes – there. Notes on memories – emotional responses rather than facts. Urgency/instructions. Superior? Preliminary research suggests points of connection between these and other reps’ memories. Also indicates that further data exists in government files on us.

John sighs. He rereads the text, then looks up to Sherlock’s face, and then back down at his palm.

‘Fine,’ he says out loud. ‘Fine, I’ll break into the government’s files. You bastard.’

*

Breaking into the government’s files is less dramatic than it sounds. As an E.L.I., John technically works for the government, and has a certain amount of clearance, especially in areas related to the afters.

He enters the gov.uk website and logs in to the secure area. He can’t access all of it by any means, but he’s hoping to get in far enough. However, a quick scan through the available information reveals it to be all things he already knows.

He hesitates. But Sherlock is still motionless on the floor, and John is becoming increasingly anxious. And no one will ever know.

Mike has higher clearance than he does, having been working with afters for much longer and holding a senior position. He also has extremely predictable taste in passwords. John knows no one else who completely ignores even the most basic primary school password instruction and happily creates passwords consisting of one of their dogs’ names and sometimes one or two numbers, though often not even that. It takes John two tries to get into his account.

John peers closer at his hand, seeing instantly that this higher level information looks much more promising. And then suddenly he finds his hand being grabbed from behind. He reacts instantly, twisting his hand out of the grip and spinning round, other hand raised in a fist.

Sherlock is standing there, upright, conscious and smirking.
'What the hell?' John says.

Sherlock grabs his hand again, and John is too confused to stop him. It takes him a moment to register that Sherlock is rapidly skimming through the information, and by the time the full implications of the situation have sunk in, it’s too late. He tugs his hand away, but Sherlock is already looking deeply satisfied.

‘Did you fake passing out?’ John says, incredulous.

‘I knew you’d panic,’ Sherlock says. He looks so nonchalant that John wants to punch him. ‘Or at least – not panic, that’s perhaps not quite the word for it. You remained calm, of course, but you were concerned. As I’d known you would be.’

The pieces click. ‘You pretended something was wrong with you so I’d get worried, decide I needed more information, and hack into the database for you.’

‘Exactly,’ Sherlock says. ‘I knew you’d never agree to hack into it for me without a strong motive like that, but I asked anyway, to plant the idea in your mind. I’d prepared the ground by leaving a document indicating that access to the files would be necessary open on my handchip. And you behaved just as I predicted.’

John is speechless. Sherlock looks so bloody happy, like he’s just accomplished something wonderful, and John spent the last ten minutes in a state of genuine fear thinking that he’d accidentally broken something in Sherlock’s mind.

When, after a few more moments, he still can’t think of anything to say, he just turns round, goes upstairs, and shuts the door of his room.

*

John’s barely got as far as sitting down on his bed before he starts to feel conflicted. He’s still angry, and still feels hurt. But the fact is that Sherlock is an after, and it’s supposed to be John’s job to teach him right and wrong according to 22nd century earth standards.
Problematic behaviour from afters is to be expected, entirely natural. And explaining why it isn’t OK is a large part of John’s job. Storming out when a student does something inappropriate is really just not on. And it certainly isn’t something John’s done before. What the hell is it about Sherlock that’s got under his skin so fast?

There’s a knock at the door. ‘Come in,’ John calls, trying rapidly to make up his mind as to what to do. He’s reluctant to apologise, but that might just be petulance. God, he’s supposed to be a good example.

The door opens. ‘I’ve upset you,’ Sherlock says.

‘Yes,’ John agrees, ‘but I shouldn’t have left. I’m sorry. I ought to have explained why I was unhappy about your behaviour.’

‘You felt manipulated,’ Sherlock says. ‘Betrayed. I understand all that, I just hadn’t considered it. I –’ he hesitates. ‘I just got swept up in – I just wanted to get the information so badly. I can’t – I cannot bear not knowing things, not when they’re...important.’

John looks hard at Sherlock. His face is set, but there’s a vulnerability there. And he only turned up in this world a week or two ago. He’s lost his memories, he knows no one here. He’s alone. And John wonders if Sherlock’s desperation to understand who he is and where he’s come from isn’t really about feeling lost where he is now.

And yet – John cannot read Sherlock. He’s never felt this out of his depth with a student. He’s never felt this out of his depth with anyone. And he honestly doesn’t know whether Sherlock’s trying to keep up a mask of indifference but failing to keep cracks from appearing in it, or whether he’s deliberately showing that sliver of vulnerability to make John feel sorry for him and let the manipulation issue go. Does Sherlock know nothing at all about how people tick, or everything, or somehow, bizarrely, both at once?

‘I understand,’ John says eventually, which is about as untrue a statement as he’s ever uttered. ‘Just – if you want me to do something I don’t want to do it’s better if we negotiate, OK? And if you really just can’t get my consent then – then you might just have to accept not getting what you want. It’s a pretty unpleasant idea to have to adjust to, that sometimes you have to let other people’s choices and wants come before yours, I know. But I’ll try and help you get used to it, as much as I can.’

Sherlock inclines his head. ‘All right,’ he says. ‘I’ll remember.’
John decides that’s the best he’s going to get. ‘Did you find out anything useful?’ he asks.

‘Not directly,’ Sherlock says, ‘but I did find evidence that there is useful information there. But it requires higher clearance. The highest, in fact.’

John is puzzled for a minute. The highest? But then it occurs to him what Sherlock might mean. ‘You don’t – you aren’t suggesting the Afters Coordinator, are you?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Sherlock says, looking oddly gleeful. ‘I think we ought to pay Mycroft Holmes a visit.’

‘You realise there’s no way he’s going to give you access to his government account, right?’

‘She won’t have to,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ll get it.’

‘He claims that there isn’t any secret government information about the afters anyway,’ John says. ‘But I suppose he would say that.’

‘Of course he would,’ Sherlock says. John tries to work out from his tone whether he just means that of course a government official would keep government secrets, or whether he means more than that – knows something of Mycroft’s personality.

It seems easier just to ask. So John says, ‘Have you met him? Or is you using his surname a coincidence?’

‘I’ve met him,’ Sherlock says. His face is blank, impossible to read, but there’s a slight edge to his tone.

John’s been meaning to tell Sherlock about that bizarre meeting with Mycroft since it happened. But in the immediate aftermath John was more worried about Sherlock’s e-stim overdose and having committed murder, and after that – well, John really just wanted to give Sherlock time to adjust to all the normal difficulties of 22nd century earth without having to worry about the Afters Coordinator behaving in a deeply odd fashion.
Now seems like the time to mention it, though. ‘I ran into him the other day,’ John says. ‘Well, not exactly ran into him. He – uh, arranged a meeting. He tried to pay me to spy on you.’

‘Did you accept?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Of course not,’ John says indignantly.

‘Pity,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve seen how useful money is here. We could have split it. And you’re reporting on me anyway.’

‘This was different,’ John insists. ‘Weird. I didn’t really know what to make of it, to be honest. He wanted me to submit reports directly to him without telling you. Which is decidedly not standard. I’m supposed to summarise the contents of my reports for you and if you ask for them I have to show them to you.’

‘I won’t be asking,’ Sherlock says. ‘I know what they’ll say, and it’s all going to be entirely lacking in interest.’

John smiles. ‘Fair enough. When did you meet Mycroft?’

‘After I was registered he showed up at Montague Street,’ Sherlock says. ‘He introduced himself, asked if I remembered anything, and left. She was only there for about five minutes, but he managed to cram an immense amount of grating personality into that space. I took against him.’ Sherlock pauses. ‘A great deal more than was rational, if I’m being honest. It disturbed me. I don’t like emotions that I can’t trace the intellectual origins of.’

‘So then you decided to name yourself after him?’ John says. He can’t quite follow the logic, but Sherlock’s thoughts usually turn out to be more logical than they appear at first.

‘I didn’t,’ Sherlock says, scowling. ‘I found my first name in an eleventh century poem that was included in the cultural handbook. I’m not sure I particularly like it, but it was better than the abysmal names on the list of suggestions they gave me, anyway. I picked a surname from the same source, but when I went to tell the administrators that I’d chosen they informed me that a surname had already been registered for me, so I’d only need a first name. They refused to alter it.’

‘Who would do that?’ John says, bewildered. ‘I can’t imagine that Mycroft would – I mean, I don’t
know what the point would be. But then I can’t see why anyone else would do it either, so...’

‘Quite,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ll find out eventually, but for now there are more pressing mysteries to solve.’

‘Such as your entire existence,’ John says. Sherlock smiles. ‘I’ll make an appointment with Mycroft,’ John tells him. ‘But it probably won’t be for at least a few days, maybe weeks. I imagine he’s pretty busy.’

Sherlock nods, but doesn’t look very happy about it.

‘You’re worried about what you’re going to do with yourself till you can advance with the investigation,’ John guesses.

‘Well, you’ve utterly failed to find ways to keep my mind occupied,’ Sherlock says.

‘I’m supposed to be teaching you,’ John says, not without a little desperation. ‘It’s my job. We could use a few days to focus on that.’

Sherlock flops dramatically down onto John’s bed. The sight of him there is unsettling, somehow. John manoeuvres his mind away from the danger area in the way he’s been taught and says, apologetically, ‘I know this stuff isn’t very exciting. But it’s important.’

‘I’m not altogether convinced of that,’ Sherlock says. ‘I think I’ve managed perfectly well so far without understanding all the trivialities of social etiquette.’ John opens his mouth to speak, but Sherlock continues before he can: ‘However, I recognise that I’m legally required to receive earth life instruction. If you can’t convince your headquarters that you’re succeeding in teaching me, they’ll assign me someone else. And I’ve seen what the others are like. I wouldn’t survive an entire month of cohabiting with that kind of idiocy. So I’m willing to cover the basics, at least, although I’m not promising to go any further than that. Just don’t expect me to enjoy it.’

‘Fair enough,’ John says. He’s pretty sure that none of the odd and not altogether appropriate things that just flashed through his mind are showing on his face. Although Sherlock seems to notice so much more than should be possible, so John can’t be certain.

He should not be pleased that Sherlock finds him more tolerable than Athelney Jones or Molly
Hooper. They’re both nice people, and by the sound of things they had a tough time with Sherlock. And John shouldn’t feel a little warm burst at the idea of Sherlock liking him anyway – particularly since Sherlock hasn’t even said anything about liking him, only about finding him less unbearable than his colleagues.

“What sort of tedium do you have in store for me now, then?” Sherlock says.

John considers this question. ‘We’ve been stuck in the flat too long,’ he decides. ‘I think it’s time for a field trip.’

* 

It’s only six, but it being early October, the sun is already beginning to set. The streetlamps have risen up from their slots in the street. They’re the weakest of bulbs, the standard issue government energy-saving ones used for all mass lighting, and their light is pretty dreary. They’ll brighten slowly over the next few hours, and by the time night falls altogether there’ll be just about enough light coming from them to stop people tripping over the cracks in the pavement. But for now the main sources of light are still the setting sun, the windows of the shops that are still open and the flats above them.

Down the middle of the street, between the pavement on either side, red and brown leaves cover the ground thickly, surrounding the trees that run along the sides of the road. They’re small trees; this is partly because they aren’t fully grown yet – the planting campaign only began about ten years ago, when private vehicles were finally outlawed altogether, and roads became virtually obsolete. But the trees will never get that big – small varieties were chosen because there still has to be room between the trees for government and emergency vehicles to drive through on occasion, and room above for avias to fly close enough to the ground to see where they are.

There are camera slots in the walls every ten paces on Baker Street, which is excessive even for London. Only about half of them are active during the day, but now that it’s night-time, more and more of them are starting to open. John loathed the cameras when he first got back – not that there was really that much privacy in the army, but when he was off-duty and wanted to get away, there was the whole expanse of space to fly into. He’s used to the constant surveillance again now, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to take it for granted the way he did before he left earth.

They walk to the tubes entrance and head underground. John presses the call button. ‘It’s variable,’ he explains to Sherlock. ‘In theory it isn’t supposed to take more than five minutes for a tube car to arrive, but I’ve waited up to twenty before.’
‘I have used the tubes before, you know,’ Sherlock says. ‘If you have to go around teaching me things, please at least try to keep it to what’s really necessary.’

‘You can’t have taken the tubes more than a handful of times,’ John protests. ‘I’ve been taking them for years. I do have a slightly better idea of what they’re like on average.’

‘I’ve taken the tubes eight times,’ Sherlock says. ‘I made a note of the time the car took to arrive each time and now have a working idea of the mean arrival time as well as the standard deviation from it. Admittedly eight is a small sample size, but I’m perfectly capable of adding to it without your help.’

John snorts. ‘I don’t know why I didn’t expect that,’ he says.

‘Neither do I,’ Sherlock says, and adds, as a car pulls up, ‘Two and a half minutes.’

They get in. Tube cars are supposed to hold up to six people, although in practice more than four is pretty unpleasant. This one, though, has no one already in it, and with just the two of them there’s plenty of room. They sit opposite each other on the benches and Sherlock stretches his legs out. One of them brushes one of John’s; John shifts slightly away until he’s free from the contact.

John turns to the direction pad on the wall and uses the map function to find the nearest stop to where he’s planning to take them, then inserts the correct fare. The car shoots off.

‘Time to teach tube car etiquette,’ John says, sitting back, and Sherlock gives a theatrical sigh. Undeterred, John continues, ‘There was no one in this car when it arrived here. If there is, though, you can just get in, you don’t need to ask permission. If there are lots of people you’ll all have to squish together, no avoiding it, but don’t get into one with lots of people unless you have no choice – if you think an emptier one is likely to come along, and you’re not in a hurry, wait for that. Sit as far away from other people as space allows, and don’t talk to anyone unless they talk to you first. Don’t smile at people, or look at them for longer than a second or two.’

‘I like those rules,’ Sherlock says. ‘This seems much more sensible than anything else I’ve heard. But why is it practically required to smile at people at social gatherings, even if you don’t know them, but inappropriate to smile at them in the tubes?’

‘At social gatherings you’re supposed to be getting to know people,’ John explains. ‘People you
see in the tubes you’ll probably never see again.’

‘I think I’ll apply tube car etiquette to everything,’ Sherlock says musingly.

‘Sherlock, no,’ John says. Sherlock just smirks at him. And John should press the issue, he really should, because he has no doubt that Sherlock means it. And yet Sherlock’s contempt for social norms is oddly compelling. John’s previous students were very anxious to learn how to fit in, and indeed most befores John knows are just as concerned with appropriate behaviour. Sherlock’s lack of interest is – problematic, certainly, and something John’s really supposed to be trying to fix, but, for all that, refreshing.

The tube car speeds on, and John just stares out of the window at the wires and lights flashing past, and says nothing.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: references to alcoholism/addiction

The journey takes about an hour and a half. John attempts a bit more teaching, but, when he senses that Sherlock’s patience is about to run out entirely, he stops, and lets Sherlock talk about the blood experiment and voice opinions on earth culture. Although *lets* is probably not the right word; in reality John enjoys listening to Sherlock being himself much more than trying to change him. Which is a bit of a problem, really, since changing him is John’s job.

‘How far are we going?’ Sherlock complains, sounding about five years old. ‘Are we even still in London?’

‘Technically, yes,’ John says. A voice announces: *Next stop: Babraham Road.* ‘But it’s pretty different from Baker Street. Actually, this whole area that we’re heading into – it’s called Cambridge – used to be a city in its own right. London’s really just a big compilation of a bunch of different towns and villages, it’s been eating up the area around it for hundreds of years. But over the past hundred years or so the government’s been trying to protect the countryside. When it became obvious that we were going to have to build on the green belt to support the population, they designated pockets of protected land.’

‘Are we going to one of those?’ Sherlock says, sounding less than impressed.

‘They’re beautiful,’ John insists. ‘There’s one in Cambridge that’s a few square kilometres, and it feels – really different from anything you’ll have seen before. It’s worth a visit, honestly.’

Sherlock looks unconvinced, but he doesn’t say anything else.

They get off at the next stop, and head back overground. It’s dark now, and there are no streetlamps out here. It’s even possible to pick out a couple of stars.

John leads them a little way from the tubes entrance, but, acutely aware of his limp in the cold, doesn’t go far. Then he stops, and looks around. The grass stretches out into the distance. Beside him Sherlock mutters, ‘If I’d known you meant “field trip” literally, I’d have stayed at home,’ but
John pays no attention. He closes his eyes, feels the cold air sharp against his face. There’s no one else around; trips to countryside pockets are somewhat more popular in summer, during the day.

‘What are we doing here?’ Sherlock says, irritably.

John opens his eyes. ‘I just wanted you to see something new,’ he says. ‘You should see as much of earth’s variety as possible. I wouldn’t want you thinking everywhere’s like Baker Street.’

He’s uncomfortably aware of Sherlock’s gaze on him, but he doesn’t look. After a moment Sherlock says, ‘Have you taken any other students here?’

John forces himself, then, to meet Sherlock’s eyes. ‘No,’ he says. When Sherlock doesn’t say anything, John says, awkwardly, ‘I – it’s the sort of thing I’d normally let people discover for themselves. But I knew if anyone mentioned the countryside to you they’d tell you how peaceful and calm it is, and you’d say it sounded hateful and never go near it. Which – I guess would be fine, only I thought, if you had to give it a chance, if I took you without explaining – it’s so empty out here. Hardly any security cameras. No people. I thought you might like that.’

Sherlock looks out across the grass, almost black in the darkness, rustling very softly in the slight breeze. At last he says, ‘I do like it.’

‘So do I,’ John says.

*

Day three of living with Sherlock, and twenty hours or so after John first realised his attraction to his student. The attraction is showing no signs of fading, and John is starting to get worried. In his lessons on the subject he was told that within the first twenty four hours the attraction should not necessarily have disappeared yet, but should have become milder and much more easily controllable.

_The attraction you’ll be feeling isn’t real_, he remembers his instructor saying. _You’re in constant close proximity with your students, and you feel responsible for them, protective. That can create an illusion of attraction, but since it isn’t really based on the person themselves, their characteristics, it is easily dispelled._
And of course that must be what’s going on here. Because it can’t be attraction based purely on physical appearance – John’s always found that very easy to get rid of, when it’s been necessary to do so. And he’s only known Sherlock a couple of days, and cannot possibly know enough about him to be attracted to him for who he is. Yet Sherlock’s personality is so dramatic that John can’t help but feel that he does know it, at least a little.

Thinking like that, though, is really not very helpful.

Sherlock is downstairs, reading through some files for a case Lestrade sent him earlier this morning. John has no idea when they’ll be able to get an appointment with Mycroft, so it’s a relief that Sherlock’s got something to do in the meantime.

John, meanwhile, is lying on his bed, looking at his handchip display, and wondering, not for the first time, what the hell is wrong with his sister.

*Heyy*, her latest message says, *hopeur k. did u getring valued yet? dont worry anyway no rush. Also saw ur latest profile update lol. CHARMING? also what kind of name is sherlock but mainly loling at u saying hes charming. hahahaha always thought u were kinkier than u let on into reps huh. I think u fancy him lol. So i found u a present ur welcome hahahaha lol*

The ‘present’ in question came in the form of an attachment to the message, and it’s this that John has been staring blankly at for over a minute now.

He’s seen after porn, once or twice, though he’s never sought it out. There isn’t that much of it about; it’s considered niche, a relatively unusual fetish. And it makes John uncomfortable in any case, because afters are people, and in the porn they aren’t really portrayed that way. Afters in porn are always weird, and more often than not given ridiculous bodily features. Tentacles seem to be popular, for some reason.

But now he’s staring at this stupid video Harry’s sent him, at an after man with pale skin and dark hair and high cheekbones kissing a before. They’re naked, and the after guy has three penises, all of them improbably large. John knows very little about after biology, particularly in relation to sex, but he very much doubts that it’s all that different from anyone else’s. So this video is offensive, and harmful, and really stupid.

And still, he’s getting hard.
John brings his free hand down against the palm showing the video with far more force than necessary, closing the file and turning the handchip off in one movement. He gets up off the bed. A cold shower before he goes back downstairs is definitely in order.

*

By the time John arrives in the living room, he’s feeling a lot better. The shower was refreshing, and as head-clearing as he’d hoped, and later on he can send Harry a strongly-worded message. What she thinks she’s doing, interfering in his life and sending him porn, John has no idea. She doesn’t understand the responsibilities of an instructor at all – but then since when has Harry ever understood anything about any kind of responsibility?

Though it has, John realises with a pang of guilt, been an awfully long time since he’s seen her in the fleshworld. Possibly this was just her way of trying to get his attention. When he’s too cold with her for too long she does tend to resort to childish jabs, her techniques exactly the same as they were when she was twelve. And John always feels an odd mixture of irritated and just very slightly heartbroken. He resolves to message her and arrange to go out for lunch or something.

Sherlock is stretched out on the sofa, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling and apparently deep in thought.

‘You thinking about the case?’ John asks.

Focus comes back into Sherlock’s eyes. He looks over at John, returning from wherever his mind was. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Solved that ages ago. Painfully simple. Why Lestrade couldn’t manage it herself, I have no idea.’

‘Himself,’ John says.

‘What does it matter?’ Sherlock says.

‘It just does,’ John insists. ‘I know it seems stupid, but gender matters here – people get really upset sometimes if you misgender them, so just try, OK? I can write all the pronouns down for you if you want. It’s him for men, her for women, tem for non-binary-identified people and them for groups.’
Sherlock ignores this. John decides to press the point later. ‘If not the case, what is on your mind?’ he says. ‘You seemed to be considering something pretty deeply.’

‘Oh, a different problem entirely,’ Sherlock says. He pushes himself upright. ‘Nothing pressing.’

John’s about to ask further questions when Sherlock’s handchip beeps. He looks down at it, then looks up with a delighted expression that John recognises from the day before yesterday. ‘Lestrade’s got you another case already?’ he asks.

Sherlock nods, almost jumping to his feet. ‘Someone called in just now. Not murder, wouldn’t usually be Lestrade’s division, but he thinks someone might try for murder soon. Wouldn’t say any more than that.’

‘Lestrade’s division is – homicide related e-crime?’ John guesses. It’s an expression he’s heard before, in a police drama or something, and it seems to fit.

‘Yes, exactly,’ Sherlock says. ‘He works alongside another D.I., Tobias Gregson, who looks into ordinary fleshworld murders, but if there’s an online angle Lestrade’s responsible for that. So much potential when it comes to using the internet for violence. People don’t seem to be anywhere near as creative as they might be, though that last case was quite interesting. Perhaps there’ll be some imagination at work here, too.’

‘You could at least pretend to be a bit less thrilled,’ John says, but he can’t help smiling. Sherlock seems more alive now, more himself, thrumming with energy, and it’s an appealing look on him. This, John thinks, is how Sherlock is supposed to be, his natural state.

‘Lestrade’s going to pick us up in a police avia and take us to interview the victim, or potential victim,’ Sherlock says. ‘Apparently we can’t interview him online because he’d find it traumatic.’

There’s disdain in Sherlock’s voice for what he apparently sees as a weakness, and one that’s causing him personal inconvenience at that, but John’s focus is limited to one word. ‘Us?’ he says. ‘You want me along again?’

‘As my E.L.I.,’ Sherlock says, ‘you are supposed to be around me the majority of the time, aren’t you? To explain the norms around – whatever comes up.’
‘I’m not sure how much normal we’re likely to encounter at a crime scene.’

‘We aren’t going to a crime scene, we’re interviewing someone,’ Sherlock says. ‘Is it really that hard to digest simple information? But you aren’t under any obligation to come, obviously.’

If John didn’t know better, he’d think Sherlock was hurt at the idea of John not wanting to accompany him, but that seems unlikely. ‘I’m definitely coming,’ he says. ‘I haven’t seen anywhere near enough trouble yet.’

Sherlock smiles a little bit, and John remembers his confidence last time he invited John along on a case, his evident certainty that John wouldn’t be able to resist the lure of mayhem and mystery and danger. That’s what that hurt look was about, John realises: for a moment just now, Sherlock was faced with the possibility that he might have been wrong. A possibility, John is sure, that Sherlock finds too horrible to contemplate.

‘Let’s see what Lestrade can provide for us, then,’ Sherlock says, and sweeps towards the door. John almost forgets his cane again, reaching the door without limping, but Sherlock tosses it to him with an opaque look. Probably for the best; it wouldn’t have been good if the limp had suddenly reasserted itself kilometres from home and John hadn’t had it. That doesn’t stop him feeling slightly irritated, but he puts it out of his mind, and heads towards the police avia outside.

*

When they get into the avia the driver – a slightly tired-looking man with grey hair whom John assumes to be D.I. Lestrade – turns round and frowns at John. ‘Er,’ he says.

‘Sherlock didn’t tell you,’ John realises. He gives Sherlock an accusing look.

‘Slipped my mind,’ Sherlock says. ‘This is my E.L.I., John Watson.’

‘I’m meant to go around with him and teach him how to be polite and things,’ John says.

‘Ah,’ Lestrade says. It occurs to John that Lestrade has spent some time talking to Sherlock over the past couple of days, and might reasonably be thinking that John isn’t doing a very good job so far. But if he is thinking that, he doesn’t say anything about it.
‘You won’t even know I’m here,’ John promises, sitting back to illustrate his point.

The avia takes off. John expects a jolt, but doesn’t feel much of anything. Sherlock says, ‘So, what exactly is this case? Is someone actually in danger of death or am I wasting my time?’

‘Sherlock –’ John says.

‘Fine, fine, not good, I know,’ Sherlock says. ‘Lestrade?’

‘We’re going to visit a man called Vic Hatherley,’ Lestrade says. ‘An online maintenance worker. I’ll let him tell you the details of his story himself, but essentially, he lost a thumb online and then came offline to find that he’d lost it in the fleshworld too.’

‘So someone came and chopped it off while he was online?’ John says, intrigued enough by the story to momentarily forget his promise to be invisible.

Lestrade doesn’t seem to mind, though. ‘Possibly, but there are complications,’ he says. ‘The only person in the house was his girlfriend; no one else has a key and there’s no sign of forced entry. Why would she want to sever his thumb? And then there’s the fact that while he was online he experienced an animation of a cleaver chopping his thumb off – why bother with that?’

John glances at Sherlock; his eyes are bright and he’s sitting up very straight. ‘I’m sure you can drive faster than this, Lestrade,’ he says.

Lestrade shakes his head, but the avia does accelerate very slightly. John looks out of the window, unable to suppress some excitement of his own. He watches the trees and buildings shooting past underneath them, and finds himself acutely missing the much faster flights through space that were his life for fifteen years.

Then: ‘We’re here,’ Lestrade says, beginning to descend slowly. ‘He’s expecting us. Or some of us, anyway.’ He glances at John.

‘John comes in with me,’ Sherlock says, firmly.
‘Oh, fine,’ Lestrade says, landing gently, with nothing more than a slight clunk and a rocking sensation. ‘Let’s go in.’

Lestrade rings the doorbell, and is answered by a man of about twenty five who is presumably Hatherley. The man confirms this a moment later, and clearly expects John and Sherlock to introduce themselves in turn.

Lestrade, however, does that for them, evidently concerned over what Sherlock might say. ‘This is Sherlock Holmes and John Watson,’ he says. ‘They’re consulting on the case. You don’t object to repeating your story to them?’

‘Not at all,’ Hatherley says with a slightly curious glance at them. ‘Come on in.’

They sit down in Hatherley’s living room and he says, ‘Should I just – launch right into it?’

‘Go ahead,’ Lestrade says.

Hatherley sits back in his chair and stretches out his hands. Looking closely, John can see the slight differences between his left thumb and his right, and the way the latter doesn’t fit in quite as well with his hand as the former. Apparently the doctors didn’t manage to save Hatherley’s own thumb, and had to give him a donated one. Which is odd. Unless it took days to get to the hospital, that shouldn’t have happened.

Sherlock’s looking too. But he doesn’t say anything, presumably waiting to hear Hatherley’s story first.

‘So, day before yesterday I got a message left on my work profile from someone called Lysander Stark offering me a job. I was actually already on a three week job –’


‘Does it matter?’ Hatherley says, looking surprised.
‘Don’t know what matters at this stage,’ Sherlock says. ‘What was it?’

‘Oh, OK,’ Hatherley says. ‘I was working for the Bank of England, in the banknote production section. They’ve got a website which organises the whole system and it was glitchy. It’s a bit of a weird job actually, because security’s so tight that they don’t let you work from home; no one can access the site except actually from within the building itself. You have to use chips and screens in the desks there, you can’t use a handchip. So that’s why I agreed to speak to Stark, because I thought being able to do some extra stuff at home, earn a bit of additional money at the weekend, could be useful. I wasn’t really planning to take the job, though; I’m doing OK at the moment and I didn’t need the extra money. But I thought I’d look into it, just in case the pay was really good.’

‘And?’ Sherlock says.

‘Well, it was really good,’ Hatherley says. ‘Amazing, in fact. He just wanted me to fix one fairly simple error on a website his small new company uses for accounting, and he was paying an amount you’d expect to get for something complex and long-term. He paid me straight away, as well. I thought it was weird, but I couldn’t really bring myself to say no to something that good, even if I didn’t really trust him.’

Sherlock is almost certainly about to mutter ‘idiot’ just a little too loudly, so John gives him a pre-emptive elbow to the side. Sherlock gives John a look that’s first indignant, and then oddly considering. John looks away.

Hatherley glances at them, looking slightly confused, but then continues. ‘I logged in with the username he’d given me yesterday evening, after I got home from the Bank of England. I’d assumed that I’d either just be browsing or at most have an icon, but it turned out to be a slow-load site where I had an avatar. That seemed odd and unnecessary, but I waited the full twenty minutes it took for the handchip to scan me and create a three dimensional avatar, and then I started trying to work out what was causing the problems with the site. I’d barely started when this ridiculous animated cleaver appeared and chopped off my avatar’s thumb.’

Sherlock smiles. John can’t really blame him; it’s an intriguing story, and he’s been so desperate for an interesting case. Still, it’s the sort of reaction John really ought to discourage. At least Hatherley seems caught up enough in telling his story that he hasn’t noticed.

‘I felt a bit of pain, more than you normally would from online placebo effect, and it went on a lot longer than it normally does as well. But I didn’t think much of it. I just figured it must be part of the virus that was causing the site problems – that some disgruntled employee had messed around with the site and created this animation as a crude way of scaring off people who tried to fix it. I just kept working, I sorted out the problem, and then I logged off and –’ He swallows. ‘And my thumb was – well – gone. And there was blood –’
He’s starting to look pale. ‘That’s fine,’ John says quickly. ‘We understand.’

‘According to Lestrade,’ Sherlock says, ‘the only person in the house was your girlfriend. What’s her name?’

‘Elise Ferguson,’ Hatherley says. ‘But she didn’t have anything to do with this.’

‘You don’t know that,’ Sherlock says. ‘On the face of it, no one else appears to have access. Did she bring you any kind of food or drink while you were working?’

‘Tea,’ Hatherley says. ‘Why?’

‘You don’t notice much that happens in the fleshworld while online,’ Sherlock says, ‘but you’d notice losing a thumb. The animation was presumably meant to take care of that, since you’d assume any pain you felt was placebo effect. But pain that intense would never pass for psychosomatic.’

John shifts slightly; he knows very well how intense psychosomatic pain can be. But that’s not relevant; Sherlock’s talking about a completely different context here.

‘What are you saying?’ Hatherley demands.

‘Painkillers,’ Sherlock says. ‘They wouldn’t need to be strong, over-the-counter would do. Just enough to dull the pain to the point where it could pass for something happening in your head in response to an image. She could easily have dissolved them in your tea. The question is, why would she want your thumb? Whoever severed it clearly wanted the digit itself – you’ve had a donated one attached instead of the hospital reattaching your own, so yours must not have been available. Presumably when you came offline it simply wasn’t there? Whoever removed it took it away. Tricking you into believing nothing had really happened gave them time to do that. And, if your girlfriend was responsible, meant that you wouldn’t realise it was her.’

‘It wasn’t her,’ Hatherley says, face getting redder. ‘I trust her completely.’

‘It was her,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s the only possible solution.’
'Listen here –' Hatherley says, getting to his feet.

John thinks fast. ‘She probably didn’t know what she was doing,’ he says. Both Hatherley and Sherlock turn to look at him. ‘I mean, if she put something in your tea, Mr. Hatherley, she might have thought it was harmless. Sorry, I’m not expressing this very well – I mean somebody might have given her some special brand of sugar or something as a present, and she might have just dropped it in there.’

Sherlock opens his mouth to say something, presumably pointing out that, while drugging the tea might have been a mistake, the thumb-severing and fake job and cleaver animation must have been both deliberate and premeditated. John glares hard, and, somewhat to his amazement, Sherlock’s mouth shuts again. John goes on, ‘And if that’s true – I mean, it’s just a theory, but – she could be in danger. Whoever gave her the sugar, or whatever it was, might think she’s a liability. We might want to check up on her.’

It’s a thin story, but thankfully Hatherley seems too worried to question it. ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ he says. ‘Can you – could the police –’ he breaks off.

‘Sherlock and I will tail her for today,’ John promises. ‘Make sure she’s all right. Can you tell me where she’ll be now?’

‘Of course,’ Hatherley says. ‘At work, that’s – she runs a café, if you give me your handchip i.d. I’ll message you the address. Her shift finishes at one thirty, you should be able to make it if you’re quick.’

This taken care of, Hatherley adds, ‘Thank you so much.’

‘No problem,’ John says. ‘We’ll get onto that now.’ And he, Lestrade and Sherlock walk out.

Outside the house, Sherlock gives him a long stare. ‘You knew I’d want to tail her,’ he says.

John shrugs. ‘Stood to reason. I could see you were suspicious of her, and you’re right, not much else makes sense. I saw Hatherley was going to cause trouble, so I suddenly thought I could try and calm him down and get you an easy excuse to track his girlfriend as well.’
Sherlock looks—almost shocked. He makes an odd gesture with his hands.

‘Are you trying to swear at me?’ John asks, puzzled.

‘No—’ Sherlock says. He looks somewhat frustrated. ‘No, I was trying to convey—don’t you find words a clumsy method of communication sometimes?’

‘Frequently,’ John says, and of course he should have thought of that—afters, while they do, without exception, always speak the language of wherever they turn up fluently, frequently seem to have moments of frustration with language, moments when they can’t quite get their meaning across. Of course, before have those too, but afters seem to find it more irritating, seem sometimes even anxious at the difficulties that they have, and it seems to happen more often for them too.

John goes on, ‘Words are pretty clumsy, but they’re the best we’ve got.’

‘I suppose so,’ Sherlock says. He makes another abortive hand gesture. ‘You’d think imagery—anyhow, it doesn’t matter. I meant to say—your methods in talking to Hatherley were—not hopeless.’

That’s about as good a compliment as John’s got from Sherlock yet. Lestrade looks astonished. John feels warmth spreading through him, and hastily moves on. ‘I don’t know why Ferguson would want her boyfriend’s thumb, though,’ he says.

‘If she’s planning to kill him,’ Lestrade says, ‘it could be a kind of trophy. She might be an undetected serial killer. Though admittedly they don’t generally take trophies before they murder people.’

‘How dramatic, Lestrade,’ Sherlock says. ‘It seems to me that there’s a much more likely solution.’

‘And that would be?’ Lestrade says.

‘No time now, we need to get on if we’re going to catch Ferguson before she leaves,’ Sherlock says. ‘Lestrade, ask Hatherley about the security system at the Bank of England.’

He strides off, and John is forced to run after him before he can hear Lestrade’s reply.
John and Sherlock are crouched outside the café Elise Ferguson works at. She’s due out in ten
minutes.

‘Do you think the Bank of England has a thumbprint security system?’ John whispers.

Sherlock gives him a look that’s almost admiring. ‘Yes, I do,’ he says. ‘Lestrade should be able to
let us know for certain later. But it would start to explain things, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘But why would she want to get into the Bank of England?’

‘Hatherley’s job was in banknote production, remember,’ Sherlock says. ‘But I’m hoping that
trailing Ferguson should give us a bit more data.’

John wants to ask more questions, even if it does lead to Sherlock thinking he’s an idiot, but then
Sherlock puts a finger over his lips, and every thought in his head is obliterated.

His thought processes are so scrambled that it takes him a good couple of seconds to realise why
Sherlock’s done this: a tall woman with curly brown hair has just exited the building. From the
case files they looked at on Sherlock’s handchip on the way here, John is able to recognise her as
Ferguson.

Following her is easy enough until she goes down into the tubes. At that point, there’s nothing for
it but to hurry down after her and get into the same tube car as she does. Fortunately it’s a fairly
busy time, with people who work half-day shifts coming home and others venturing out for lunch,
so it won’t seem too odd that they’ve chosen to share a car.

John sits very still, staring at the tunnel walls, and not thinking about either the warmth of
Sherlock’s leg where it’s pressed up against John’s, or the cool pressure of his finger across John’s
mouth, millimetres from John’s tongue. John could have engulfed it with barely a movement. But
no, no, those thoughts are so far beyond unhelpful – he forces his mind to turn to the unpleasant
task of planning what he’ll say to Harry when he messages her later. Or perhaps he should ring her,
considering how long it’s been since they’ve spoken.

They get off at the same stop as Ferguson but walk in the opposite direction to her, hoping to allay
any suspicions she might have that way. As soon as she rounds a corner, they turn round, at Sherlock’s direction, and walk very briskly back. Sherlock peers round the corner and waits till she’s a safe distance away before proceeding after her again.

They trail her like this all the way to a nondescript looking block of flats. She rings the bell for number 6, and is buzzed in.

‘Now what?’ John says.

Sherlock stands back and surveys the building thoughtfully. ‘I think I can climb up the balconies,’ he says.

John looks up at the rows of tiny balconies, mostly dotted with insipid-looking pot plants. ‘I can’t,’ he says.

Sherlock’s still looking up, considering. He doesn’t say anything in response to John’s point, just reaches up to grab hold of the rails of the first floor balcony, and manages to hoist himself up. If anyone happened to be looking out of the ground floor window, they’d see Sherlock’s long legs vanishing upwards past them, but thankfully no one seems to be in.

‘Right,’ John says. ‘I’ll just wait here, then.’

Sherlock still doesn’t say anything. He’s got his hands round the rail of the second floor balcony now, and is pulling himself upwards again. ‘I’ll keep watch,’ John calls up after him, and again gets no reply.

John’s leg twinges. He leans on his cane, and looks all around him, keeping a lookout for anyone else coming up and ringing the buzzer for number six. Though really what he’s going to do if anyone does – call up to Sherlock, eavesdropping on the balcony? That would just alert people to his presence.

He considers going home, but he thinks of the laser hidden in his handchip, and what happened last time Sherlock ran off on a case alone. No, John had better stay here, however useless he is, just in case Sherlock needs him.

He shrinks back into the shadow of the first floor balcony, and waits.
John waits half an hour. Then he suddenly hears a sound above, and then another, and then Sherlock’s dropping down beside him.

‘Did you find anything out?’ John asks.

‘They heard someone outside,’ Sherlock says. ‘I got down in time – they’re coming, though. Using the stairs. We have to go.’

Sherlock starts running, and John runs after him. He doesn’t, in this moment, need the cane, and it’s slowing him down, but he can’t afford to leave it when he knows the limp will be back again later. But even with that weight holding him back, and his shorter legs, he’s almost keeping pace with Sherlock.

They run through a maze of alleyways, turning into sidestreets at random – or perhaps Sherlock knows exactly where he’s going, John wouldn’t be surprised – and keep running long after the sound of footsteps coming after them has faded to nothing. Eventually they get to a main road, and Sherlock stops and leans back against a wall, gasping for breath. John follows suit, but has to query: ‘Sure we’re safe?’

‘They never saw either of us,’ Sherlock says, between heavy gulps of air. ‘Just heard there was someone. It could be – anyone on this street.’

‘Breathing might be – a bit of a giveaway,’ John points out.

‘They gave up ages ago anyway,’ Sherlock says dismissively, or as dismissively as he can while out of breath.

‘Why’d we keep running then?’ John says.
'Enjoying myself,' Sherlock says with a grin. ‘Weren’t you?’

John grins back, wide and unmuted, as an answer. When he’s got his breath back he asks, ‘So what did you hear?’

Sherlock looks pleased with himself. ‘It was a gang meeting,’ he says. ‘Specifically, a gang of forgers.’

‘Oh,’ John says, starting to see. ‘And Ferguson –’

‘She told them that they now had access to a thumb with a print approved for entry to the note production area,’ he says. ‘They were talking about what they’d do with some information when they got it. It appears that they want to study the banknote printing process up close so that they can duplicate it as closely as possible, and they needed a thumbprint that could get them access to the rooms where it happens.’

‘Ah,’ John says. His heart rate’s slowing down now. He’s increasingly aware of Sherlock’s proximity, of the adrenaline singing in both their veins. ‘You know,’ he says, because he has to say something, ‘we didn’t really have to tail her ourselves. I’m sure Lestrade could have got access to the security cameras around where she works. We’d have seen if she went anywhere suspicious in the last few days.’

‘No,’ Sherlock says, ‘According to the case files, Lestrade already examined the camera footage. For the past two weeks, every time Ferguson left work, she just so happened to take a route which avoided all the cameras – it’s not an area with that many of them, only about one per street, and she seems to have passed the ones on the nearby streets at exactly the same time as large groups of other people, and then disappeared down side streets. It happened too consistently to be a coincidence, so as soon as I read the case files I knew for certain that she was up to something, but not what.’

‘But you only read the case files in the tubes,’ John says. ‘After you’d decided to follow her.’

Sherlock smiles, the smile John is beginning to recognise as meaning well done John, you’re being slightly less idiotic than you normally are. John deeply resents how flattered and warm it makes him feel. ‘Well,’ Sherlock says, ‘you tell me how you’d rather spend an afternoon: going through hours upon hours of camera footage, or following suspects and being chased down mazes of alleyways.’
John can’t help but laugh. ‘I think some people would prefer the former,’ he says.

‘Quite possibly,’ Sherlock says, ‘but those people aren’t represented here, are they?’

There’s something slightly heated in his gaze. John fixes his eyes on a point over Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘Perhaps not,’ he says. ‘What now?’

‘Now we get dinner,’ Sherlock says. ‘You must be hungry. I am too, come to think of it. And then we’re going to use Lestrade’s police database – the idiot keeps his password stored in a file on his handchip, it was easy to get – to look at records of missing children from about 2090 to the present.’

‘You’re back to investigating the afters,’ John says. ‘But that – it sounds like what you’re looking into is...awfully close to what some of the conspiracy theorists think. Also, stealing passwords –’

‘You used Stamford’s,’ Sherlock says.

‘Yes, but I –’

‘Don’t be tedious,’ Sherlock says. ‘As for conspiracy theories – as I’ve said before, it’s too early in the investigation to rule anything out. But this is only one of several lines I want to look into. Time travel actually seems the most promising, but that’s more difficult to investigate. Missing children is the most straightforward starting point.’

‘Fair enough,’ John says. ‘So, I guess now that you’ve solved the Hatherley case –’

‘Oh, no, I haven’t,’ Sherlock says.

‘Well, I suppose there are a couple of loose ends –’

‘More than that,’ Sherlock says. ‘A huge organisation like the Bank of England would hardly – no, you don’t see it, do you? Never mind. I’ll need to speak to Hatherley again tomorrow, preferably
John isn’t going to get anything else out of Sherlock now, so he just shrugs. He ought to say something else about the password theft, because that really isn’t OK, but then he pushes himself away from the wall and is met with a violent stab of pain in his leg. He gasps, and fumbles with his cane, finally managing to get it planted on the ground to lean on.

When the pain is this bad it’s hard to notice much else, but he’s vaguely aware of Sherlock leaning forward, as if to study it, and has to fight off an urge to shove him out of the way. That would be unreasonable and unfair. Being angry with Sherlock for going off to climb balconies without John isn’t fair either. None of this is Sherlock’s fault, and John shouldn’t resent being left so much. It was the only practical thing to do. And if Sherlock had apologised, and soothed him, and given him fake reassurance about how John really was useful – well, John would have hated that even more, wouldn’t he?

John isn’t sure how long he stands there, a mass of pain and undirected rage, but eventually he manages to straighten up. ‘Sorry about that,’ he says, voice even and level as ever, and that at least is one small thing he can be proud of. ‘Acts up in the cold sometimes, and I don’t expect all the running helped.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Sherlock says. ‘The running helped a great deal.’

A little bit of the anger manages to escape. ‘I think I know more about it than you do, Sherlock,’ he says.

‘You’re wrong there too,’ Sherlock says, maddeningly unruffled. ‘Anywhere good for dinner around here?’

*  

They have dinner in a small underground restaurant with walls so thin that John can hear tube cars going by in the tunnel that must run right past their table. It’s an oddly soothing sound, reminding him somehow of mess dinners up on the starline, where the sound of ships taking off and landing at the spaceport next door was a constant background noise.

The food was awful, but it didn’t take long to get used to it, and he and Bill and Mary used to huddle at the end of the table and giggle about horrifying things. They were an odd mixed group –
John remembers Mary saying, one of the few times they all managed to get leave at the same time and wound up in a pub together to celebrate as soon as they hit earth, *a medic, a technician and a scout all walk into a bar, sounds like the start of a bad joke.*

As a medic John had kept odd hours, needed for a huge variety of different roles. Sometimes he was in the hospital on the base planet – that was the closest he got to routine medical work, although every now and then the Gliesans would attempt a raid on the base, often targeting the hospital first, and then he’d always be the first to volunteer to get outside and start shooting. Sometimes he flew with Mary; scouting was dangerous, flying behind enemy lines engendering almost perpetual injury, making a personal medic a necessity for scouts. Those were the best times – he hated seeing her in pain, but in between her constant injuries she’d laugh and make faces at aliens who couldn’t see her. She was always good company.

He snaps out of it with a start, realising he’s been miles away and that his food is untouched, but Sherlock doesn’t comment. He’s actually surprisingly relaxing company that way – when he’s not demanding to be entertained and kept from boredom, he can go for a long time without talking, and silences between them never seem to John to be awkward.

‘Sorry,’ John says. ‘I was just – thinking.’

Sherlock’s eyes narrow in a now familiar expression. ‘You started the first time a tube car went by,’ he says. ‘It was a fairly quiet sound, and you don’t startle particularly easily. The most likely explanation is that it reminded you of something. Something significant enough to cause a detectable physical reaction.’

‘Spaceships,’ John says.

This is plenty for Sherlock to go on. He gets the rest of the way by himself: ‘You were mentally reminiscing about meals in the army,’ he says. ‘And the people you had them with, I expect.’

‘Bill Murray and Mary Morstan,’ John says. ‘They were my best friends out there. But I can’t – contact’s hard. The outer starline isn’t exactly close.’

‘You miss them,’ Sherlock says.

‘Yeah,’ John says, and Sherlock says nothing else, doesn’t press for details. He’s probably working them all out in his head anyway, but somehow John doesn’t mind that.
When they get home, Sherlock gets a handchip message which flashes up on the viewing screen.

*If you’d stayed five seconds I could have told you that I already asked Hatherley for info on the BoE security system. Amazingly enough the idea did occur to me as well. But he said he didn’t know what the full system was so I was waiting for a colleague to get back to me on that. The area where banknotes are printed is as I assume you were thinking protected by a thumbprint system. Hatherley says his thumbprint was taken when he first started working there and will be erased from the system when he finishes the job. As well as thumbprints they have a retina scanner but – won’t bore you with the details but those can be fooled though it takes quite sophisticated tech. Thumbprints are actually much harder to fake. What did you find out?*

Sherlock sits down to reply. John goes to his room – time to stop putting off the task of ringing Harry.

She picks up almost immediately, and also appears on the screen, which is a good sign; if she were drunk she’d almost certainly turn off video in an attempt to hide it. How she can think, after all these years, that he can’t tell – but anyway, she isn’t drunk now. That’s good. Even if does deprive him of an excuse not to talk to her.

‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Been a while since we spoke, I thought I’d check in.’

‘It has,’ she says, and then there’s a long, uncomfortable silence.

‘Please don’t send me porn,’ John says, eventually.

‘Oh, God,’ she says. ‘Sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘Not much, I expect,’ John says. But no, he really doesn’t have the energy for a fight with Harry. Fighting with her when she’s sober is pointless in any case because she’ll just agree with everything he says, apologise for getting drunk, and then proceed not to change her behaviour at all. (Fighting with her when she’s drunk is, obviously, even more pointless.) He hastily amends, ‘Anyway, I wasn’t really calling about that, just wanted to, uh, let you know. Not to do that. Um, what I wanted to ask was – haven’t seen you in the fleshworld in forever. Do you want to get coffee or something sometime?’
‘That’d be great!’ Harry says. Her enthusiasm, which he knows is entirely genuine, makes his gut twist. ‘I’ll check my diary. Just message me dates you can do and I’ll let you know.’

‘Will do,’ John says. ‘See you soon.’

‘See you!’ Harry says brightly, and John hangs up.

He lies back on his bed, feeling oddly drained. He’s got no right to complain, really: the conversation went pretty much perfectly, by his and Harry’s standards. She was sober, and cooperative and friendly. John even got an apology.

But once, years and years ago now, they’d had a relationship that went beyond that. Once seeing her had been something he enjoyed, rather than something horrible that it was his duty to get through. In a way, the good conversations are worse than the bad, because they just make John think of everything they’re not.

He messages Harry a couple of dates, and she messages back suggesting lunch early next week, which he agrees to.

It occurs to him that the porn Harry sent him is still saved on his handchip, and that it’s going to be awkward if Sherlock somehow winds up seeing it, so he opens it up again in order to delete it.

He can’t help watching a minute or two of it first, intrigued by the sheer idiocy of the whole thing. And yet it has its moments. When the offensively caricatured bodily features of the after aren’t visible, when the camera shows the scene from behind his head. There’s something compelling about the way he starts off reserved, even withdrawn, and becomes increasingly vocal and appreciative as it goes on, deep voice letting out moans and bitten-off swearing.

John means to close it, he does. But then somehow his hand is moving, not towards the screen, but past it, and lower still. His eyes close.

_I can’t do this_, he thinks. He marshals up all the good reasons why he can’t, thinks of how messed up this is. But his eyes don’t leave the screen, and his hand seems to have made itself into a fist against all instruction from the brain.
He stares down at the screen, and then at his trousers, his wrist disappearing inside them. *This is nothing to do with Sherlock*, he tells himself, as his hand starts to move. *Just exploring sexuality. Trying things. Healthy. It’s fine. Not about Sherlock at all.*

He focuses on the image and the sound of the after in the video, the back of his head, hair dark against his skin, voice unsteady. He doesn’t let anything or anyone else into his head. Just that image, faceless, safe. Maybe the person in the image shares a few features with – but thousands of people have those features, that’s nothing. That’s fine.

‘John!’ Sherlock calls from downstairs, and the shouted word blasts into the careful image. The imaginary camera angle swerves, falls apart. Sherlock’s face is there, full lips shaping John’s name. John comes with a small gasp, and sits up.

*Fuck, he thinks. Fuck, this isn’t – what can I –*

‘John, I need you!’ Sherlock calls. And John knows that what Sherlock ‘needs’ is for John to pass him something, or make him tea, or do some other task that Sherlock could very well do himself. And yet John’s already getting to his feet.

He changes underwear and then goes to the toilet to wash his hands. The toilet is downstairs, and he’s very conscious of having to walk past Sherlock’s back to get there. It may very well be obvious to Sherlock what John’s been doing. But surely even Sherlock won’t be able to tell what he’s been thinking?

‘What do you want?’ John asks when he comes back from the bathroom.

Sherlock says, ‘I’ve sent two web addresses to your handchip. We need to look at the visual descriptions and photographs of missing children between the years I’ve noted and at the descriptions and photos of reps that have arrived. I’ll do A-M, you do N-Z.’

And John – John is just utterly happy, because Sherlock isn’t treating him like furniture or a servant, or asking him to do menial tasks, he’s treating him more like – well, a colleague.

*What I actually am*, John reminds himself, *is a teacher.* But that’s hard to remember around a man who radiates a constant belief that he knows everything.
John sits down on the sofa and opens up the websites, thinking: *I am really fucked, aren’t I?*

*

John and Sherlock go through missing children reports until midnight, at which point John goes to bed and Sherlock keeps going. It’s already clear from what they’ve done so far, though, that the results aren’t going to be very conclusive. There are plenty of afters whose features do match those of children that have disappeared, but whether they’re actually the same people is impossible to tell. And of course Sherlock only has access to the UK records, which makes their data pretty limited.

When John gets up the next morning he finds that Sherlock has gone through all of the records overnight and hasn’t slept at all. He doesn’t seem lethargic, though – quite the reverse; there’s a tense energy to his movements, and he seems intensely wound up.

‘We’re going to talk to Hatherley and Ferguson this morning,’ he says, when he sees John.

‘Good morning,’ John says, pointedly.

‘Greetings before any actual content is allowed to enter the conversation,’ Sherlock says, in apparently reply. ‘Yes, I’ve noticed that’s a feature of interaction here.’ He’s shifting slightly on the balls of his feet, a mass of pent-up motion.

‘It’s polite,’ John says. ‘It doesn’t mean much, but it just – I suppose it’s a way of recognising the person you’re greeting as a human being.’

‘Perhaps you shouldn’t say it to me, then,’ Sherlock says, ‘since you can’t be certain that I’m human.’

John opens his mouth to speak even though he doesn’t know what he’s going to say, but Sherlock makes a sweeping hand gesture, his fingers brushing dangerously close to John’s mouth. John takes a slight step back.

‘You rely on language so much,’ Sherlock says. ‘It just seems imbecilic to waste it. Anyway, never mind that. We need to go to visit our maintenance worker. As well as finishing looking through the missing children reports, last night I also managed to find some additional interesting information.’
'Which was?' John says.

‘Hatherley’s medical records,’ Sherlock says. ‘And the fact that a senior member of the Bank of England printing team died in an avia accident two weeks ago,’

John feels stupid, as usual. ‘So – what – you think he was killed?’ he says. ‘Or – I don’t see how it fits in.’

‘Of course you don’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘Shall we go?’

It isn’t actually a question, because Sherlock starts walking towards the door while speaking. John is very glad he decided to get dressed before coming downstairs, since otherwise he’d be facing a choice between being left behind and going out in his pyjamas. He has a horrible feeling he’d have picked the latter.

*

The scene is almost an exact replica of the one that took place the day before: Hatherley, John and Sherlock sitting down and Lestrade electing to stand and look official. The only difference is that Ferguson has joined them this time, and has also chosen to stand on the grounds that she’ll need to head off to work in a minute.

‘We tailed you yesterday, Ms Ferguson,’ Sherlock says. As she begins an outraged reply, he goes on, ‘I also heard your conversation at the location you eventually reached, concerning accessing the printing area at the Bank of England.’

She falls silent. Then she starts shaking.

‘Elise?’ Hatherley says. ‘Is this -?’ He breaks off, looking pained.

‘You don’t understand,’ she whispers. ‘I did it for you.’
‘You did –‘ again, he seems unable to finish the sentence.

‘They were going to kill you,’ she says, brokenly. ‘They – they came up to me after you started working at the bank and they said – they said they could just kill you and take it – the, the thumb, I mean. But they said they’d rather not and – murder – was something they preferred to avoid and if I’d just – take it for them – they wouldn’t have to –‘ she stops, tears beginning to seep from her eyes.

Hatherley looks slightly tearful too. ‘You should have told me,’ he says.

‘I was going to,’ she says. ‘I was, I promise.’ She rubs ineffectually at her eyes. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘You did it to save my life,’ Hatherley says. ‘I – I understand.’

At this, Ferguson’s quiet weeping becomes full on sobbing, and she clutches at Hatherley.

‘One last thing,’ Sherlock says, his quiet, measured tones breaking through all the noise. ‘I had a look at your medical records last night, Mr. Hatherley.’

He looks up from comforting Ferguson. ‘My – medical records? How did you get them?’

‘The security was unimpressive,’ Sherlock says. ‘But the records were very interesting. They included the identity of the original owner of your new thumb.’

Hatherley frowns. ‘I don’t even know who that is,’ he says. ‘They just picked.’

‘Stupid lie to tell,’ Sherlock says. ‘The records also show that you claimed to have very specific requirements and rejected the first two donated thumbs you were offered.’

‘I was on some pretty heavy duty painkillers at the time,’ Hatherley admits, with a slight smile. ‘I can’t promise my memory’s very accurate.’

‘You weren’t offered the job at the Bank of England,’ Sherlock says. ‘You wrote in asking for it,
offering to work for much lower wages than would usually be expected and stipulating that it was vital you started immediately. You claimed you were badly in need of work – any work, at any wages. I’ve seen all the transcripts. This happened just under two weeks ago, a day after the death of a member of the money printing team.’

‘Are you accusing me of murder?’ Hatherley says. ‘You think I killed someone to get a job, or – no, I have no idea what you’re driving at. May I remind you that I’m the victim here?’

‘You made an impressive sacrifice, certainly,’ Sherlock says. ‘Worth it for the money, I suppose.’

‘Sherlock,’ Lestrade says. ‘What exactly –‘

‘I’m not accusing you of murder,’ Sherlock says. ‘Just fraud and forgery. The printing team member died in a genuine accident. A gang of forgers, on hearing about this, made enquiries and discovered that he was not only on the organ donors’ list but had donated his entire body to be used by hospitals for study or donation purposes as they saw fit. The Bank of England, apparently, didn’t think to remove his security clearance. I should think they would have eventually, but the bureaucracy I imagine takes a while. And the forgers’ leader –’ he nods at Ferguson, who’s looking shocked – ‘came up with a very clever way to use the situation to their advantage.’

‘This is absurd,’ Ferguson says, her voice still shaking slightly.

Sherlock ignores her. ‘You volunteered,’ he says to Hatherley. ‘You thought you had the closest physical match to the dead man and would be the one most likely to be able to acquire the donated thumb. And your day job as a maintenance worker provided an easy way to get access to the Bank of England building. A huge organisation like the Bank of England would never give temporary staff access to their really secure areas – which is why I was certain that, despite how it looked, the forgers couldn’t really be after your thumbprint – but the job got you part of the way there. All you had to do after that was have your girlfriend remove your thumb and be rushed to hospital for a replacement. She was prepared to take the blame if necessary, with a sob story you planned out together. The gang would have disappeared; she’d have got a highly reduced sentence for acting under duress, if she went to jail at all, and if she did you’d have had the money waiting for her when she got out.’

‘You can’t prove any of this,’ Hatherley says.

‘You faked your medical records to convince the doctors who treated you to give you the right thumb,’ Sherlock says. ‘If you know what you’re looking for, the forgery is obvious. You’re going to have trouble explaining that.’
‘Fuck you,’ Hatherley says, and Sherlock smiles.

*

‘That was amazing,’ John says, beaming at Sherlock.

‘They haven’t confessed,’ Lestrade warns them. ‘And the evidence so far is almost non-existent. But thanks to you we managed to get to the gang’s headquarters and round them up before Hatherley and Ferguson could tip them off, and I’m quite hopeful that one of them will talk. And the medical records look promising. Good job.’ He pauses. ‘I don’t suppose – me and some of my team are meeting at an e-bar tonight. Do you two want to join us?’

‘Yeah, OK, I’ll be there,’ John says, before Sherlock can express disgust at the whole notion. John has just about no social life, and he isn’t about to turn down the opportunity for a night out in favour of sitting at home agonising over being attracted to a student.

‘I won’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve got work to do.’

‘Is it still OK if I come?’ John says.

‘Of course!’ Lestrade says. ‘I’ll message you the web address. Oh, and off-duty, I’m Greg.’

‘Got it,’ John says. ‘See you there!’

Lestrade drops them off at Baker Street. All the way up the stairs, Sherlock continues to express his dissatisfaction at John going out, because apparently John is now vital to Sherlock’s research. John, however, holds firm. He needs a night not thinking about Sherlock, and that’s never going to happen while they’re in the same flat.

*

John likes the full-on virtual reality that slow-load sites offer, the avatars that look almost like real
people and the three-dimensional feel of the surroundings. But he’s never been convinced that they’re worth the waiting time – they often take as long as twenty minutes to start up. He supposes that travelling to a fleshworld bar could easily take as long as that, but even so.

When it finally loads John lets his handchip scan him in order to produce his avatar, and then finds himself standing in a large, bright e-bar. The fashion at the moment is for bars to be highly cluttered and dark, but this one’s affecting a retro style, with a very minimalist late 21st century look to the decoration.

Lestrade’s – Greg’s – avatar is sitting at the bar, and waves to John. ‘Over here.’ There are a couple of avatars around him, who turn out to belong to a sergeant called Sally Donovan, and another D.I., Tobias Gregson. They’re all before – unsurprising; there’s only a handful of afters in the police force. Trust can still only go so far.

Sally clearly doesn’t like Sherlock, despite having only met him twice, and John can’t help but resent her a bit for that. But she’s witty and straightforward and very hard not to like; a few drinks have him relaxing and laughing at her jokes. The pints are cheap, and their effects flicker in and out of existence; John’s always found it hard to let go and enjoy their placebo effect. He’ll take a fleshworld beer over these any day, though a lot of people swear by them – no calories, no risk to your health, and in theory the same degree of intoxication. John’s not convinced, but tonight he finds himself enjoying both the virtual pints and the company of the Met officers.

Eventually John mentions the fact that he’s an ex-soldier, and braces himself for the reaction. Tobias just nods, and Greg looks thoughtful, but Sally gets a look John’s seen before. Slightly combative, slightly curious. ‘We broke the 2113 treaty, not them,’ she says. ‘Doesn’t that bother you?’

‘The politicians who made that call had pretty good reason to believe that the Gliesans were on their way to breaking it,’ John says, the words worn and mechanical from repeated use. ‘Someone would have done it, sooner or later. Whether it was us or them first didn’t make much difference.’

‘But they’ve got a right to survive too, haven’t they?’ Sally insists.

She means more, John knows, than just that taking life away from individual Gliesan soldiers is wrong. She’s calling the whole rationale for the war into question. And she has a point. But: ‘They won’t share either,’ he says. ‘And they’d invade and wipe us out if they could, to have Nova to themselves. I saw what I was doing as – defence. Protection.’

She nods. ‘I didn’t mean to – I wasn’t getting at you,’ she says. ‘I just...find it hard to understand.'
Surely we could make space on the planet for both of us.’

John shrugs. ‘Nova’s the only habitable planet within a distance that can be travelled through particle transit,’ he says. ‘Our planet and Gliese-589-h are both hopelessly overcrowded, and Nova isn’t any bigger than either of them. The Gliesans, like us, are well on their way to destroying their own planet. Eventually – and sooner rather than later – we’re both going to have to escape. We could share Nova fine if we just wanted to settle colonies there, but to move our entire populations – resources would be stretched a long way beyond breaking point. People would starve in millions.’

‘Yeah,’ Sally says. ‘I guess – I mean, I know, I just – it seems so horrible.’

‘It is,’ John admits. He doesn’t admit that he misses being part of it like hell. That would take a lot more drinks than this.

‘Did you ever –’ Tobias says, then stops.

‘What?’ John asks.

Te looks uncomfortable. ‘I don’t want to make you feel – I mean, I guess thinking of them as people isn’t – I just, um, I was going to ask if you ever talked to one.’

‘To a Gliesan?’ John asks. Tobias nods.

This question is familiar too, and John doesn’t always choose to answer it. Tonight, though, he says: ‘Once.’

‘You speak Gliesan, then?’ Greg asks.

John shakes his head. ‘Humans can’t speak Gliesan,’ he says. ‘It’s not even a language as we’d think about it. Won’t explain, I’m too drunk and it’s too boring, but what I do speak a bit of is literated Gliesan. Pointless language really. Means nothing to them or to us, but it’s a necessary halfway point for translators. I had a friend out there who was a translator, and I picked up a bit from tem.’
‘But you said you talked to a Gliesan,’ Sally says.

‘Didn’t say it understood,’ John says. ‘We were both injured at the time, and stuck in a pit. I had a go at communicating and I think it was trying as well, but it was hopeless really.’

John wonders, sometimes, how much of his seeing the Gliesans as people is retrospective. Did he feel it so much at the time, when he was shooting at them? He’s pretty sure he did, but it’s hard to know. He at least thinks that the recognition of how alive they were was sharpened and clarified by that time in the pit, both of them dying together. Possibly it’s a good thing that he wasn’t fit for service after that. Maybe going back and killing more of them wouldn’t have been all that easy.

It died before John was rescued. John thought at the time that it seemed glad not to be alone, but that was probably just sentiment. There’s no reason to assume that Gliesan facial expressions can be read the same way as human ones.

‘This has been really nice,’ Greg says. ‘You should come next time too, John.’

‘I’d love to,’ John says, and means it. This night has done its job of getting his mind off Sherlock much better than he expected, and the Met officers are very good company.

If he doesn’t wake up tomorrow with at least some sign of his attraction to Sherlock dissipating, he’s going to end the assignment. However awful that is to think of, it’s nice to know that he might at least get some new friendships out of this whole mess.
John braves the stairs the next morning with a feeling of walking out into a torrent of laser fire.

Sherlock is stretched out in his favourite languid taking-up-the-entire-sofa position, head tilted to observe the viewing screen, which he’s scrolling through on his handchip.

‘Lestrade hasn’t got anything for us today,’ Sherlock says. ‘I don’t know why he even bothers existing sometimes.’

John is so warmed by the *us* that he doesn’t even remonstrate with Sherlock over his somewhat unfair dismissal of Lestrade’s right to be alive unless he’s supplying Sherlock with cases. Then, John realises something else: ‘You’ve been using pronouns properly.’

‘Since yesterday morning,’ Sherlock says. ‘I was wondering when you’d notice.’

‘Why the sudden change?’ John asks.

Sherlock’s been looking at him, but now he looks back at the screen. ‘If your reports don’t show me to make any progress at all, your superiors will conclude that you’re unsuited to teaching me and assign someone else. As we’ve discussed, that option isn’t acceptable to me, so I’m clearly going to have to make some concessions to their idiotic curriculum. Pronouns seemed an easy option. It certainly doesn’t mean that my opinions on this whole concept of “gender” have changed in the slightest.’

‘You still think it’s stupid, but you’re compromising to stay here with me,’ John says.

‘That is what I just said,’ Sherlock says. ‘I don’t know why you feel the need to repeat things.’
And John just looks at him. At Sherlock, with his focus, his easy physicality which is still present now even though he’s just lying on the sofa – languorous rather than frenetic, but still graceful. At his hands, with their long, agile fingers that look like they were sculpted by a master artist. And at his face, where John almost fancies that his burning intelligence is actually visible, waiting behind his eyes for an opportunity to cut through everything in sight like the point of a laser.

And this man, whose full extraordinariness John becomes more and more aware of all the time, thinks John more tolerable than almost anyone else, wants him to stay.

‘I’ll be back in a sec,’ John says, his voice sounding almost normal. ‘Just got to – in my room – just, hang on.’

In his room he starts packing. He ought to tell Sherlock first, but he needs a minute or two to calm down. The force of the attraction just then was bigger than he knew how to deal with. And alongside it, as always, a deep and constantly expanding affection. That’s really the problem, isn’t it? Attraction alone he might have been able to handle. But this – this gaping dark warmth in his chest when Sherlock does anything especially – especially Sherlock – that John cannot cope with at all, not in conjunction with everything else.

He sits down heavily on the bed. Rushing around frantically packing isn’t going to help, he decides. He needs to take the edge off. Maybe just sit for a minute. Think about something else. Or –

It can’t really do any harm, can it? Not now that he’s leaving.

He opens up the video on his handchip and slips his other hand inside his jeans. It won’t take long. He flicks the sound off with his thumb anyway, unwilling to risk Sherlock hearing, and starts to move the hand that’s inside his boxers. He barely knows why he’s doing this, except that he needs to do something to stop feeling like every one of his nerves is straining at the surface of his skin.

The door opens.

John pulls his hand out of his trousers again and hastily zips up his jeans, but Sherlock’s already standing there, looking down at him and clearly seeing everything.

‘You’re attracted to me,’ he says.
John swallows. He doesn’t know where to look. Being walked in on wanking would be embarrassing under normal circumstances, but the sort of thing that might happen between flatmates, to be laughed off. This is – not like that at all.

His initial, almost overpowering instinct, is to tell Sherlock he’s wrong. To say indignantly that watching porn that happens to feature an after has nothing to do with Sherlock, that Sherlock’s insulting himself by implying that afters are interchangeable like that. That afters are just people, and John doesn’t even notice these things, and was barely even aware that one of the guys in the video was an after.

But Sherlock would see through that straight away. He might or might not be aware of how afters are presented in porn, but he can surely guess from the attitudes he’s seen all around him that there’s no way they’d be shown as normal, as just like anyone else. And anyway, John was supposed to be telling Sherlock the truth today anyway. He just hadn’t expected to have to do it like this. But it’s his own fault, so he squares his shoulders, and says: ‘I was going to tell you.’

Sherlock looks around the room. ‘After you’d packed up to leave,’ he says.

John turns his handchip off, not wanting to look at the video a second longer. He stands. ‘I’m really sorry,’ he says. ‘I just – well, there’s nothing to say. It would be completely inappropriate for me to stay any longer. I know you haven’t had much luck with other E.L.I.s, but I’ll try and make sure they find you someone you can bear to live with. I’ll just message headquarters now –’

Sherlock takes two fast step forwards and his arm shoots out to grab John by the wrist. ‘You will do no such thing,’ he says.

‘Sherlock –‘ John says.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Sherlock says. ‘You’re making a fuss over nothing. I’ve known that you’re attracted to me almost as long as you have. It was on our second day of living together that you suddenly became aware of it, correct? The symptoms were all detailed in the pamphlets you gave me. Some of them are observable from the outside, and as soon as I read about them I realised that you’d been exhibiting several.’

‘I don’t think symptoms is the right word,’ John says, smiling despite himself. ‘It’s not a disease.’

‘Disease: an impairment of the normal state of a living animal or plant body or one of its parts that
interrupts or modifies the performance of the vital functions,’ Sherlock says, quoting a definition John remembers from his training. ‘Of course attraction’s a disease. It seems extremely impairing to me.’

‘It can be good,’ John argues. ‘If the person you’re attracted to reciprocates, and there’s no – extra difficulties, or anything.’

‘It renders people even less able to control their own minds and bodies than they usually are,’ Sherlock says. ‘I can’t see how that could be good under any circumstances. However, my observation of the phenomenon is still limited, so I’ll reserve judgement.’

‘If your observation’s mostly based on me, I don’t blame you for thinking the whole thing’s just a nightmare,’ John says. ‘But Sherlock, I really can’t stay as your E.L.I. I’ve tried to suppress it, and it just isn’t working.’

‘Why should I care?’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s causing you a great deal of distress, evidently, but it doesn’t really affect me.’

‘But – of course it does,’ John says. ‘I mean – it – I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, or concerned about – being taken advantage of, or –’

‘Well, I don’t feel any of the above,’ Sherlock says. ‘So there’s no need for you to worry.’

‘It’s against the rules,’ John protests, but he can hear himself how weak it sounds. He doesn’t want to leave; he wants almost nothing less. Living with Sherlock has been – wonderful, really, and he’s nowhere near ready for it to end.

Sherlock doesn’t even bother to reply to this verbally, just makes a scoffing noise.

John caves. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘All right, look, I’ll stay, but if you ever feel – anything I said, or you just don’t like it, if you ever change your mind –’

‘I’ll be sure to tell you,’ Sherlock finishes. ‘Now, if you’ve concluded your moral crisis, we’ve got work to do.’
‘The investigation into missing children hasn’t turned anything up so far,’ Sherlock says. ‘I want to leave that for now and try a different tack – I want more information about us, the reps, ourselves.’

‘What kind of information?’ John asks. ‘I don’t think there’s anywhere much to look if you’ve exhausted the government files. And I still haven’t heard back from Mycroft about when we can get an appointment with him.’

‘I want ordinary information,’ Sherlock says. ‘Everyday observations. Since I arrived I’ve seen numerous times that people take in all sorts of things without ever thinking about them or drawing even the most obvious conclusions from them. There are probably all sorts of things about us that normal people know and just haven’t put together or understood the significance of.’

‘So we’re just going to ask random people what they think about afters?’

‘We’re going to a social forum,’ Sherlock says. ‘We’ll ask people, yes, what they think about reps in general, but also things like – do the reps you know ever do anything odd? Different from normal behaviour? Are they unlike other people you know in any way? It’s the differences between you and us that I’m interested in. The answer as to where we come from must lie in that.’

John can’t help but say, awkwardly, ‘Are we – when we ask – maybe we should say afters – I mean of course, you can identify however you like, it’s just that we might get better results –’

‘Afters is a term used by a minority of the population,’ Sherlock says. ‘Most people either have never heard of it, or think it’s ridiculous. We’ll get better results saying reps or replacements, and you know that perfectly well, the term just makes you uncomfortable for some reason.’

‘Replacements just sounds so – angry,’ John says.

‘People are angry,’ Sherlock says. ‘Can you blame them? No, we’ll say reps – and you’ll try not to look miserable when you say it. I don’t want you getting us dismissed as self-righteous do-gooders before we even get started.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ John says. ‘What’s the address?’
Odd? I’m not sure, writes the icon in front of them. The username is fairladyvic, but John hasn’t asked the user’s fleshworld name or gender. The feminine username makes John inclined to think of them as she, but he knows that in reality it isn’t much of a guide. People have all sorts of usernames.

How many reps do you know? Sherlock writes. John still hasn’t asked him about his icon, the innocuous-looking little bee. John’s own icon is, admittedly, a bulldog puppy, and probably cuter than anything he’d choose now – but he chose his at fifteen, and has never bothered to change it since, whereas Sherlock, of course, must have chosen his far more recently.

I’ve met quite a few, fairladyvic writes. But if you mean know well then just two. I really don’t think they’re that odd. Just like anyone else.

Sherlock decided not to use an internet headset this time so he and John could discuss things in the fleshworld while they conducted the interviews. Now he looks away from the viewing screen, the movement catching John’s eye and making him look up from his handchip.

‘What?’ John asks.

‘Te’s no use to us,’ Sherlock says. ‘Te’s terrified of saying anything offensive, so te’s electing not to say anything at all.’

Sherlock’s icon flies away from fairladyvic, leaving John to hastily type thanks for ur help, bye! and then send his own icon rushing after it.

The next user they talk to – ibaynes – is more forthcoming. I’m 62, te writes. I remember when the first reps arrived. Even shared a flat with one at one point. I was pretty desperate for a flatshare at the time or I dunno that I would’ve. Not that there was anything wrong with the guy, but he was just hard to understand. Made communicating difficult. His English was terrible. And it’s not like with someone who speaks another language, where maybe they don’t know all the words or teir grammar’s all over the place. It was like he didn’t really get how to use language at all. They were all like that back then. Funny, cos they all seem to speak perfect English now. It’s got better and better over the years.
'That could be important,' Sherlock says. ‘And it seems – I remember – no.’ He breaks off, flicking distractedly at the sofa with one finger. He stares into space. ‘We always speak the language of wherever we land,’ he says. ‘Nothing else. Just that one appropriate language, and perfectly. You never mentioned that that hadn’t always been the case – that our language skills were much poorer at the beginning.’

‘I don’t remember it,’ John says. ‘As long as I’ve been really aware of it, or paying attention, language was never a problem.’

‘I think we were taught to speak languages used on 22nd century earth,’ Sherlock says, slowly. ‘But I can’t get at the memory.’

‘If – whoever sent you – were able to teach you,’ John says, ‘why didn’t they do that from the beginning? I mean, why the improvement in language skills?’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘I don’t know,’ he says, and turns back to the screen.

_We really aren’t that odd, writes violetbike03. I think people want to think of us as aliens or robots, I think they can’t deal with the fact that we’re just like anyone else. I seriously don’t know what you’re trying to do but I’m really not interested in some stupid study to prove we’re freaks._

_No offence meant, Sherlock writes. I’m an after myself._

_Oh, violetbike03 writes after a moment. I’m sorry, I misunderstood. In that case, I have some advice for you. I’ve been here since 2135 and what I know for sure is that we’re much better off focusing on how we’re similar to normal people, and not how we’re different. You’re new, right? You must be. Well, if I were you, I’d stop trying to be special and start trying to fit in. I can’t think of anything especially odd about us. You may as well forget about it._

A user called kinhops dodges around the question of whether te knows any afters for ages, and then finally admits: _My partner is one, actually._

_Excellent, writes Sherlock. You should be in a position to know, then – anything odd that your partner does? Any way in which te’s different to most other people? Anything at all will do, however small it seems._
There’s a very long pause. Then: *I can’t think of anything.*

*There must be something, Sherlock insists. Everyone has their own little quirks, don’t they? It would be very strange if your partner were completely average in every respect. Rather surprising that you’d want to be with someone like that, too. Sounds dull.*

*She isn’t dull! kihops writes. Course she’s got quirks, just. Look. I don’t want to talk about my sex life with strangers, OK? I don’t know why you think it’s even your business.*

The icon flies away. In the fleshworld, John glances at Sherlock. ‘That was strange behaviour.’

‘People do behave strangely when it comes to sex, though,’ Sherlock says.

John isn’t sure if this is a jab at him, but decides to assume it isn’t. ‘But we weren’t asking about sex, were we?’ he says.

Sherlock smiles, and John suspects he was being tested. ‘Exactly,’ Sherlock says. ‘I asked about their partner, I assumed I was asking about sex. Their mind went straight there.’

John really doesn’t want to talk about after sex, but if it’s important to the investigation – ‘Er, well, is there – anything –‘ he breaks off, embarrassed. ‘You know, anything about afters that –‘

Sherlock just looks at him for a long time. Then he says, coolly, ‘You ought to lay off the rep porn, John. It’s doing nothing for your perception. Not that your perception was ever particularly shining, of course.’

‘I’m sorry,’ John mutters. ‘I – that was a really inappropriate question, I’m –‘

‘Do feel free to shut up and let me get on with my work at any point,’ Sherlock says, now looking determinedly at the screen, and John’s mouth snaps shut.

*Hand gestures, says carrup4es. Always waving their hands about, they are. The first ones were worse, I dunno if you two were old enough to remember them? It was like they didn’t know how to use their bodies. They could walk fine, but they were so unsure of their arms, they’d hold*
everything so carefully as if they might break it. And they waved their hands around all the time. Used to touch people kinda inappropriately too. I don’t mean anything really creepy, just touching people’s faces sometimes, even if they didn’t know them well. Then they just stopped. Since the ’30s, new reps basically never touch people at all.

‘It’s true,’ Sherlock says, and then his face creases up in pain. He makes a slightly shocked sound. John moves forward, concerned, but Sherlock gestures him away. ‘I’m fine,’ he says. ‘I’m just – I don’t – I’m experiencing a very strong compulsion not to say this.’

‘Don’t say it if it’s going to hurt you,’ John says.

‘It’s important,’ Sherlock says. ‘Because I also have a strong compulsion not to – agh – to touch people. I – mean – in ways that are inappropriate here. Other kinds are fine. Taking someone’s arm or pushing them – but not – ow –’

‘That’s enough,’ John says, firmly. ‘That’ll do. It’s your investigation, it’s in your head, you don’t need to tell me.’

Sherlock gives him a strange, piercing look, then nods, almost smiles, and turns back to the screen again.

Fuck them of course they’re fucking odd, woodleyson writes. What are you asking for?

I’m a rep, and I’m – Sherlock gets as far as writing, before a string of swear words appear above the icon, and then: what the fuck do you think you’re doing messing around here did you ssee anywherein this forum that says reps are welcome here? I’m finding your handchip id now i’m going to find you you fucking

John reaches over and turns off Sherlock’s handchip, and then turns off his own. Sherlock turns an outraged glare on him. ‘Te might have given us something useful!’ Sherlock says, furious.

‘Te was just a bigot,’ John objects. ‘Anything te said would just have been stupid stereotypes.’

‘Possibly,’ Sherlock says. ‘But from my observation hatred and obsession are closely linked. That user probably watches reps all the time, looking for things to hate about them, things to be wrong with them. Te’d have given me a whole catalogue of ways in which reps are different from normal
people if you’d let me talk to tem.’

‘Yes, or te’d have found out your handchip i.d., come round here and caved your head in,’ John says. ‘I wasn’t prepared to find out which.’

‘Is protecting me part of your job description now?’ Sherlock says with a sneer. ‘Guide, instructor and knight in shining armour. Saving me from all the nasty baddies whether I like it or not.’

‘No,’ John says. ‘But if you got your head smashed in I’d have to go back to being an E.L.I. for people who actually want to learn, and where’s the challenge in that?’

He smiles at Sherlock. It’s a determined smile, a please-can-this-be-OK smile, because it feels like Sherlock is even pricklier than usual this morning, and that makes John anxious. Sherlock would not like admitting to feeling frightened or uncomfortable, and John knows he can’t take Sherlock’s cavalier attitude about John’s attraction to him at face value. If Sherlock were in distress he might very well show it just like this.

And yet Sherlock was very insistent that John stay, and John desperately wants to stay. So –

‘I thought you’d done the moral crisis,’ Sherlock says, sounding less cold and more petulant. ‘This is more tedium than I’m willing to put up with. And since you’ve interrupted the interview process, I may as well go to my room and try another tack.’ He stands up.

‘We’re OK, aren’t we?’ John says.

Sherlock sighs. ‘I’m OK,’ he says. ‘You appear to be having quite unnecessary scruples. You’ve also got some rather irritating tendencies towards random acts of heroism, but I suppose that quality of yours saved my life a few days ago, so there’s only so much I can complain.’

‘Though you haven’t let that stop you trying,’ John says. He smiles again, and this time Sherlock finally smiles back.

*
‘Promise me you won’t set anything on fire,’ John says, anxiously.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. ‘New to this planet and/or this time, but not actually a baby,’ he says.

‘So you’re saying that setting fire to the flat would be completely out of character and something you would never do?’ John says. ‘Because if so it shouldn’t be a very hard promise to make or keep.’

‘Have a nice time with your sister!’ Sherlock says brightly. John hates him a little.

It’s the first time John’s going to be leaving Sherlock alone in the flat for any significant amount of time. And it’s good that he’s doing it – E.L.I.s are supposed to help their assignments gradually adjust to living alone so they’re ready to do so by the time the arrangement ends. But he can’t help but be slightly concerned over what Sherlock might take the opportunity to do when left to his own devices.

John reaches the café before Harry and orders two orange juices and a large slice of Victoria sponge, which he knows is the only thing here that they both like.

She comes in a few minutes later, and he watches her step through the door. She looks very much the same as the last time he saw her – brown hair in a ponytail, wearing her customary almost-uniform of a soft, loose checked shirt, jeans and a long navy coat. When you’re preternaturally unstable, he remembers her saying once, it helps to control what you can. Clothing comes into that category. Of course, even small things like that haven’t always been within Harry’s ability to keep stable. Every now and then she goes out and buys an entire new wardrobe, normally in some specific genre – rock chick or ladylike or spaceport-style – trying to remake herself into someone she thinks will be better.

Apparently now, though, she’s in a stable phase, and the shirt looks reasonably worn, hopefully meaning that she’s had it a while and hasn’t thrown an entire wardrobe away to be replaced very recently.

She sits down and smiles at him. ‘Sponge cake, brilliant,’ she says, taking up her fork.

John takes up his own. ‘How are you?’ he says. He endeavours not to put in an undertone of ‘How many days sober?’ He tries, these days, not to ask, not to wonder, not to count. He decided years ago that he couldn’t spend his life waiting for it to happen over and over again. There are,
nevertheless, parts of his brain that still haven’t quite caught up with that decision.

‘I’m all right,’ Harry says. Probably hasn’t drunk since she sent me the porn, John thinks, entirely against his will. That’s still only a couple of days. On average – and John has tried to forget the average, but it can’t be done – she lasts about three to four weeks sober before drinking again, then stays drunk for about a week. It’s just manageable enough that she can keep her job, can even keep the drinking a secret from everyone but those closest to her.

‘I haven’t had time to look into selling the ring yet,’ John says. ‘I’ve got a new student – been really busy, sorry.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Harry says. ‘I ought to do it myself, I know, it’s just – cowardice. I can’t bear to look at the thing.’

‘You might need to give me the actual ring if I’m going to get it valued,’ John says. ‘I mean, scanners can get a lot from a photograph now, and I can probably get you a preliminary estimate, but a jeweller’s going to want to see the real thing before they give you any definite answer.’

‘Yeah, I guess,’ Harry says. ‘OK, um – I’ll send it to you?’

‘Maybe not a good idea to send it through the post,’ John says. ‘Just – maybe just bring it next time we meet up.’

Harry cracks a faint smile. ‘What, in another year and a half?’ she says.

John frowns at her. ‘I saw you when I got sent home,’ he says. ‘That was only seven months ago.’

‘Been counting, have you?’ Harry says, with the ghost of a smile. John looks away.

‘Only seven months is kind of a telling way of putting it when we’re family,’ Harry says. ‘The only family either of us really has, bar the odd second cousin. And it was a year and a half before that.’

‘I was in the army,’ John says. ‘And – well, you’re frequently unavailable.’
He doesn’t mean that to have the bite it does. But Harry doesn’t cry, thank God, as she frequently does when he brings up the drinking while she’s sober. She just says, ‘I’m so sorry, John.’

‘I know,’ he says. She’s always sorry, and she always means it. Once, he’d have thought that would make a difference.

There’s a long, quiet pause. Then she says, ‘I am trying.’

‘I know,’ John says again. She means that too. He swallows. He thought he packaged all these feelings away years ago. When he saw her after getting home it was a brief visit, where she cried and he said he was all right a great many times and he was just too exhausted to feel anything much. Before that he’d been pretty cold when he came home on leave, making it clear that he was seeing her out of duty rather than anything else. He doesn’t know what’s happened to suddenly open all this up again, except that perhaps it was only a matter of time. Naive, possibly, for him to think that he could just stop caring at will.

‘How are you adjusting to being home?’ Harry asks, changing the subject. ‘I mean – being part of the army, it was – important to you, wasn’t it?’

John has to swallow again. ‘It was,’ he says.

‘You must miss it,’ Harry says. ‘And you must miss Bill and Mary. You – I guess you won’t have seen them since you got back? They won’t have had leave yet?’

‘No,’ John says. ‘But I think they’ve got it coming up. I don’t know, it’s hard to communicate when they’re, you know, not even still in the solar system.’ He produces a laugh and is grateful when Harry doesn’t comment on its glaring fakeness.

‘I guess you can look forward to that, then,’ she says. ‘And – the job? That’s OK? Pretty different. Though I guess you were a teacher before you joined the army.’

‘Which is why I was qualified for this,’ John says. ‘I’d have had to go and retrain otherwise, don’t think I could have stuck that. It was a big part of the reason why I took this job, not having to get another qualification for it. Even though I never actually liked teaching much.’
‘And is this kind of teaching any better?’

‘Yeah,’ John says slowly. ‘I think so. I mean, I was bored at first, but...’

He trails off, not entirely sure how to finish that sentence. *I was bored at first but then my third client turned out to be desperately attractive with no sense of self-preservation and now I divide my time between lusting after him inappropriately, running away from criminals, trying to make him eat and sleep like a normal person and occasionally shooting people.*

‘My latest client’s proving a challenge,’ he says, finally. ‘Quite determined to stick to his way of doing things. I’m – getting to be more creative about how I teach, which is making things much more interesting.’

‘He – you’ve mentioned him in your blog,’ Harry says, looking slightly embarrassed. ‘I – uh, I think I – I don’t really remember, but I’m sorry about how I reacted to that. I was just drunk and insane.’

‘It’s fine,’ John says. ‘I guess I did gush about him a bit. He’s – intriguing. I don’t know. I’ve never met anyone quite like – I mean, afters are always weird, but he’s in a category of his own.’

‘I’d quite like to meet him,’ Harry says. ‘He sounds great.’

*

John gets home from meeting Harry feeling oddly optimistic. Not that he expects her to stay sober – he’s no longer capable of even hoping for that. But they had a surprisingly nice conversation, and he wonders if maybe he was too quick to dismiss the possibility of remaining friendly with her. He’ll never be close to her again as long as she keeps disappearing every few weeks, but though real closeness isn’t an option maybe friendliness and affection are. Perhaps he shouldn’t leave it as long before seeing her again.

Sherlock is lying back on the sofa, a bright glow coming from his handchip. John moves nearer, and sees small electrical pulses coming from it, flashing up Sherlock’s arm. He sighs. At least Sherlock isn’t taking e-stims, and if it were just one or even two pulses a minute John wouldn’t be too worried. This, however, is a bit much.
'Three pulses a minute?’ John says. ‘You know that’s definitely above approved usage, right?’

Sherlock sits up. ‘It’s a three-pulse problem,’ he says. ‘Anyway, I told you you could come over and turn it down if it really bothered you.’

John stares. ‘When?’

‘About half an hour ago, I think,’ Sherlock says.

‘I was out,’ John says. ‘With my sister. Remember? I told you I was leaving. We had a whole conversation.’

‘It’s hardly my fault you weren’t listening,’ Sherlock says, but he does turn off his handchip.

‘You’ve been working more on finding out about the afters, then?’ John says.

Sherlock blinks. ‘Earlier, yes,’ he says. ‘Just now I was focused on another – issue. There’s something I need to work out. But never mind that, I was as you say working on the after problem most of the time you were out and I think I’ve found a lead.’

He says it all very fast, so that John has to take a moment to process. Sherlock huffs impatiently. John says, quickly, ‘What kind of lead?’

‘I’ve managed to isolate a number of images of afters who could be missing children,’ Sherlock says. ‘Looking for physical resemblance in general left me with a huge number of options – you wouldn’t expect adults to look all that much like they did as children so it was hard to rule anything out. Instead I’ve looked for afters who had some distinct specific physical peculiarity in common with missing children – birthmarks, scars, that kind of thing – and also looked broadly similar enough to be a possibility. Only twelve met the criteria, but that’s still a slightly higher number than I would have predicted. Not many people do have conveniently striking skin-stories.’

‘Skin-stories?’ John says. ‘I’ve never heard that phrase. You mean – identifying marks?’

Sherlock appears to actually flinch. ‘Identifying marks, yes,’ he says. ‘Two of the twelve that I
found are in the UK, and one of those is in London. I propose we visit her.’

‘Yeah, OK,’ John says. ‘Are you going to tell her she might be a missing child? It could be upsetting.’

‘I want to show her pictures of the parents of the child in question and see if she recognises them,’ Sherlock says.

‘That could definitely be upsetting,’ John says. ‘Especially if she actually does recognise them.’

‘It’s an outside chance,’ Sherlock says. ‘But that’s why you’re coming. If she gets emotional you can – hug her, or something, calm her down so we can proceed with the investigation.’

‘Bit not good,’ John says.

‘I haven’t even met her,’ Sherlock says.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ John says. ‘She’s human.’

‘Possibly human,’ Sherlock corrects. ‘You might even stretch to probably human, but not beyond that. What if she isn’t? Am I still obliged to care about her feelings? Would you still care about her feelings?’

‘Of course,’ John says. ‘Human was – I just use the word out of habit, but I mean she’s a sentient being, she – she has feelings.’

‘Considering how careful you are to say afters and not reps,’ Sherlock says, ‘I’d have thought you’d better recognise the significance of habits like that. Anyway, we’re wasting time. Let’s go.’
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: discussion of missing children

Catherine Oakshott looks about forty, though it can be hard to tell with afters. They have a medical examination when they first arrive and get an age and made up birthdate assigned based on that, but their biology is apparently slightly puzzling – though John was never trained to treat afters, since they aren’t allowed in the army, so he doesn’t know much about it.

She’s tall, curly-haired, and, crucially, has a tiny scar below her lip – just like Laurette Cusack, who disappeared from her home in west London at the age of thirteen in 2128. Which means that Catherine Oakshott is possible, in terms of age and appearance, although, as Sherlock kept reminding John on the way here, the odds are very small.

When they explain why they’re here, she only raises her eyebrows and invites them in. They walk through into a kitchen-diner that smells strongly of bleach, which Catherine apologises for: apparently her cleaner was round yesterday and was a bit over-zealous. She invites them to sit around a small table. The room’s a bit cramped – not so much because of the space, which is actually pretty good by London standards, but because of the model railway that runs right through the middle.

Catherine smiles when she sees John looking at it. ‘Took me two years, that,’ she says. ‘It’s a perfect replica of a mid 21st century track. Bit sad, I know, but I love modelling. My job can get a bit stressful and it takes my mind off things.’

There are little model trees dotted around the track and, now John looks around the room, he can see all sorts of things – planes, avias, landscapes – sitting on various shelves and surfaces.

‘They’re beautiful,’ he says. ‘What are they made of?’

‘Mixture of things,’ she says. ‘Wood, foam, plastic...I do the trees out of lichen.’

‘Nice,’ John says.
‘Thanks,’ she says. ‘Anyway. You guys are here because you think that I’m a child who went missing in the twenties?’

‘Not really,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s very improbable. But just within the bounds of possibility.’ He flashes up the photographs of Laurette Cusack’s parents on his handchip. ‘Do these images trigger any memories for you?’

She looks at them for a few moments, then shakes her head. ‘They don’t, sorry.’

‘Could I ask you a few questions?’ Sherlock says. John reminds himself to praise Sherlock for his politeness later.

‘Sure,’ Catherine says. ‘Would you mind if I carve a pumpkin while we talk, though? I always bring one and – oh, although –’ She looks thoughtfully at Sherlock. ‘I don’t have to ask if you’re an after. But am I right in assuming that you’re fairly new here?’

Sherlock frowns at her, and nods.

‘Thought so,’ she says. ‘Don’t be offended by that, it’s not that you’re being inappropriate or anything. Just a feeling. Anyway, you probably don’t know much about Halloween then. I know I didn’t. But it’s a festival, and it’s tomorrow. And – well, I’ve heard that kids actually used to go round the areas where they lived and knock on people’s doors and ask for sweets. Hard to believe, but supposedly they did. Now, though, I can’t imagine any parent letting their child go up to a stranger’s house. So instead the local council sets gather points around various security cameras on busy streets and if you want to give out sweets you register with them and bring them along to whatever gather point you’re assigned to. And then children go from point to point getting as many sweets as they can. Traditionally, you carry your sweets in a pumpkin.’

While she talks, she fetches a pumpkin from a corner and sets it on the table, then gets a knife. ‘Most people carve faces in their pumpkins,’ she goes on. ‘I like to do landscapes, and I put a couple of my model trees inside too, amongst the sweets. I bring one every year.’

‘Fascinating,’ Sherlock says, not sounding very fascinated.

Catherine looks at him sharply. ‘You need to learn this stuff,’ she says. ‘People won’t know how to react to you until you do. If you want to blend in – if you want friends –’
‘Why would I want any of that?’ Sherlock says. John looks away from him, watches the gleam of the knife in Catherine’s hand instead.

Catherine shrugs. ‘What questions did you want to ask me?’ she says. She digs the knife into the pumpkin and starts manoeuvring it carefully. John’s carved several pumpkins, and seen other people carve them, but he’s never seen anyone put this amount of care into doing so. It makes oddly compelling watching.

‘Any memories from before you arrived?’ Sherlock says.

Catherine shakes her head, pushing the knife along and up to make what proves to be a leaf shape. ‘Barely anything,’ she says. ‘I know I arrived with this idea in my head that I needed to blend in, but I can’t remember how I got it.’

‘That’s all?’ Sherlock says.

‘Pretty much,’ Catherine says, carving another leaf, and starting on what soon starts looking like part of a flower. ‘I try not to think about my past too much. I’d rather focus on my life here; that’s what I have to deal with now.’

John’s starting to think this is a definite dead end, but Sherlock presses on. ‘Any aversion to touching people? Particularly to touching their faces with your fingers?’

Catherine visibly winces. ‘What are you doing?’ she snaps at Sherlock. ‘You can’t –’ she pauses, calms, and gives him a more reflective look. ‘Wasn’t it hard for you to say that?’ she asks.

‘I’m working on pushing past these irrational aversions we appear to be saddled with,’ Sherlock says.

‘You sounded remarkably normal,’ Catherine says. ‘I feel pretty uncomfortable just talking about it like this.’ She gives the flower a slender stem, and turns the pumpkin around to attend to the other side.

‘And you’ve never given any thought as to why?’
‘I probably did at first,’ Catherine says. ‘But I’ve been here eight years. I guess I’ve made my peace with the fact that I’m never going to understand who I was before I arrived. I don’t think about it much any more.’

Sherlock looks highly unimpressed by this. Catherine smiles. ‘I almost want to get your handchip i.d.,’ she says. ‘Message you in a year, see if you’re still into finding out where we’re from. I’ve known other afters keen on that when they first arrived, but just about everyone settles down sooner or later. Usually sooner.’ She’s made a grassy field at the bottom of this side of the pumpkin now, with just a few careful flicks of the knife making sharp lines running across.

‘Is there anything else you feel uncomfortable about, or strongly resistant to?’ Sherlock asks.

‘God, I dunno,’ Catherine says, focusing on some small intricate shape she’s making above the grass. ‘Befores feel uncomfortable about things too, after all. Of course there are things, but I don’t know what’s normal.’

‘Of course you do,’ Sherlock says. ‘If you feel things you’ve never heard befores mention feeling – if they’re completely irrational and you can’t explain them –’

‘Nothing like that,’ Catherine says firmly. John can’t tell whether she’s lying. The shape she’s making is turning out to be a butterfly.

‘Not very Halloween-y, this,’ he comments. ‘It’s all quite – pretty and nice. Not very scary.’

‘I like to be a bit different,’ Catherine says, giving the butterfly antennae.

‘John, must we get sidetracked by small talk?’ Sherlock says.

‘I don’t know that I can really help you anyway,’ Catherine says. She’s started outlining a cloud shape above her field and butterfly with the point of a knife; once done, she starts cutting into it.

‘When did you get the scar above your lip?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Did you have it when you arrived?’
‘I did,’ Catherine says. ‘And therefore I’m afraid have no idea how I got it.’ She does another cloud as she’s talking. ‘Like I said, I don’t think I’m going to be much help. I’m really much more interested in the future than the past.’

‘You could be from the future,’ Sherlock says.

‘I could,’ Catherine says. ‘And I could be a humanoid alien, and I could be a lost child kidnapped by the government for however many years – and I’ll never know which, if any of those things is true. Whereas right now I’ve got a job and a boyfriend, and I know they’re real, I know they’re part of my life and my story. So to me those are the important things, because I can be sure of them. If you spend your life chasing what you don’t know, you’ll drive yourself mad.’

John glances at Sherlock, who looks – actually quite confused. This attitude is evidently completely alien to him. ‘But all the interest is in the unknown,’ he says. ‘And chasing it is –’

‘Thrilling?’ John suggests quietly.

‘I’d say exhausting,’ Catherine says. ‘But hey, everyone’s different, I guess.’ She puts her knife down. ‘There, what do you think?’

‘It’s lovely,’ John says, and it is: it’s delicate work, despite how remarkably fast she’s done it.

She fetches a pile of unwrapped chocolate squares and starts piling them into the pumpkin.

‘You’re allowed to put them in unwrapped?’ John says, surprised.

She smiles, slightly cheeky, and John is made particularly aware of how attractive she is. ‘Course not,’ she says. ‘Local council hate it, tell me off every year. Health and safety and germs and all that. But they only grumble, they don’t stop anyone taking them, and I’m into aesthetics. I hate all that commercial shiny packaging they come in.’

She stirs the sweets around – ‘For luck,’ apparently – and then pushes them to the sides to make a gap in the middle. She takes a purplish-grey model tree from a shelf and pushes it down into the hole.
‘Damn, I’m out of sweets,’ she says. ‘I’ll need to unwrap a few more. Did you have any more questions?’

She goes to the cupboard and fetches a bag of what John now recognises as Cadslé MiniBites, sits down again and starts to unwrap them.

‘Do you ever feel – a sense of loss?’ Sherlock says. ‘As though you’re missing something, or someone?’ John looks at him. It seems an uncharacteristic question, and it makes John wonder if Sherlock’s speaking from personal experience. It’s hard to imagine Sherlock missing someone. But if he is – John pictures it for a moment, having an aching sense of emptiness and loneliness without any idea what you’re missing or why the feelings are there. It sounds horrible. He wonders whether he should bring it up with Sherlock later – Sherlock ought to talk about it, if he’s feeling alone, but he most certainly will not appreciate any attempt to get him to do so.

‘Everyone feels lonely sometimes,’ Catherine says. ‘It’s not like it’s just an after thing.’

‘Lonely without knowing why,’ Sherlock presses. ‘Like something’s been taken from you and you can’t even remember what it was.’

‘I really couldn’t –‘ she stops mid-sentence, frowning at the pumpkin. ‘What on earth - ?’

John follows her gaze. He can’t really see much except for the top of the tree poking out through the sweets, although –

‘Was that tree blue before?’ he says, doubtfully.

‘No,’ Catherine says. ‘No, it definitely wasn’t. It’s quite a deep blue, as well. That’s – that’s bizarre.’

She shrugs, and piles up the newly unwrapped chocolates on top of the tree. ‘I suppose it reacted to the sweets somehow,’ she says. ‘How odd. Makes you worry about what kind of rubbish is in them, really.’ She looks at Sherlock. ‘Anything else?’

‘No,’ Sherlock says finally. ‘I don’t think so. Not for now. But I may be in touch.’
‘Sure,’ Catherine says. ‘Anytime.’

* 

‘Do you want to do something for Halloween?’ John asks. ‘I mean, it’s more of a children’s festival, but adults do sometimes arrange parties and things too.’

‘I really feel you ought to be able to work out the answer to that question on your own,’ Sherlock says.

‘That would be a no, then,’ John says.

‘What I want to “do for Halloween”,’ Sherlock says, ‘is stay inside and hide from all the children parading around the streets, and research leads on the origins of the afters.’

John thinks of sitting across from Sherlock in an armchair, or beside him on the sofa, looking through notes on his handchip, watching the sky get dark outside the window and listening to overexcited children run past the building.

‘Yeah, OK,’ he says. ‘Sounds quite nice, to be honest. Anyway, tomorrow’s the end of our first week together, so we have to do a review session.’

Sherlock groans. John giggles, and thinks that their plans for tomorrow really don’t sound too bad at all.

* 

John sleeps unusually well that night, and, on waking, starts mentally steeling himself for the review with Sherlock. The chances of getting Sherlock to sit through the whole thing seem vanishingly small. And then – he can’t help but wonder whether Sherlock’s going to bring up the attraction thing. He’d be perfectly within his rights to do so, of course, in fact John ought to encourage him to discuss any issues he has with it, but – God, John hates even thinking about it. Not that he isn’t (still) thinking about it constantly.
Sherlock’s already in the living room when John gets downstairs – John really has to try and get him to sleep more – and looks up with a facial expression clearly intended to indicate an attitude of noble patience in the face of great tribulations. ‘Let’s get this over with,’ he says.

John nods and sits down in his armchair, facing Sherlock. He opens up the list of review discussion questions on his handchip and asks the first of them: ‘What do you feel you’ve learned so far?’

‘That 2156 earth is frequently dull and irritating?’ Sherlock suggests. ‘That everything, particularly the management of reps, is swathed in tedious bureaucracy, and almost everyone is almost incomprehensibly stupid?’

‘I thought you said you wanted to get this over with,’ John says. ‘We’re never going to be done if you don’t say anything I can actually write down.’

Sherlock gets a kind of half smirk on his face that John doesn’t feel bodes well at all. Then his expression goes completely blank, and he says in expressionless tones: ‘I feel that during my course of instruction I have learned a great deal about the variety present in 22nd earth culture, and the nuances it is necessary to understand in communicating with others.’

‘Some of the people reading this report will have met you,’ John says. ‘They’ll never believe for a second you said that, they’ll think I’m making it up. Also, you acting the perfect student is really disturbing.’

‘I’m really keen to learn about irrational traditions and excessively elaborate social rules,’ Sherlock says, now putting on an expression of delighted enthusiasm. ‘Please do tell me about it all.’

‘Seriously, stop it,’ John says, and then they’re both giggling.

‘Fine,’ Sherlock says eventually. ‘Put down that I’ve learned that, annoying as social customs can be, learning to navigate them is useful for manipulating people. No, not manipulating people, they won’t like that – all right, say communicating with people.’

‘You have no idea how much it worries me that you conceptualise communication and manipulation as the same thing,’ John tells him, but he enters the comment into the notes. It’s about as good as they’re likely to get.
The interview drags on. ‘What do you feel is still important for you to learn?’ results in Sherlock displaying a great deal of enthusiasm – definitely genuine this time – over the wide variety of poisons present on earth and his desire to learn the details of all of them, or as many as is feasible. ‘What frustrations have you encountered?’ leads to a ten minute rant. John has no idea what the monitor team are going to make of Sherlock’s – Sherlockness – but he decides that’s their problem, and his is just to get the damn review done. With that attitude, everything proceeds smoothly, until he asks: ‘How do you currently feel about the prospect of beginning independent living in three weeks’ time?’

John isn’t entirely sure what he expected Sherlock to say to this one. On the one hand, he clearly likes being looked after, having someone run around to make tea for him and get things for him from his own jacket pocket. On the other hand, he’s also clearly someone who requires a certain amount of space to himself and tends to find other people boring and annoying most of the time.

What he definitely doesn’t expect is for Sherlock to look very thoughtful, as though it’s a complex and difficult question, and stay quiet for several long moments.

‘Er?’ John says.

‘I don’t think I like the idea at all,’ Sherlock says at last. ‘You’re very useful to me.’

‘But the point of all this is that you stop needing me,’ John says. ‘I know you like having someone to help you with things, but –’

‘I don’t need you,’ Sherlock interrupts. ‘I have no doubt that I could manage to learn all of the trivialities you’re paid to teach me in a day or two of experimentation.’

John doesn’t flinch at this, although he does become slightly stiller and stiffer. ‘In that case –’

‘Don’t be offended,’ Sherlock says impatiently. ‘I said you were useful, didn’t I? Not for teaching me how to carry out mindless everyday tasks or informing me about social routine, neither of which I care about, but in much more important ways. It’s –’ he takes a breath. ‘Never mind. Let’s move on. I suppose the next question is something about the skills I feel I’ll need in order to live alone.’

‘Got it in one,’ John says. Sherlock groans. ‘C’mon,’ John says. ‘We’re almost through now. Let’s just get it done and we’ll be free for another week.’
After what feels like a very long time, John finally finishes questioning Sherlock. He typed down Sherlock’s answers as they went along, but now he needs to neaten up the report and remove anything that’s likely to cause the monitors too much alarm.

Halfway through doing this, he gets a call from someone who turns out to be Mycroft’s assistant, inviting John and Sherlock to a meeting with Mycroft tomorrow at 2 p.m.

‘Oh, good,’ Sherlock says, when John tells him.

‘I can’t tell whether that’s sarcasm or genuine,’ John says.

‘Both at the same time,’ Sherlock says. ‘This meeting ought to be very useful, but I can’t say I’m looking forward to spending any more time in that man’s company. Then again, perhaps I’ll be able to get to the bottom of this irrational dislike I have for him; I would like to understand that.’

‘He can be a bit creepy,’ John says. ‘And the whole name thing – that’s bizarre. I don’t blame you for finding him a bit disturbing.’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘Disturbed isn’t right,’ he says. ‘It’s annoyance I feel around him, mostly. Which is peculiar, since he’s easily the most intelligent person I’ve met since arriving here, and I ought to appreciate that more. Anyway – if you’ve finished typing up your report, I need your help.’

‘With what?’ John asks.

‘A couple of experiments,’ Sherlock says.

‘Experiments to find out what?’

‘Telling you would invalidate the results,’ Sherlock says, smoothly. ‘But there’s nothing harmful
or unpleasant involved.’

Somehow, this isn’t very reassuring. John’s pretty sure he should be saying no. But he finds himself nodding instead, muttering ‘Oh, fine then.’

‘Excellent,’ Sherlock says. ‘Take off your shirt.’

John gapes at him. ‘What? No!’

‘You said you’d help,’ Sherlock says, petulant.

‘This is ridiculous. What can you possibly be researching with this?’ John protests. ‘If you’re researching the afters – I’m a before, what use is my body going to be to you?’

John hears the words as he says them, and flushes. ‘Uh – I just mean –’

Sherlock cuts him off. ‘This isn’t about the after problem. I told you I was investigating something else as well. Now, are you going to do it, or am I going to have to find some other way of getting the information I need?’

John shuts his eyes, opens them again, and pulls his jumper over his head, and then starts unbuttoning his shirt. He has to look at the floor while he does this; meeting Sherlock’s eyes while stripping would be the end of him. When it’s finally undone – after what feels like millennia of fiddling clumsily with buttons – he pulls it off, chucks it to the floor and looks defiantly back at Sherlock.

Who is staring. His eyes move slowly over John’s chest, as if cataloguing. John swallows, and then immediately has to swallow again. He thinks of limb reattachment surgery, of flies congregating outside the mess hall, pressing at the windows and buzzing hungrily, and just about manages to keep the situation from becoming completely embarrassing. Sherlock paces around him, looking at him from all angles. Time seems to pass very slowly.

Eventually Sherlock approaches, and straps what John recognises as a device for measuring heartrate to John’s wrist, and then puts one on his own. John’s question as to the purpose of this gets ignored. Sherlock waits a minute, then looks at first the device on John’s wrist and then the one on his own, and enters both figures into his handchip.
Then he takes a step nearer, so that he’s well and truly in John’s personal space, and puts a hand on John’s chest. It splays out, dead centre, so that if Sherlock were to widen the gaps between his fingers just a fraction his little finger would be touching John’s nipple.

John watches, transfixed, as the hand moves up towards his neck, roams around his shoulders freely, pauses momentarily over the tiny narrow scar where his arm was reattached, and then strokes back down.

No hope now of avoiding embarrassment; John can feel stirring and is powerless to do a thing about it. Breathing is hard work; his chest is tight and seems almost to shrink back wherever Sherlock’s fingers touch it, as if backing away from this onslaught, from the revelations Sherlock’s dragging up out of John’s body.

Sherlock looks at the heartrate devices again – and John’s heart is pounding, and Sherlock’s got that fact down in hard data now, entered neatly into a table on his handchip – and then removes them.

‘Thank you,’ he says, and that politeness is distinctly alarming. ‘That was very useful.’

‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?’ John says.

‘Not yet,’ Sherlock says. ‘I – soon. I just need a bit more data now. You can put your shirt back on if you like.’

Very red now, John scrambles for his shirt and hurriedly does it up again. He feels unpleasantly hot, but puts the jumper on anyway; with both the shirt and jumper tugged down he feels marginally less exposed, although not much, since Sherlock knows exactly what’s going on in John’s mind and body anyway.

‘The symptoms I mentioned,’ Sherlock says, abruptly. ‘Concerning attraction. Pupil dilation, increased heartrate, etc. – as a doctor and someone familiar with this culture, do you know of anything else that can cause those?’

John frowns at him. Then his heart starts to sink. Is that what all this was about? He accepted Sherlock’s insistence that John’s attraction to him wasn’t a problem out of wishful-thinking as much as anything else. But this is...not a good sign.
'There are lots of things that can cause either increased heartrate or pupil dilation,' John says. ‘Not so many that can cause both. But anyway – there are lots of other symptoms, you know, that aren’t so easily detectable by people other than the sufferer.’ (And when did he pick up Sherlock’s habit of talking about attraction as a disease?)

‘Such as?’ Sherlock says. His hands are in his pockets and he looks defensive. This is looking worse and worse.

‘You think about the person a lot,’ John says. ‘You want to be around them. You – uh, you want to touch them, and them to touch you.’ Gently, he adds, ‘Sherlock, if that experiment was – if you were trying to objectively assess whether I’m attracted to you then – I’m afraid you’re going to have to take my word for it that I definitely am. You can’t rationalise it away. And the fact that you’re trying to does make me worry that you aren’t as comfortable with this situation as you might have initially thought.’

Sherlock looks at John, shakes his head once, and then walks to his room without another word.

*

John doesn’t want to disturb Sherlock if Sherlock needs space – possibly needs space from John most of all. So instead he goes to his own room, sits on the bed, and frets. He cannot believe how irresponsible he’s been, or how selfish. He’s overstepped the limits of appropriate behaviour completely. Stripping off and letting a student touch his chest? A student he’s attracted to? Sherlock being so different from other people doesn’t mean that John should be ignoring the rules.

Deciding to stay was one thing – although a dubious decision in its own right. But if John’s going to do that, he has to get himself under control. No more incidents like today’s.

He stays in his room for hours. He sneaks out to grab lunch at one point, but there’s no sign of Sherlock. Normally John would be nagging him to eat at this point, but this time he decides it’s best to give Sherlock some more time, and just take his lunch to his room instead.

He reads, watches a film on his handchip, and then, finally, when it starts go get dark and he starts to hear excited children shouting outside as they make their way to the Halloween points, makes his way back downstairs, and knocks on Sherlock’s door.
'Good,' Sherlock says. ‘You’ve arrived just in time. I’ve finished processing the evidence.’

‘If you’re still trying to assess my attraction –’

‘Not yours,’ Sherlock says. ‘Mine.’

John blinks at him.

‘I’ve suspected for some time that it was mutual,’ Sherlock says. ‘But being unfamiliar with the condition, I had to ensure that I couldn’t be suffering something different with related symptoms. However, I’ve monitored them – using you as a control, since you appear certain that what you’re experiencing is attraction – and there’s really no other explanation, especially since you mentioned additional signs earlier. I have all of those too. The booklet mentioned one or two others – fantasising, for instance – which also apply.’

‘You mean –’ John says.

‘I’m sexually attracted to you,’ Sherlock says. ‘Have been all along, as a matter of fact, but I had to be sure. I expect you’re going to dismiss this as dependence or confusion, but don’t bother. I’m very sure of it now. And anyway, it doesn’t matter, because I recognise that your professional ethics would never allow you to have any sort of sexual contact with me. And personally I’m not very fond of being at my body’s mercy. So I suggest we simply work on eradicating these feelings. I’m sure they can be dealt with, given time.’

John tries to think of something to say that isn’t ‘Er’. Sherlock’s attracted to him? To John? But then it shouldn’t be a surprise, not really: afters often are attracted to their E.L.I.s. Sherlock’s in fact just referred to one of the studies on the subject – and when did he get round to reading that? – suggesting that afters’ feelings of dependence on their E.L.I.s can cause it to happen.

‘Good idea,’ John manages at last. ‘Um – yes. Let’s – do that.’

‘Glad we’re agreed,’ Sherlock says, sounding entirely cheerful and unconcerned. ‘I’m sending you a file on after memories; have a look at the highlighted paragraph and tell me if you see anything unusual.’

‘Will do,’ John says weakly. ‘Uh, I’ll just – I’ll be in my room, reading, if – you need anything
Sherlock’s only response to this is a nod; he’s already lost again in reading files on his handchip, and all John can do is return to his room, feeling more than a little dazed.
John reads the file Sherlock’s sent him. The highlighted paragraph concerns the fact that most afters, as well as reporting that they feel they’ve been given instructions to complete some kind of task, also mention a vague sense of respect and admiration directed at whoever gave them those instructions. Sherlock’s added a comment here: ‘Note that I do not have any such feelings; rather a lingering sense of irritation’. The paragraph then goes on to discuss some experiments that were run on early afters, getting them to carry out particular tasks and then seeing if they felt any sense of satisfaction. The results are only summarised, though the details can apparently be found in an appendix:

**Results summary**

**Painting a picture:** 7% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, a further 61% reported a mild sense of satisfaction

**Running a 5km track:** 40% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, 12% a mild sense

**Learning to play a beginners’ piece on the piano:** 6% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, 2% a mild sense

**Analysing a historical document:** 34% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, 37% a mild sense

**Learning how to aim and fire a gun, and hitting a target:** 1% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, 1% a mild sense

**Carrying out a simple chemical experiment and making a graph of the results:** 4% reported a medium-strong sense of satisfaction, 73% reported a mild sense

John doesn’t really see anything particularly unusual, except perhaps that he’s surprised so few people got satisfaction from the gun task. But it might be him that’s abnormal there, not the afters.

He thinks about going back to Sherlock to let him know John’s observations (or lack thereof) but doesn’t quite feel up to being in Sherlock’s room right now. Instead he taps off a quick message – *Not keen on guns? Or I guess maybe it was the aiming/trying to hit a target thing they didn’t like. And the differences between strong and mild on the chemical and painting ones are maybe interesting? I don’t really know though, sorry* – and then lies back on his bed.

Sherlock’s voice, cool and relaxed, echoes in his head. *I’m sexually attracted to you. Have been all along. I suggest we work on eradicating these feelings.*
There are numerous reasons for the ban on E. L.I.s having sex or relationships with their students, but they’re almost all centred around the inherent power imbalance. Afters learn everything they need to know to start off in the world from their E.L.I.s. If a relationship turned sour, an instructor would be able to do serious harm to their student by intentionally teaching them incorrect information. Afters also don’t know enough about 22nd century earth relationships to know what’s normal, something an abusive instructor could take advantage of. And then there’s the studies showing that afters tend to feel grateful to and dependent on their E.L.I.s, and that this can often translate into a particularly needy form of attraction.

Sherlock’s determined independence, his apparent lack of interest in being taught anything at all by John and his air of self sufficiency all meant that it never occurred to John that any of this could happen with him. Apparently, though, it can, and has. And John’s job now is to help Sherlock work through his feelings, understand them, deconstruct them, and move on.

John shuts his eyes and tries to think of anything but standing half-stripped under Sherlock’s eyes, Sherlock’s fingers on his skin. But what he falls asleep thinking of in the end is no better – his heartrate on Sherlock’s handchip, beating out a graph of incontrovertible data beneath Sherlock’s palm, nestled up close to the place in Sherlock’s wrist where his own pulse breaks the surface.

*

John expects things with Sherlock to be awkward the next morning, or if not awkward then at least somehow different. But Sherlock appears to be exactly as usual.

‘I’m not sure yet if there’s anything useful to be found in the early experiment report I sent you,’ he says, as soon as John steps onto the stairs.

‘Morning,’ John says blearily. ‘Er – sorry, what was that?’

‘However,’ Sherlock continues, ‘I want to repeat the experiments on myself so I can judge more exactly. Who knows what the people who ran them originally might have failed to record? Obviously a sample size of one will mean extremely limited data, but it’s a start. I can always recruit more reps later on.’

‘Oh,’ John says. ‘How did you sleep?’

‘Didn’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘Our appointment with Mycroft isn’t till two, so we’ve got time to run at
least one of these experiments. Do you know of a five kilometre track anywhere nearby? Or somewhere we can get painting supplies?'

‘Getting tea,’ John says, coming downstairs. He got round to connecting the kettle to his handchip’s network a couple of days ago, so now he just flops onto the sofa and presses the tea button which he’s put right on the handchip’s opening menu.

‘Do most people take this long to approach actual sentience after waking?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Because if so, I can’t imagine how your culture manages to function.’

‘Tea first, talk after,’ John says. He sinks back into the sofa.

John’s handchip beeps to let him know the water’s boiled, and he goes next door to make the tea.

‘There’s a park six tube segments from here,’ Sherlock’s voice says from next door. ‘If we go now we’ll have plenty of time.’

John comes back through clutching a mug, his brain finally starting to come online. ‘Is this really going to work, though?’ he says. ‘I mean – wasn’t the whole point of those experiments to see the afters’ reactions to being set tasks and fulfilling them? If you choose the tasks yourself –’

Sherlock goes very still, then beams. ‘Of course!’ he says. ‘Quite right, John, I don’t know how I could have – all right, then, I’ll need your help.’

John takes a sip of tea. ‘OK,’ he says. ‘How exactly?’

‘Set me tasks,’ Sherlock says. ‘Broadly similar to the ones the original testers used – similar categories – but different enough that I get a sense of fulfilling a task someone’s set me rather than simply trying to replicate an experiment.’

John nods, taking a bigger sip. ‘Right,’ he says. ‘I guess I can do that.’

‘Now?’ Sherlock says.
‘Give me a minute to think something up!’ John says. ‘Not to mention finish my tea.’ He sits down again, in his armchair this time.

Sherlock paces up and down by the stairs, turns in a circle, and then says, ‘Have you thought of anything yet?’

‘Sometimes I think you’re actually two years old,’ John says. And it occurs to him that it’s very odd, really, to be saying that to someone he’s known a week. Because he doesn’t really know what Sherlock is sometimes like, what he’s occasionally or even usually like, only how he happens to be when he’s just moved in with a new E.L.I. who he finds slightly more tolerable than previous ones. The holes – or, really, gaping chasms – in Sherlock’s memory are such that Sherlock himself doesn’t really know who he is or what he’s actually like.

John left his previous clients feeling that they were good acquaintances, bordering on friends. That was after a month. He and Sherlock are one week in and he’s already thinking of Sherlock as – well, as something other than a close acquaintance. Describing it more precisely than that is hard, though. Friend doesn’t quite fit. Student is factually correct but in practice seems to have very little to do with how they relate to each other. All John knows is that it’s different from any relationship he’s had with a student before. Or with anyone else, for that matter.

‘What about now?’ Sherlock says, and John starts.

Reluctant to say, ‘Actually, I wasn’t thinking about the experiment, I was pondering the nature of our relationship,’ he thinks hastily, takes a large gulp of tea that burns his tongue slightly, and says, ‘All right, yeah. Uh – let’s go with drawing.’

‘That’s very similar to the original task,’ Sherlock says.

‘No arguing,’ John says. ‘If we’re going to do this, you just – do what I say. I want you to draw a picture, and take, um – twenty minutes to do it.’

Sherlock smirks. ‘You’re enjoying this already,’ he observes. ‘I should have realised you’d appreciate this experiment. What do you want me to use to draw it? Pencil, pen, handchip?’

‘Pencil,’ John says. He finds one in a drawer and puts it down on the kitchen table, where there’s already a stack of paper.
Sherlock sits down at the table, picks up the pencil and bends his head over the paper without another word. John could get used to this.

There’s twenty minutes of peace after that. Sherlock continues to draw without once looking up. John finishes his tea and then makes himself another mug. Faint sunlight seeps through the windows and fills the living room with a pale wash of warmth.

‘Time’s up,’ he says.

Sherlock straightens, and hands the picture to John, who looks at it curiously. It’s unexpectedly beautiful, and he finds himself studying it for some time. It shows the room they’re in – though without them in it, just the walls and floor and furniture. John didn’t give much thought to what Sherlock’s drawing style was likely to be, but he thinks he’d have predicted meticulous detail and hyper-realism. It isn’t like that at all. There’s a liquidity to the lines; one thing blurs into another, and various objects in the drawing have moved from their positions in real life.

‘Did the original testers offer feedback on the tasks?’ John asks. ‘I mean, praise the afters being tested for doing it right, or anything? Because that must have an impact on satisfaction.’

‘They did,’ Sherlock says. ‘Always positive. The idea was to simulate the situation the reps would be in if someone in authority gave them an order and they carried it out, and the testers thought they’d probably be congratulated under those circumstances.’

‘In that case,’ John says, ‘this is beautiful, Sherlock. Really – quite extraordinary, actually. Have you tried drawing before?’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘I’ve sketched graphs on my handchip,’ he says. ‘But drawing without a computer, and purely for artistic reasons without practical benefit – no.’

‘It’s amazing,’ John says.

‘That’s enough,’ Sherlock says. ‘It was fairly quick and perfunctory praise in the original tests. No need to get carried away.’
John very much wants to keep going, to convey to Sherlock how lovely he finds this picture, but invalidating the results of the experiment is not going to make Sherlock happy at all. So he just says, ‘Right, so how would you rate your satisfaction on completing that task?’ He pulls the options from the original experiment up on his handchip. ‘Not at all satisfied, mildly satisfied, moderately satisfied, strongly satisfied.’

‘I–’ Sherlock says, and winces. ‘Oh, not this again.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Compulsion not –’ Sherlock grits out – ‘not to say.’

‘Just write it down in your own notes,’ John suggests.

Sherlock opens his handchip and starts to type, but almost immediately winces again. ‘Same,’ he says. His whole face screws up, as if making some huge effort, and he snaps, ‘Strong satisfaction,’ and then sits down heavily on the floor.

‘I really don’t know if I’m comfortable doing this experiment if it’s going to hurt you,’ John says.

‘It doesn’t hurt,’ Sherlock says. ‘It just feels wrong. And I will not be dictated to by irrational barriers in my mind – I’m going to get over them, and having additional motivation to do so might help.’

‘OK,’ John says.

‘It explains the discrepancy between mild and moderate-strong satisfaction reported in the original experiment,’ Sherlock says, sounding more normal. ‘The tested reps didn’t want to lie, but felt compelled not to admit that they found painting satisfying. So they compromised and said they were mildly satisfied by completing that task. Though 7% evidently managed to push themselves through the barrier, or for some reason had a weaker barrier to begin with.’

John nods. ‘Do you want a break before doing another one?’ he asks.
‘Maybe a moment or two,’ Sherlock says. He leans his head back on the banister by the stairs. John’s eyes linger a moment too long on his slender neck as it’s exposed, then dart away.

‘So – you almost all vaguely remember being given some sort of task, and...this means what?’ John says. ‘That it has something to do with drawing or painting?’

‘Not necessarily,’ Sherlock says. ‘These experiments are somewhat inexact. It could simply be that the task involved precise work with our hands in some way. Or was related to something visual in a general way. Art seems unlikely.’

‘I guess,’ John says. ‘The task about chemical experiments had a similar pattern of responses, didn’t it? Do you think that could also be because people were reluctant to tell the truth about it being satisfying?’

Sherlock frowns. ‘I talk about science and chemicals and experiments a lot without feeling any barrier,’ he says, ‘so it seems unlikely. But we’ll have to try something similar and find out. Though I think we should try the piano one next, or whatever equivalent you can think of.’

‘Would a different instrument do?’ John asks. ‘My sister’s ex plays the violin; I might be able to borrow one from her.’

‘Good,’ Sherlock says. ‘That should do nicely. Can you message her now?’

*  

Clara’s out, but says she has a key with a neighbour and gives John the admission code. John is secretly somewhat relieved that he isn’t going to have to be face to face with her; he’s barely spoken to her since he heard the news about her and Harry splitting up. He has absolutely no idea what he’d say.

Clara also messages him instructions as to where to find her violin and a booklet of beginner pieces, and within forty minutes he’s back at the flat. When he gets in, Sherlock’s sitting halfway up the stairs, eyes shut, muttering to himself.

‘Got it,’ John says, ‘and a beginner piece for you to try. Want to give it a go now?’
Sherlock opens his eyes. ‘You shouldn’t be so accommodating, asking my preferences all the time,’ he says. ‘In the original experiment, the reps were just told to do things, not asked.’

John rolls his eyes. ‘Fine,’ he says, and dredges up a superior officer voice. ‘Get up, come here, and read the opening chapter of this booklet. It’ll tell you how to read music and how to physically position the instrument. Then, try to play the first piece in the second chapter.’

Sherlock looks slightly pink all of a sudden – apparently annoyed by John’s ordering him about, despite having asked for it. ‘You don’t need to go that far,’ he says. ‘The scientists running the experiment would hardly have barked orders like soldiers.’

‘Can’t get it right, can I?’ John says, but he’s smiling. ‘Just – take the sodding booklet, OK?’

‘They definitely wouldn’t have talked like that,’ Sherlock says, grinning.

‘And you’re the expert on appropriate tone and manner in different kinds of interaction now?’

‘I’ve observed enough to have a good idea,’ Sherlock says. ‘And before you say anything, no, you shouldn’t expect that to affect my own behaviour in the slightest.’

‘Yes, I’d assumed,’ John says.

Sherlock doesn’t get up; just holds out his hand, and John crosses the room to hand over the booklet. They sit in silence for five minutes while Sherlock scans the chapter rapidly. Then he says, ‘All right, that seems straightforward enough,’ and gets up.

John gives him the violin. They don’t have the music stand, so John finds himself holding up the booklet at the right page for Sherlock to see.

‘This is just a one off,’ he warns. ‘Don’t get any ideas about using me as furniture in general.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ Sherlock says, but he’s smirking, and John is probably doomed to having
cups of tea balanced on his head for the rest of the month.

Sherlock moves the bow across the strings, and produces a screeching sound. John winces; Sherlock scowls, and moves back for another try. This time, the sound is clear and perfect.

John isn’t sure what happens after that. It’s as though Sherlock goes through all the normal beginner stages of playing an instrument over the next ten minutes. John sees him hesitate slightly too long between notes, hears him get the rhythm wrong, get the wrong note – but Sherlock only makes each of these mistakes once, or twice at most, and then moves on. He plays the piece perfectly all the way through and then moves on without further instruction to the next piece in the booklet. He plays that too, then, after glancing at the next couple of pieces and shaking his head in apparent disgust, skips to three quarters of the way through the booklet.

He seems almost possessed, eyes fixed on the booklet, lit by something John’s never seen in them before. John is fairly sure that he could shout Sherlock’s name and Sherlock wouldn’t hear him; he’s lost somewhere else entirely.

Sherlock is beautiful like this and John finds himself staring unreservedly. He has no idea how much time passes or how many pieces Sherlock plays before finally lowering the bow, and looking up.

‘I’m guessing we’re putting you down for a strong sense of satisfaction on that one,’ John manages to say.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘How could the others not –’ he breaks off, as if the concept is too impossible to articulate.

‘Afters are usually a bit baffled by music,’ John says. ‘Mostly don’t seem to get it, or understand the appeal. Some of them actually say they find trying to play it disturbing.’

Sherlock just shakes his head quietly. John notices that his fingers are clutching at the violin, holding it tight, almost protectively.

‘I can ask Clara if you can keep it for a while,’ John says. ‘Although I’m afraid I think she probably will want it back pretty soon.’
Sherlock nods, and makes a credible attempt at not looking crushed. John decides that if Clara does say no, he’s going to get Sherlock his own violin. He might be able to claim it as necessary for education, but if not he’ll spend his own money. It’s not as if he spends much on himself, and he’d pay a lot more than the price of a cheap violin to see that look on Sherlock’s face again. He looked – lost, but as though he was lost somewhere extraordinary and wonderful, somewhere where his constant cacophony of thought did not exactly go silent, but melded itself with the pattern of the music and became part of something bigger. Something Sherlock could be swept up in instead of endlessly trying to organise and control.

John knows he’s being very fanciful now, but he doesn’t think that necessarily means he’s wrong.

*

‘So,’ John says, as they sit down in the tube car, ‘what exactly are we hoping to get out of this meeting?’

‘To begin with we’ll both talk to him,’ Sherlock says. ‘Ask questions straightforwardly – he won’t answer them, of course, but we may as well make sure. Then you’re going to keep talking to him, keep him occupied, while I explore the building. There may be print records stored somewhere, or alternatively a computer I can use to access files – he’s the sort of man who would always keep a backup of anything on his handchip, whether on a computer or as physical copies. Quite likely both.’

‘Funny how you never mentioned that this meeting was really about me helping you break into a government building,’ John says.

‘You’d have agreed eventually anyway,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’d have had to go through lots of tedious persuasion, whereas telling you right before we leave will force you to process the information more quickly and come to a decision faster. Your mental processes can reach a perfectly reasonable speed when you let them; I was just ensuring they operated in the most efficient way possible.’

‘Of course you were,’ John says. ‘Very generous of you, really.’

‘Wasn’t it?’ Sherlock says. ‘Ah, this is the right exit for Mycroft’s building. Come on.’
‘Sherlock Holmes and John Watson,’ Mycroft says, as they enter his office. ‘Nice to see you both again. Please sit down.’

There are two chairs waiting for them there; heavy and old-fashioned in style. The whole office is like that, in fact: not even 21st century but 20th. He wouldn’t be at all surprised if the enormous desk Mycroft sits behind is actually 19th century, though whether government offices can actually afford to supply that kind of antique...then again, it could be Mycroft’s own. Mycroft always gives off a vaguely moneyed impression, though that could be a deliberate attempt to intimidate people.

Mycroft says, ‘You said that you wanted to talk to me about the after phenomenon. Though I’m afraid that there really isn’t much information available. Such as there is I expect John, as an E.L.I., has already seen.’

‘What’s your private opinion on their origins?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Off the record.’

‘Believe me,’ Mycroft says, ‘anyone who has been involved in government work for any length of time can attest to the fact that there is no such thing as “off the record”. My private opinions are just that.’ He pauses for effect. ‘Private.’

‘Fair enough,’ Sherlock says. His tone is level, but John can feel him seething, and wonders again at the antagonism between these two. It doesn’t appear to go both ways – Mycroft doesn’t seem bothered by Sherlock at all – but then John very much doubts that Mycroft would show it if he did feel irritated by Sherlock, so that doesn’t mean much.

‘We’ve been investigating a couple of different things,’ John says. ‘Have you got any notes on the changes that have occurred since the afters first started arriving? Getting better at talking and writing, and developing an aversion to certain kinds of touching?’

‘Some,’ Mycroft says. ‘A very limited amount, as I said. Perhaps one of you would like to go and have a look at our print archives now?’

Sherlock’s looking suspicious, and John doesn’t blame him. This is disconcertingly ideal. But nevertheless, it would be ridiculous to waste the opportunity, so John says, ‘Yeah, that’d be great. Sherlock, do you want to go?’

Sherlock nods, and gets to his feet. ‘I suppose you’ll want someone to supervise me?’ he says.
‘Not at all,’ Mycroft says. ‘The archives aren’t classified. They’re on the floor below this one; I’m sure you can find your own way there easily enough.’

Sherlock frowns, and then exits the room.

‘How is it, living with him?’ Mycroft asks, after the door shuts. ‘Hellish, I’d imagine from his file.’

‘I’m never bored,’ John says.

Mycroft smiles. ‘I must confess I was looking forward to seeing how this assignment panned out. The two of you are both interesting personalities in your own right.’

‘Er...thank you?’ John says.

‘Oh, it’s certainly a compliment,’ Mycroft says. ‘Although I find that most people are interesting, if you look at them closely enough. You and Sherlock are both something out of the common, though.’

‘Sherlock is – extraordinary,’ John says, and then is terrified that he’s just given himself away.

‘Yes,’ Mycroft agrees. Then he says, ‘Nevertheless, I’d advise you against sleeping with him.’

John doesn’t splutter, doesn’t give a rash of frenzied denials, but he does take several seconds to compose a reply. When it comes, it comes slightly too fast. ‘I have no intention of sleeping with him.’

Mycroft studies him. ‘Good. It’s not so much the usual reasons that worry me, you know. I really can’t imagine – from what I’ve read of Sherlock – that his becoming excessively dependent on you would be a problem.’

‘No,’ John says. ‘No, but even so, it wouldn’t be right.’
‘Possibly, possibly not,’ Mycroft says. ‘But it wouldn’t do for you to get found out and removed as
his E.L.I. I’m really not entirely sure whether you’re a good influence on him or not, but at least he
does allow you to influence him in some way, which is more than can be said for either of the
previous instructors he was paired with.’

‘Why does it matter?’ John asks.

‘I’m the Afters Coordinator,’ Mycroft says. ‘New afters are my responsibility, and this one has
given me reason to worry. Naturally I’m concerned that he integrates smoothly into 22\textsuperscript{nd} century
earth life, and I feel that you have a better chance of helping him to do that than anyone else. I
don’t want that compromised. I have no investment in Sherlock \emph{personally}, of course, but
professionally I have a very great one, and I take my profession extremely seriously. I encourage
you to do the same.’

‘Yes,’ John says. ‘I do, I will, of course. I wasn’t – I wouldn’t have –’

‘Then there’s no problem,’ Mycroft says.

John hesitates. Mycroft’s provided a perfectly convincing answer as to why he’s so apparently
interested in what happens to Sherlock, and yet there’s an obvious question remaining. After a
moment, John asks it: ‘Why did you give Sherlock your surname?’

Mycroft smiles. There’s something almost sad in the smile, but John’s probably just imagining that
– it seems very unlikely. ‘That I can’t tell you,’ Mycroft says. ‘What I can tell you, John, is that
there are many aspects of life in which caring is not an advantage. I’ve been negligent in observing
that dictum of late, but, as always when I allow myself to forget it, I have been sharply reminded.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ John tells him, honestly.

‘No matter,’ Mycroft says. ‘Perhaps you should go and see how Sherlock’s getting on?’
'Find anything?' John asks, though he waits until they’re safely out of Mycroft’s office building and in a tube car before he does it. Not that he really thinks that’ll stop Mycroft from hearing what they’ve got to say; the man always gives the impression of having eyes everywhere. And anyway, this isn’t secret. But he still thinks it’s probably better not to parade their discoveries in front of Mycroft – as short and odd as the meeting was, John had enough time to get the feeling that Mycroft isn’t particularly thrilled about Sherlock’s investigation.

‘I did,’ Sherlock says. ‘It was in the print archives, but I took scans with my handchip. Here.’ He holds up his palm for John to see.

It’s a picture of a street corner. There’s nothing apparently unusual about it that John can see; two brick walls meeting and the edge of a shop sign, whose first letter (L) is just visible.

‘What is this?’ John asks.

‘This is a photograph of a place where someone was replaced in 2136,’ Sherlock says. ‘Half an hour or so before this picture was taken, Sylvius Brett disappeared and a rep who would later take the name Sam Merton appeared in his place. The After Management department no longer bothers to take photographs of every place a rep appears after they’ve been collected and taken to Montague Street. But they did for a long time, in the hope that there might be some clue there.’

‘And according to you, there is?’

Sherlock zooms in. ‘Look at the wall,’ he instructs.

John does, and notices what he hadn’t when the picture was zoomed out: there’s some pieces missing from the wall. Up to about a fifth of the way up – roughly the height of a person – there’s a column of bricks with a flat hollow scooped out of them.
‘So the bricks are a bit chipped,’ John says, slowly. ‘They were – scraped by something, I guess?’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘It’s a perfectly smooth, even indentation,’ he says. ‘Nothing could cut them that perfectly – even if someone had done it deliberately, there’d be bumps and slightly different bits.’

‘So then what happened?’ John asks.

Sherlock smiles, face suffused with the triumphant glee John’s grown to recognise as meaning progress in working something out. ‘Particle transit,’ he says. ‘This photo isn’t the only one like that – there’s a file noting a number of occasions in which, as well as a person, part of a wall or building disappeared too. Particle transit is the only transportation method that could explain that.’

‘How?’ John says. ‘I mean, I’ve obviously used particle transit to get to the starline and back, but I don’t really know much about how it works.’

‘All right,’ Sherlock says, pressing his hands together and leaning back in his seat. ‘Are you familiar at least with the basic principle?’

‘Sort of,’ John says. ‘Um, I’m probably horribly wrong, but – I think it’s that – particles can disappear from one place and reappear in another, right? And – the probability of all the particles that make up a given thing – like a person – disappearing at the same time and reappearing in the same place is naturally tiny, but the particle transit machine somehow affects quantum probability? I mean, I have no idea how, but...that’s the impression I have of it.’

‘Basic, but more or less correct,’ Sherlock says. ‘And enough of an understanding to be going on with. In terms of how the transportation is actually carried out, there are two ways of going about it. You can either – essentially mark particular particles as the ones to move, and then deposit them into a space, essentially shunting aside everything around them to make room. That’s how the army does it, how you’ll have been transported, but for that technique to work you have to know exactly where you’re putting the person, otherwise they could end up inside a wall. People who appear at the outer starline all appear on mats in the docks designed for the purpose, don’t they?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘So if you’re not sure of the exact layout of wherever you’re sending someone, then what do you do?’
’You – I suppose you could think of it as drawing a box around them,’ Sherlock says. ‘All of the particles in a given area move, and are swapped with all of the particles in an area of the same dimensions somewhere else. Clearly whoever’s engineering the swapping is able to ensure which country people end up in – the fact that our language skills are always appropriate shows that – but probably nothing more exact than that.’

‘Someone could still end up inside a wall,’ John says. ‘They’d just have a box of air around them, and then the wall would cave in on them.’

‘Yes, but at least they’d have a reasonable chance of survival that way,’ Sherlock says. ‘Whereas if it was precisely the area that made up their body that was moved, they’d suffocate extremely quickly. Actually,’ he adds, looking thoughtfully at John, ‘that would be a good way to confirm this hypothesis. If I’m right, and particle transit of the swapping variety is been how reps are transported, then probability dictates that a number of people would have ended up in unfortunate locations. We should look for records of that.’

‘And then?” John says. ‘Assuming you’re correct, where does that lead us?’

‘Possibly nowhere,’ Sherlock says. ‘Except that it’s not as if any ordinary person has a particle transit machine in their basement, is it? They’re astronomically expensive, correct?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘China’s got one, and America has – and obviously the world army has a whole bank of them to transport soldiers, paid for by the Earth Nations. But no, there’s no way a private citizen could ever have one.’

‘Interesting,’ Sherlock says. ‘Lends some credence to the conspiracy theories, doesn’t it?’

‘But why would a government do this?’ John protests. ‘Kidnap people and drop them somewhere else years later without their memories. It’s insane.’

‘Well, the conspiracy theorists say they’re experimenting on people,’ Sherlock says. ‘Once they’re finished with the subjects, they wipe their memories to keep the experimentation secret, and let them go.’

‘No,’ John says, shaking his head. ‘No, that’s – I can’t believe that.’
Sherlock shrugs. ‘Time travel’s still a possibility. It’s possible that in the future researchers
discover how to make particle transit work for time as well as space. I imagine there are people
looking into the idea.’

‘We should try and research time travel, then,’ John says.

‘First,’ Sherlock says, ‘I want to finish the task experiment.’

*

John takes on the gun task next, deciding to use his militarised handchip – hopefully that should
meet the right criteria for similar-but-not-too-similar.

He rummages around in his belongings till he finds his old army vest. Supposedly laser proof; in
fact wearing it would prevent a body from being sliced clean in half but would not stop severe
organ damage. John almost never wore it, preferring a quick, clean death to permanent disability
and mutilation, or possibly still death, but slower. Ironic, really, that he’s ended up with a
psychebullet in his leg, though he knows it could have been much worse.

Hanging it over the wall underneath the piece of paper where he’s drawn a rough target should
protect the wall from too much damage, though. He’ll make sure he instructs Sherlock to just shoot
one brief pulse, not a concentrated beam; as long as Sherlock sticks to that there shouldn’t be a
mark left on the wallpaper.

John hangs up the vest, and then the target over it, and stands in the middle of the living room,
motioning for Sherlock to come over and join him.

‘I’ve switched on the military mode,’ John says. ‘The red light you can see there is where the laser
comes out. It’ll cut clean through anything it touches, so keep out of its way. OK, now take my
hand.’

Sherlock’s hand rests over John’s, and John realises much too late how terrible an idea this was. He
ignores this realisation, and the way his heart suddenly seems to be throbbing under the skin of his
hand, and says, ‘If you look at the screen you can see the trigger button. Manoeuvre my hand into
position first, till it’s aiming where you want it. Don’t press the button till I say so.’
Sherlock pushes at John’s hand and John goes along with the movement. When Sherlock lets go, John judges that the beam of the laser will hit the target, though not dead centre, and won’t cut through anything on the way, so he says, ‘All right, go,’ and Sherlock fires.

This is affecting John in unexpected ways. It’s not just that their hands are touching, or that Sherlock’s standing so close, leaning forward and down, his head almost resting on John’s shoulder, curls brushing at the edge of John’s face. It’s the coordination, the two of them aiming together, or maybe it’s John actually getting to teach Sherlock something for a change (and something John really cares about, rather than the boring minutiae of everyday living). Or it could be something else – John doesn’t know, would rather not think about it, but everything feels as charged and hot as the laser when it strikes the target.

Sherlock removes his finger from the button instantly, just as John told him to. ‘Brilliant,’ John says.

He can feel Sherlock glowering. ‘I didn’t hit the centre,’ he says. ‘I’m trying again.’

John lets him, and this time, Sherlock hits it dead on. ‘Fantastic,’ John says, genuinely impressed.

Sherlock straightens, and then, out of nowhere, lets out what sounds horribly like a yell of pain.

‘Are you OK?’ John says, turning to face him, hands reaching out almost automatically to check for injuries. Catching himself, he flicks off the military mode before touching Sherlock. Best not to accidentally decapitate him with a laser.

‘I tried to say –’ Sherlock’s face wrenches. He sinks to the floor, curls up into a ball, and then says, very fast and very quietly, ‘Trees are green, James Bond films are terrible, I got great satisfaction from that task, I wonder if Lestrade will have an interesting crime for us soon.’

John can only stare. Sherlock says, ‘It’s a – mental perception trick. Admitting to finding that – as I found it – was almost unbearable. I thought perhaps saying other random sentences might trick my brain into allowing it. I’ve evidently been instructed – perhaps even brainwashed – very strongly not to admit to any familiarity with or interest in weapons.’

‘That’s....’ John frowns. ‘That’s slightly worrying.’
'Exciting, though, isn’t it?’ Sherlock says. ‘Definitely something sinister going on here.’

His eyes are alight. John doesn’t have a good feeling about any of this, but he smiles stiffly. ‘I suppose we should get onto the next task,’ he says.

Sherlock uncurls from his ball and pushes himself to his feet. He looks – almost awkward, all of a sudden. ‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea,’ he says.

‘What? Why?’ John says. ‘You – you haven’t been put off by this, have you? You still want to finish?’

‘I still want to finish,’ Sherlock says. ‘But I think it may be advisable to have someone other than you administer the tasks.’

John repeats, ‘What? Why?’ sounding like an idiot. He is, ridiculously, slightly hurt.

‘It’s – I’ve become aware that –’ Sherlock fidgets. ‘The way I react to your praise is perhaps too different from the way a newly arrived rep would react to the praise of a researcher, a complete stranger to them.’

John frowns. ‘Yeah, you’ve got a point there,’ he admits. ‘But getting a complete stranger in to do this could be difficult.’

‘A complete stranger isn’t necessary,’ Sherlock says. ‘Just someone who I don’t – someone with whom I have a lesser degree of familiarity. I was thinking of asking Ms Hudson.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Good idea.’

If he feels a slight, incomprehensible pang of loss – well, that just proves Sherlock’s point, really. ‘I’ll message her now, shall I?’ he says.

*
Ms Hudson agrees to come over straight away. On arrival, she insists on making them both large, steaming mugs of tea, and presses them into their hands.

‘It’s November now,’ she says. ‘Getting cold. You boys need to keep yourselves warm.’

‘Thank you,’ John says, smiling at her. There’s something immediately likeable about her. Making them tea is definitely not her job, but then, helping Sherlock with bizarre experiments probably isn’t either. The government workers assigned to check up on John’s previous jobs just showed up once every week or so to make sure nothing was seriously wrong and had very little contact beyond that.

She reads the list, and purses her lips thoughtfully. ‘Similar to running a track,’ she says, ‘but not too similar. Perhaps an exercise routine? I know my niece uses something like that. Such a sweet girl, although I do have my worries about her taste in men. Still, we all make mistakes there. I know I’ve –‘

‘An exercise routine sounds fine,’ Sherlock interrupts. ‘And while I do it, there’s really no need at all for you to regale me with mind-numbing tales of how you once went on a date with a man who seemed perfectly charming and then turned out to be sleeping with your best friend.’

John winces. ‘Sherlock –’ he starts, but then he breaks off abruptly. Ms Hudson has just patted Sherlock on the head, something which, if John did it, would surely result in the loss of his arm. Sherlock stares up at her, clearly completely taken aback.

‘So impatient,’ she says. ‘I expect your mind moves very fast, doesn’t it? My sister had a girlfriend like that once. Always seemed very impolite because she couldn’t bear to wait for anyone. It annoyed my sister no end. I found her quite charming, personally, although she could be a little bit hurtful sometimes, without meaning to.’

Sherlock just blinks at her, and then goes back to staring at the offending hand, which is now safely back at Ms Hudson’s side.

‘I know you’re a nice boy,’ Ms Hudson says, and John wonders what the odds are of anyone else ever describing Sherlock as a ‘nice boy’ over the rest of his life. ‘But you’ll put people off, you know, if you’re rude to them.’

‘I don’t care,’ Sherlock says, regaining enough poise to speak. ‘Why would I care?’
Ms Hudson smiles knowingly. ‘Well, perhaps you’re different,’ she says. She glances at John, a glance that for some reason makes him blush. ‘I don’t really think so, though. But I don’t like to make assumptions, or generalise. I find it wastes more time than it saves, in the end. So we’ll see what happens, I suppose. It’s lovely to have you here, anyway.’

‘Er,’ Sherlock says. And then, even more incredibly: ‘Thank you.’

Ms Hudson beams at him, and then says, ‘Shall we get down to the task, then? I can ask my niece to send me a good exercise video and you can copy it.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘Good, yes, do that.’

Ms Hudson taps a message into her handchip. As she does, she remarks, ‘Of course, although I’m all for politeness, it’s not good to worry too much about what other people think. I was like that when I was still with my partner.’

John glances at Sherlock, who’s looking bored again already but apparently doesn’t dare say anything about it for fear of being patted again.

‘You gave in too much to what they wanted?’ John says, since one of them had better be polite, though actually he’s not much more interested in stories of bad boys and unfaithful partners than Sherlock is.

‘Oh yes,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘I thought I could change him. I’m afraid my niece is like that, too.’

‘But you broke up with him in the end,’ John says, smiling at her. ‘So perhaps she’ll learn, too, as she gets older.’

‘I didn’t actually break up with him,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘He was executed. He killed three people, you know. Ah, good, the video’s come through – would you like to get started, Sherlock?’
The exercise routine, as it turns out, is really a gymnastics routine. Sherlock watches it once through. ‘Interesting,’ he says. ‘I’m finding this very aesthetically pleasing, this display. It’s – elegant. It’s a much more straightforward feeling than my reaction to music, and less intense. But pleasant all the same.’

Sherlock then has a go at the routine himself, and proves to be as unfairly good at this as at everything else he does. He’s remarkably flexible, and so for John watching becomes an exercise in yanking his mind repeatedly away from the gutter.

Eventually he meets Sherlock’s eyes by accident, and Sherlock, evidently seeing something there of what’s going on in John’s mind, snaps, ‘John, you’re distracting me. Your presence is likely to invalidate the results; you should go upstairs.’

Upstairs, John thinks of Sherlock below, limbs stretching, concentrating intensely, and has to hold back a groan.

Sherlock’s admission that John’s feelings are, to some degree, reciprocated, has only made things worse. His mind now can’t let go of the idea that the things it wants are things it could, theoretically have. Which is ridiculous, because Sherlock being attracted to him changes nothing; the rules – and the reasons for those rules – are still in place. But John wants, and can’t seem to stop wanting.

He is not going to wank over a student again, especially not when said student and a government worker are just through a closed door and down one short flight of stairs, so he reads a book on his handchip instead. Or tries to, at any rate; mostly he ends up reading the same page over and over again while his mind drifts inexorably back towards Sherlock.

* 

‘Medium sense of satisfaction,’ Sherlock says. ‘I preferred watching the routine to actually attempting it, I think.’

‘You were so good at it,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘It’s a pity you missed the end, John, he was wonderful.’

‘I bet,’ John says, feeling very glad not to have been there.
'I’m very happy to help you do the last two tasks as well,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘I’m afraid I can’t now, though – I have to check up on another assignment. Would tomorrow be all right?’

‘Yep, sure,’ John says.

When she’s gone, Sherlock remarks, ‘She’s...interesting. At least, she’s significantly more interesting than I gave her credit for to begin with.’

‘Because her partner was a murderer?’ John says, half-smiling at Sherlock’s eternally inappropriate idea of what’s ‘interesting’.

‘Not so much the fact itself as her attitude to it,’ Sherlock says.

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Yeah, I see what you mean.’

He can't think of anything else to say about Ms Hudson, and there's a long silence. A silence which is slightly alarming in how awkward it feels. John always felt able to be quiet around Sherlock before. The fear of what they might be losing - this friendship that John’s only had a week and which already is disconcertingly important – makes John risk saying: ‘When you said my watching you was invalidating the results, was it...my response that was the problem? Because I can work harder at hiding it, I can –’

‘My response to your response, really,’ Sherlock says. He shifts, looking very uncomfortable, and John regrets starting this conversation, but Sherlock goes on before John can change the subject: ‘I react quite strongly to your praise, and your approval, and – also your arousal. There’s some kind of mirroring effect, I don’t – it’s interesting. I think I’d prefer observing it from the outside, though.’ He smiles.

‘You don’t have to discuss this if you don’t –’

‘You may as well know,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’m not finding this easy, keeping to this decision we made. You evidently aren’t either.’

‘Not even slightly,’ John says, because if Sherlock’s going to be honest John may as well join in.
‘It’ll get easier, won’t it?’ Sherlock says, sounding oddly vulnerable.

‘Yeah,’ John says, trying to believe it. ‘Yeah, I’m sure it will.’

‘It is fascinating,’ Sherlock adds, sounding more like his usual self. ‘Very different from anything else I’ve felt since I arrived. And exacerbated by the strangest things. When you move in such a way that I see flashes of skin I don’t normally see – or when you exert yourself so that I see your muscles moving beneath. I suppose it’s the unknown, the inaccessible that’s so appealing. I want to touch you all the time, even though the conditioning I seem to have would undoubtedly prevent my touching you in the way I’d like. But you could touch me, and I think about that all the time too. I think about you pushing the warmth of your fingers into every place in my body that has space for them. I think of – of colours – no, that’s not right – of the patterns you’d leave on me, unique, no one else would be exactly the same, I –’

‘You have to stop talking,’ John says, voice weak. ‘Sherlock, you can’t – I can’t –’

Sherlock makes a frustrated sound, and leans back. ‘You’re right,’ he says. ‘Talking about it makes it worse, doesn’t it? Ideally I’d like to gather data on the subject, because how I feel it might be different from how you do, and that could be valuable to know. But talking about it to you makes me – umber – amber – no, this is impossible, does language always break down around this subject?’

‘I don’t know,’ John says. ‘To be honest I’ve never really tried to vocalise it as clearly as you are now. I always just said, you know, I fancied someone. I never spun it out like this.’

‘Perhaps that was wise,’ Sherlock mutters. ‘This is impossible.’

There’s another pause, and John opens his mouth to say something, anything, but then, thankfully, his handchip beeps. He looks down at the message.

Hi John, it’s Gregson. We’ve got a death at 28C Iverson Road – the examining doctor’s not happy about it, we should be getting the results soon, but if it is murder I can’t see how it was done. Lestrade says Sherlock’s good for this kind of case – could you ask him if he minds having a look?

Cheers.

John lifts his palm to show Sherlock, and says, ‘Why does 28C Iverson Road sound familiar?’
Sherlock looks slightly grim. ‘Because,’ he says, ‘we were there the day before yesterday. That’s Catherine Oakshott’s address.’

*

When they get there, the building’s cordoned off. Inside Catherine’s flat, Gregson is standing, looking worried. He looks very different on duty, braided hair wound up and clipped back neatly, and a stiff, almost military posture.

‘Thanks for coming,’ he says when he sees John and Sherlock enter. ‘The examining doctor sent off to have some analysis done, so we should know for sure what killed her within a few hours. Feel free to take a look round.’

Catherine is sitting at the kitchen table, slumped back in her chair. There’s saliva all round her mouth and chin, and her lips are quite swollen. John’s training focused on laser injuries, but did also more briefly cover a number of illnesses and problems that might affect soldiers outside of battle. He’d need more information to be sure, but he reckons Catherine’s symptoms indicate laryngeal oedema – though what that means, if anything, he doesn’t know.

The rest of the room seems pretty much normal. The pumpkin they saw Catherine carve is sitting on the table beside her, half full of chocolates – surprising, really; John would expect her to have run out in about ten minutes. Children on Halloween are hardly known for their restraint.

The only really odd thing John observes is that the blue model tree is no longer in the pumpkin; instead, it’s lying smashed on top of the model train in the middle of the room.

‘The salivating and the swelling probably mean fluid’s accumulated where it shouldn’t,’ John says to Sherlock. ‘Though I have no idea what that tells us.’

‘Hm,’ Sherlock says. There’s a box of disposable gloves sitting by the door; Sherlock pulls on a pair and then walks over to the body. He reaches towards its mouth, and then his hands flinch back.

Sherlock almost snarls in irritation, and then expressions chase across his face as John watches him battle his own brain, trying to touch Catherine’s face. His hands move forward a couple of centimetres and then back by a little bit less, edging jerkily towards her. He’s reddening with the effort of it, teeth digging hard into his lip. Gregson stares in bewilderment, but says nothing.
John does, and sees immediately what Sherlock’s getting at: there’s signs of erosion all over the inside of Catherine’s throat.

‘Yeah, that’s what got the doctor so worried,’ Gregson says from across the room, seeing where they’re looking. ‘But he wasn’t sure exactly what caused it.’

Sherlock’s gaze goes from the dead woman, to Gregson, to the blue tree on top of the model engine. ‘I have an idea of what may have caused it,’ he says, mostly to himself. ‘Though I don’t see – it seems impossible.’

‘What do you mean?’ John asks.

‘You should have the sweets in that pumpkin analysed,’ Sherlock says to Gregson.

‘OK, I guess I can do that,’ Gregson says. ‘But why?’

‘Alkali poisoning,’ Sherlock says. ‘I believe that’s how she was killed, and that it was administered through those sweets.’

John considers this. ‘It would account for the symptoms,’ he says, ‘but a base strong enough to kill would taste awful. Surely she wouldn’t have gone on eating the chocolates after tasting that – and it’d take more than one. Also, she was going to give those chocolates to kids for Halloween. Surely the killer didn’t intend to murder a bunch of children.’

‘Very neat form of serial killing if they did,’ Sherlock says, eyes bright. ‘Everyone would blame Catherine. Of course, it’s not beyond the bounds of possibility that it was Catherine who doctored the sweets, and that this is a very peculiar form of suicide. But it’s a painful death to choose, and also a difficult one – to have killed her after just a few chocolates it must have been an immensely strong alkali. Ordinary domestic products wouldn’t do the trick. It can’t have been that easy to get hold of.’
‘Hang on,’ Gregson says. ‘What do you mean, *she was going to give those chocolates to kids*, how do you know that?’

‘Oh,’ John says. ‘Right, yeah. Uh – we actually saw Catherine the other day.’

Gregson gapes at them. ‘Excuse me?’

‘We’re investigating the afters phenomenon,’ John says. ‘We wanted to interview her about it.’ It occurs to him – and really should have occurred to him sooner – quite how suspicious this is going to look, him and Sherlock visiting a woman and her dying less than forty eight hours later.

Gregson’s frowning. ‘I wish you’d told me this before you came to consult,’ he says. ‘You’re potential suspects – not that I think you did it, but – you really shouldn’t have access to the evidence.’

‘You’ve been here the whole time,’ John says.

‘It seems a bit of a coincidence,’ Gregson says, looking at them both. ‘Did you – I mean, did she tell you anything? If she knew something...’

‘We thought she might be a child that went missing a long time ago,’ John says. ‘Laurette Cusack. But Catherine didn’t know anything and said she wasn’t really interested in worrying about her past. I don’t think there can be anything there.’

‘Maybe not,’ Gregson says. ‘Anyway – I can’t have you officially consult, but if you did want to talk to the neighbours, or Catherine’s boyfriend or ex, there’s no reason I should know anything about it. You’d just be, you know, exploring London, making friends.’

‘Thanks,’ John says, grinning at them.

He looks over at Sherlock, who’s now peering down at the blue tree, frowning to himself. At Gregson’s words, though, he straightens up and nods. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘We’d best be going. Gregson, let us know as soon as you get the analysis of the body or of the chocolates.’
‘Boyfriend first,’ Sherlock says.

‘We don’t even know where he lives,’ John objects.

‘Yes we do,’ Sherlock says. ‘I got his address off her handchip when you were talking to Gregson. The ex, too.’

‘Handchips are private,’ John says, automatically, though he’s all but given up trying to make Sherlock behave appropriately.

‘She’s dead, John,’ Sherlock says. ‘We opened up her mouth and looked inside; she’s beyond privacy. You want justice for her, don’t you?’

‘OK, fine, whatever,’ John says. ‘Where is this boyfriend?’

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS: bad science, mention of relationships with murderers, description of dead body
The boyfriend’s name is Henry Baker, and he lives in a flat only two tube segments away. It’s a converted mid 21st century house, and its layout briefly fools John into thinking it’s all one dwelling. Rather than having the flats on top of each other, they’re side by side, and the entrance to the other one must be round the side. Still, it was a ridiculous thing to think: barely anyone in London has a whole house, and certainly not this central.

John’s enormously relieved to discover that he’s already heard the news of Catherine’s death from the police, since Sherlock telling him would undoubtedly have been horrific. He seems completely deflated, barely present, and assents to their request to ask some questions with a slightly bewildered looking nod.

He saw her last two days before John and Sherlock did. Everything, he says, was fine; no, they didn’t argue, and no, nothing seemed wrong, and no, she didn’t seem worried about anything. His evidence is all negative, and somewhat discouraging. John sizes him up, wonders if he could have killed her, but finds nothing. He can only hope that Sherlock’s taking in more.

‘Tell me about Halloween,’ Sherlock says. ‘Did she do the same thing every year?’

Henry nods. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘I mean, I’ve only – I had only – been going out with her six months or so, but she told me about it. She’d carve a pumpkin in some really over the top gorgeous way, and then she’d fill it with MiniBites – those are her favourite, she’s basically addicted to them. Was.’ He swallows, hard, looks at the floor. ‘She used to eat like three packets in a sitting and not realise till she was done. We used to laugh about it.’

John wishes they could leave him alone to cope with his grief, because surely this can’t be feigned, surely he can’t have done it, but Sherlock apparently still has questions. ‘Did she keep a lot of MiniBites around in the flat, then?’ he says.

‘Yep,’ Henry says. ‘Packets and packets of them. It was kind of bad actually; she’d keep them so long they went off and she’d eat a ton of them before she even noticed they tasted wrong. It was so automatic for her.’
Ah. That explains then how Catherine managed to eat a number of chocolates that must have tasted like soap before noticing there was something wrong. It also, John thinks, implies that whoever killed her knew her well enough to be aware she’d do that.

‘Thank you,’ Sherlock says. *He can be polite enough when it suits him,* John thinks. *I should really work harder at trying to make him be polite when he’s not on a case.* But Sherlock’s witty abrasiveness is so much funnier than it should be, and feels like – an outlet, of sorts, even though John isn’t the one doing it. Nevertheless, John’s glad he isn’t doing it now, to this clearly heartbroken man who just wants to be left alone.

‘How did she find Halloween this year?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Don’t know,’ Henry says. ‘Been a really busy couple of days for me and I hadn’t – I hadn’t spoken to her since before – I didn’t even –’ He looks worse than ever, and has to stop. Then he asks, ‘Anything else?’

‘What was her job?’ Sherlock asks. ‘She mentioned it was stressful.’

‘She works for the government,’ Henry says. ‘Worked. Did. I –’ he takes a deep breath, fixes his eyes on the wall slightly to the left of John and Sherlock. ‘She worked in tax. Inheritance tax, specifically. She was the administrator for her area, she used to go and interview people to make sure they weren’t lying about the amount they’d inherited.’

So many people work for the government that jobs are able to be very time intensive, and tax is one of the largest sectors. Inheritance tax is prone to fraud, because a lot of people think the 90% rate is unreasonable, and John imagines that Catherine’s job must have involved getting yelled at a lot.

‘Presumably she didn’t have access to any chemical factories or anything of that kind?’ Sherlock says.

Henry frowns. ‘No, of course not. Or, I mean, at least not that I know of. Why –’

‘Do you know what sort of lichen she used to make her model trees?’
There are tears forming in Henry’s eyes now, but he blinks them away. ‘Please don’t talk about the modelling,’ he says. ‘It was so – it was hers. All right? It was hers and not – it’s not for other people to – just, please.’

‘It’s just one question –‘ Sherlock starts, but John digs a hand into his back.

‘Thank you very much, Henry,’ he says. ‘If Sherlock or I have any further questions later on we’ll be in touch. And I’m sorry for your loss.’

Henry nods and turns away. Once outside, Sherlock says, ‘The lichen’s important, John. I wouldn’t have asked if –‘

‘I know. But is it really likely that he knew the exact kind she used? Anyway, you can find out, just go back to her flat and get one of her models and analyse it.’

‘It may not matter anyway,’ Sherlock admits. ‘I just wanted faster answers. But the analysis of the body should confirm my theory at any rate.’

‘That she was killed with a strong alkaline poison,’ John says.

‘Like a bleach, but stronger than any normal household bleach,’ Sherlock says.

‘Surely that man’s feelings matter more than just getting a faster result?’ John says, and gets no answer. He sighs, and moves on. ‘So what makes you think it was a base that killed her?’

‘Certain species of lichen change colour in response to changes in PH,’ Sherlock says. ‘Indicator paper often utilises them. If the inside of that pumpkin was coated in an alkali, which then got all over the sweets when Catherine stirred them, it would explain why the tree turned blue. And I can’t think of any other explanation, can you? Besides, the kitchen stank of bleach, and though she seemed to think that was just because her cleaner had been there the day before, I thought at the time it seemed excessive, and now I think it’s far too much of a coincidence.’

‘Her symptoms are what you’d expect from someone ingesting a strong alkali,’ John says. ‘I mean, not that my training had much to do with things like that, but from what I know they are.’
'Yes,' Sherlock says. ‘We should have the results soon, and then we’ll know for sure. In the meantime, let’s go back and visit her neighbours.’

*

In fact, Catherine’s building contains only two flats besides her own, and the top floor flat is currently unoccupied. The neighbour in the first floor flat, Jack Dryer, also turns out to be her cleaner. He claims not to have been to her flat since the day before she died.

‘Went there once a week while she was out at work,’ he explains. ‘I was reasonably friendly with her too, but mostly just at the level of passing in the corridor, you know. I can’t believe she’s dead.’

‘How long have you lived here?’ John asks.

‘About five years. I actually only moved in about a month before Catherine did. So, like I say, I definitely knew her well-ish, but we weren’t close or anything.’

John looks around the flat while Sherlock continues to ask Jack questions – about Catherine’s movements the week before she died, about what she was like as a neighbour, about what cleaning her flat was like and whether he moved the models around when he did.

Jack’s own flat is pretty much identical to Catherine’s – surprising, in a way, as John would have thought he’d earn a lot more than she did. The government created so many jobs to keep unemployment down that they could barely afford to pay much above minimum wage for most of them any more.

There’s a number of photo frames around, showing slideshows of images from Jack’s handchip. Bizarrely, there’s also a frame containing a physical, printed photograph, showing a middle-aged woman – perhaps sixty or seventy – sitting in a garden, smiling. John knows people of a hundred or so who still have printed photographs, but Jack can’t be more than forty five. John supposes he just likes an old-fashioned look - like kids in their twenties John sees in the street wearing headphones instead of just paying music through their handchips – although most things in the flat seem to be modern.

He’s starting to feel tired, and although when he first comes into a room he often momentarily forgets his limp and can stand normally for a moment, nothing makes it ache like standing in one
place for long periods of time. He has absolutely no intention, however, of asking to sit down. Instead, he leans harder on his cane, and practices diverting his mind away from thoughts of the wound the way his therapist taught him.

It doesn’t work at all – it rarely does – but the exercise, the idea of trying to take back control, is always somehow calming in itself. He gives up trying to look around the flat – Sherlock glanced round it when they came in and will have got more from that than John could get from twenty minutes’ close examination – and watches Sherlock instead.

Sherlock is most in his element when he’s analysing non-sentient data, but there’s something to be said for seeing him like this, too. His questions flow smoothly, and there’s something behind them that compels them to be answered. John’s enjoyed Sherlock doing this all week, but it is easier when he’s interrogating someone without too personal a connection to the case. When Sherlock was talking to Henry, John’s enjoyment was tinged with sympathy and guilt. Now he can just appreciate Sherlock’s energy and brilliance without worrying.

Jack tells them that Catherine was a good neighbour, quiet, fairly friendly, never any trouble. That she was at work all week as normal. He also says that cleaning her flat was pretty straightforward – he’d spray everything with a fine antibacterial mist which would evaporate within an hour or two, leaving almost everything clean. He’d also set a vacuuming bot to go around the house. He’d go and do other flats in the meantime and when he came back the mist and bot would have done their work. Then he’d look for stubborn stains and anything that required more hands-on labour and take care of that. It was rarely necessary to move the models, but occasionally he did need to get at the shelves underneath. Catherine had no problem with that, though he was instructed to leave the train set in the kitchen alone, as it was fragile – she said she could always clean under that herself.

John has no idea what the relevance of these questions is, though begins to get a glimmer when Sherlock says, ‘This antibacterial mist had alkaline components, I imagine?’

‘I guess,’ Jack says. ‘To be honest I never worried that much about the chemistry of it.’

John smiles slightly at Sherlock’s expression, which indicates: how could anyone not want to understand the chemistry of something? But all Sherlock actually says is, ‘No, I suppose not. When you cleaned up the more difficult stains, did you use a stronger product?’

‘Yes,’ Jack says. ‘But what’s this got to do with her death? Sorry, I’m just confused.’

Sherlock ignores this question. ‘Where did you get your cleaning products?’
‘I used to order them straight from the factory,’ Jack says. ‘Cheaper that way. Big factory based on a space station.’

Sherlock’s eyes light up. ‘Space stations are allowed to produce much stronger chemicals than anything on earth, aren’t they?’ he says. ‘No risk of polluting earth’s atmosphere.’

‘Yeah, exactly,’ Jack says. ‘I can give you the name and contact details of the factory if you want? Though I still don’t get –’ But Sherlock waves the impending question away, and Jack gives in, typing the factory details into Sherlock’s handchip.

Sherlock looks up at Jack, who’s leaning in quite close to type the details, and his eyes suddenly fix on a gold chain disappearing into Jack’s shirt. His fingers dart up, and he pulls the chain out. On its end is a golden three dimensional model heart – completely realistic and incredibly detailed, as far as John can tell.

‘Hey,’ Jack says, looking ruffled for the first time since they arrived. He tries to pull back, but Sherlock grips the chain tightly. ‘The workmanship on this is impressive,’ he says. ‘It’s clearly handmade, and by someone who knew what they were doing.’

‘Yes,’ Jack says, shortly. ‘Can I have it back, please?’

Sherlock releases it, and Jack backs away. ‘Not many people have the skill to make something like that,’ Sherlock says.

‘No,’ Jack says, and clamps his mouth shut again.

‘The style’s familiar, too,’ Sherlock goes on. ‘The intricacy of it...’ He smiles at Jack, a not altogether pleasant smile.

‘What do you want me to say?’ Jack snaps. ‘She’s dead, isn’t she – what’s the point in raking things up, in hurting people. She’s gone.’ His composure’s vanished into nothing; he looks suddenly completely devastated, and all John’s enjoyment of Sherlock’s interrogation vanishes too.

‘I need the truth if I’m to bring her killer to justice,’ Sherlock says, coolly. ‘Perhaps you should tell
But Jack shakes his head. ‘She’s dead,’ he repeats. ‘It’s done. There was never anything between us, nothing happened. All right? Nothing happened. There’s nothing for me to tell you and I’m not saying anything more than that.’

‘You’ve said as much as I need to hear,’ Sherlock says. He glances over at the printed photograph John noticed earlier. ‘Actually, one last thing. Who’s that?’

‘My mother,’ Jack says. ‘She died three weeks ago. I wanted a stable photograph of her, one that wouldn’t – be part of a slideshow, keep changing. So I got that printed. Does it matter?’

‘Possibly,’ Sherlock says. ‘Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Dryer.’

John gives Jack a sympathetic look as he and Sherlock leave, but doesn’t know what to say. Evidently there was more between him and Catherine than he’s prepared to talk about. But saying I’m sorry for your loss as he did to Henry feels odd, when Jack won’t even admit the nature of their relationship.

‘You think they were having an affair?’ John asks Sherlock, once they’re back outside.

‘Catherine made that necklace,’ Sherlock says. ‘The style’s identical, it’s –’ he winces. ‘I can’t – it’s hard to phrase in language. But I’m certain of it.’

He looks at John as if daring him to express doubt, but John doesn’t doubt Sherlock at all, despite the lack of a logical explanation. When John keeps silent, Sherlock smiles slightly. ‘So yes, I do think they were having an affair,’ he says. ‘It certainly seems the most likely explanation of that necklace. There are metaphors in English about the heart, aren’t there?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Although – normally when people give each other heart jewellery they use...sort of stylised representations of hearts. That don’t really look much like real hearts at all. I’ll show you one.’ He brings up an image on his handchip.

‘That doesn’t remotely resemble a human heart,’ Sherlock protests.
'Yeah, I know. Real ones are a bit – grisly, I guess, for most people. For someone so intent on wanting to be normal, Catherine was...really quite eccentric. Or at least that’s the impression I’m getting.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, thoughtfully. ‘Whether it’s relevant or not, I don’t know. But she was certainly conflicted. Anyway, if Catherine and Jack were having an affair, or planning one, and Henry Baker found out...’

‘That’d give him a motive,’ John finishes. ‘But – he was so upset. He was broken. You can’t tell me that wasn’t real.’

‘It was certainly very impressive acting if it wasn’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘But I can’t rule it out. And anyway, even if he killed her, he could still have been unhappy about it afterwards. In fact he might well have felt even worse.’

John represses a shudder. ‘That’s horrible.’

‘You’ve seen countless Gliesans sliced into bits with lasers, you’ve watched people you knew well die beside you, and you think this is horrible?’ Sherlock says.

‘We were enemies in war,’ John says. ‘I’ve never come across anyone who might have killed someone they were supposed to care about.’

Sherlock considers him. ‘Interesting. The attitude of the killer influences your feelings about a death almost more than the suffering of the victim.’

John shakes his head. ‘No, it’s – no, it’s not like that, it’s –’ but he finds himself unable to say what it is like, and falls silent.

‘I think we should visit her ex-partner next,’ Sherlock says. ‘They only broke up a year ago – and yes, I know that from reading her emails while we were in the tubes, please don’t start on about privacy again. It’s just about possible this ex could still have strong feelings about it. Their address was on the handchip too.’

John smiles at him. Sherlock gives him a quizzical look, and John explains, ‘A week ago you wouldn’t have been able to do any of this. Say stuff about how someone who’d just murdered his
girlfriend might feel, or how someone whose relationship ended a year ago might feel now. I cannot believe how fast you learn. You’re amazing, Sherlock.’

‘So you’ve said,’ Sherlock says, but he’s doing a bad job of hiding his pleasure, the corners of his mouth clearly fighting to turn up. John’s own smile grows. ‘Let’s go, then,’ he says.

Catherine’s ex lives quite a bit further away, in an actual house which looks over a countryside pocket. John can’t even begin to imagine how much it must have cost. The police, though they broke the news to Catherine’s boyfriend, are unlikely to have been here, so as they approach the door John says to Sherlock, ‘Let me tell tem about Catherine first, OK?’

He expects Sherlock to argue, but Sherlock simply inclines his head, and rings the buzzer.

‘Yes?’ says a voice over the intercom.

John leans past Sherlock. ‘Hello. Is this Mx Endell Windigate’s house?’

‘It is,’ the voice says. ‘My house. Can I help you?’

‘We’re police consultants,’ John says, feels an odd little thrill as he says it. ‘I’m afraid we have some bad news. Could we come up?’

‘Would you mind showing me a police handchip marker?’ Windigate says.

John opens his mouth to clarify that they aren’t actually policen, but Sherlock holds his palm up to the camera, and a moment later the door swings open.

John gives Sherlock a suspicious look.

‘I was bored,’ Sherlock says, defensively, ‘and the coding involved in creating a fake police marker is really quite complex, it kept me occupied for a number of hours. Besides, I thought it might come in useful. You can’t say I was wrong about that.’
‘Authority markers exist for a reason,’ John says. ‘People need to feel safe, like they know who to trust...’

‘I’ve been studying the history of crime since I arrived here,’ Sherlock says. ‘Which is only a couple of weeks, and I’ve already come across several cases of corrupt or even murderous policemen. People have the illusion of knowing who they can trust, not the reality. You could even say I’m doing the world a favour if I expose that illusion a little.’

John doesn’t have time to work out a counterargument now, as someone – presumably Windigate – is coming down the stairs towards them. ‘Come in,’ he says, looking worried, and John and Sherlock step into the corridor.

It’s a beautiful house. There’s a large picture of a bird on one wall – in the current popular style of a piece of digital art beamed onto an interestingly textured surface. In this case, it’s been projected onto an array of hanging antique saucepans, and it skews over the odd angles in a way which draws the eye. It’s not really John’s style – he’s old-fashioned, and prefers ordinary projections on smooth blank walls, and has an even more antiquated soft spot for the luxuriant depth and texture of paint. If he were really wealthy he’d put antique acrylic paintings on his walls.

Not that John really knows anything about decorating. But living on an army base for so long has made him appreciate the idea of a space that’s his, the idea of personalising it. He was rarely unhappy in the army – there was rarely time to be unhappy – but there were occasional bleak nights when they’d lost someone he knew and he’d lie in the barracks irrationally afraid that if he got up to look at the other bunks he’d find them all suddenly empty. On those nights, he thought about things like wooden staircases and paintings, and the security of being alone in a place you owned and having nothing but physical things to lose.

He tried it again when he came back, trained as an E.L.I. and got his government flat. But living somewhere that was supposed to be his but was still entirely impersonal made the whole exercise incredibly depressing. He did, though, find himself doing it a lot when living with Pike and Phelps. There were days when the flats he shared with them felt too small for two people, oppressive and crowded, and he longed to be alone.

He hasn’t done it since moving in with Sherlock. Hasn’t felt the need. He briefly tries it now, but when he imagines choosing a painting he can’t stop himself imagining Sherlock behind him, voice ringing out embarrassingly loud, that’s a forgery John, look at the woman in green’s fingernails, or you can’t possibly want that in our flat, even your taste isn’t that appalling, or the proprietor of this shop’s actually a serial killer, get ready to run.

It ought to bother him. Sherlock has left him no space to himself anywhere, not even in his own head, not even in a fantasy specifically about having space to himself. Instead Sherlock’s imaginary
voice makes him feel warm and grounded, the way it always does when he hears it for real. He shakes himself, and continues looking around.

The entrance hall is wide, open and full of bits and pieces, fiercely modern in its artfully cluttered look. As well as the bird picture there are a number of other similarly trendy texture-prints up on the walls, and a small statue of a goose plated in something shiny that might be silver or platinum rests on a circular table.

In the middle of it all stands Windigate, and John steels himself for the unpleasant task. ‘I’m John Watson, and this is Sherlock Holmes,’ he says. ‘We’re here because – you know Catherine Oakshott?’

‘She’s my ex,’ Windigate says, looking surprised. ‘I – has something happened to her?’

‘I’m afraid she’s dead,’ John says, as gently as he can without sounding like he’s talking to a child. ‘The police believe it to be murder. We’re investigating.’

He shakes his head, looking stunned. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Have you seen her recently?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Not for months,’ Windigate says. ‘We broke up just over a year ago now, I think, and we’ve only met up a few times since then. We’re still friendly; it was a pretty amicable break up. And although we never really meet in the fleshworld – it’s a bit of a trek between where we live – we do meet online occasionally and we definitely talk via handchip quite often. I actually just spoke to her the other evening – she was fed up because she was missing Halloween, and she wanted to chat.’

‘Missing Halloween?’ Sherlock says.

‘Yeah,’ Windigate says. ‘Do you want to come through and sit down, by the way?’

They head into a living room just off the entrance hall. It’s quite small, and even more crowded with ornaments than the hallway. They sit down, and Windigate says, ‘So, sorry, Mr. Holmes, you were asking about Halloween?’
‘Sherlock, please,’ Sherlock says, apparently having decided that friendliness will get him more information.

‘Sherlock, then. And feel free to call me Endell.’

‘She didn’t go to the Halloween point this year, then?’ Sherlock says.

‘No,’ Endell says. ‘She planned to, but then apparently her landlord left a message saying that some sort of chemical leak had occurred, something like that, and it wasn’t safe to go into the building’s entrance corridor. She had to stay in her flat. She was very fed up about it.’

‘Ah,’ Sherlock says. His face doesn’t change much, but there’s a slight increase in the energy of his tiny shifting movements.

‘Anything else?’ Endell says.

Sherlock considers him. ‘Catherine’s current boyfriend is a before,’ he says. ‘I assumed you were as well, before we met.’

John looks at Endell. And yes, te does in fact have all the signs of being an after, the slight wrongness of feature that’s impossible to pin down, the otherworldly prettiness. John didn’t notice, because he assumed, as Sherlock apparently did, that Endell must be a before, because –

‘The gender thing,’ Endell says, nodding with the air of someone who’s had this brought up a very large number of times before. ‘Yes, I know.’

John’s never met a non-binary after. Afters, despite arriving with near-perfect English, only ever seem to use male and female pronouns, and they throw those around randomly until they’re taught otherwise. The investigation has thrown up the fact that afters’ language skills have improved over the years, but John can only think that whoever’s been teaching them finds gender so confusing that they preferred to teach it as a binary. Two options, no grey area. Simpler, if less accurate. Not that the tertiary pronoun system is accurate, as such – the actual gender identities of those who prefer to be described with te vary enormously.
Afters are asked to pick a gender on arrival, and John’s only ever known them to choose ones that they already know the pronouns for.

‘Gender just made sense to me quicker than most afters,’ Endell says, shrugging. ‘Though when they asked me to choose one I didn’t understand it at all yet. But I could see it was important here, so I asked for more time, and within a few weeks...I don’t know what to tell you, really. Non-binary was just the option that felt right.’

Sherlock nods. ‘I have no feelings about gender at all,’ he says. ‘I picked male entirely at random. I use pronouns accurately because it upsets John when I don’t, but the effort expended in analysing a person’s gender presentation and matching it to a pronoun, while tiny, still seems something of a waste to me.’

‘Most afters feel like that. New ones certainly. Although – I’m not as weird as all that. I’ve only ever met one other non-binary after, but I have met male and female ones who feel their gender matters to them. Though it’s usually something that develops over time, being exposed to this society. I was just quicker off the mark, I guess.’

‘I have no intention of developing any irrational feelings of that kind,’ Sherlock says crisply. ‘Studying the variations in attitude is interesting, though. As well as solving the Oakshott case, I’m also studying the after phenomenon, and exceptions are often helpful for working out the rule.’

‘Glad I could help, then,’ Endell says. ‘Anything else?’

‘What do you do?’ John asks. He’s been fighting the urge to gape at the house and say _How rich are you?_ since they arrived.

‘I’m head writer at Handwire Games,’ Endell says, and ah. That explains it. Handwire’s huge, and responsible for some of the biggest games of the last ten years. Earlier this year they released _Turn Back_, which became the highest grossing game ever to hit ludus. John rarely goes to the ludus – he generally prefers the cinema, when he has money to spend on going out for entertainment – but he’d gone to play that, and loved it. He’d even considered buying it when it came out for handchips, since reviews said the individual experience was as good as the communal one, but in the end had decided he couldn’t excuse the price.

‘I haven’t yet played a videogame,’ Sherlock says. ‘But – I imagine writing them involves, as well as puzzles and logic, a great deal of both linguistic and visual creativity?’
‘Oh, yes, definitely. Well, I mean, if you just want to make games that are good entertainment, maybe not so much, but if you care about character and narrative and how those should be best expressed in an interactive format...’

Sherlock waves the art of storytelling away with a dismissive hand. ‘Yes, yes. Do you ever have any trouble with the visual aspect of your work? Flinch away from it instinctively?’

‘It isn’t too bad,’ Endell says. ‘It was worse at first, I’ve got used to it. And you know, all I do is very basic idea sketches. I don’t do the detailed design, and I certainly don’t make the art. It’s just to convey my vision for the game.’

‘And,’ Sherlock says, ‘when you and Catherine were together, did you have sex?’

John opens his mouth to tell Sherlock off, but he can’t very well say please don’t ask people about their sex life with their recently murdered ex girlfriend; that would only make things worse.

Endell, though seems surprisingly unbothered. ‘Yeah,’ te says. ‘I suppose you want to know about the flinching there, too? But you can get over it, you know, if you’re sufficiently motivated.’ Te smirks. Then teir face falls again, as though remembering why John and Sherlock are there.

‘We broke up because I was spending all my time working,’ te says. ‘Her job’s quite stressful, but it mostly operates within normal hours. She wanted someone to share her free time with, go out to interesting places and try new things with them. Whereas I was always so tired when I wasn’t working that I just wanted to have dinner and relax at home. We talked about it, decided it wasn’t making us happy, and cut it off. But it was pretty great till then, and we’ve stayed friends. Not close, but...I just can’t understand how this could happen. Who could possibly want to kill her?’

‘We’ll find out,’ John says. ‘Can you think of anything else we should know?’

‘What about her job?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Anything interesting happen with that the week before she died.’

‘No idea,’ Endell says. ‘We never talked much about work after we broke up. She always took Halloween and the day before off anyway, saved up holiday to make sure she could.’

‘I see,’ Sherlock says, and then starts for the door without thanking Endell or saying goodbye.
John takes care of those issues of etiquette, wondering as he always does whether to bother bringing them up with Sherlock, and then hurries after him as fast as he can while limping.

As he reaches the door, Sherlock glances back to him, looks down at his leg, and says, ‘I haven’t forgotten about that, by the way. I still maintain it’s curable.’

‘Bollocks,’ John says, but he can’t help wondering. Sherlock can do so many things that no one should be able to do. Best not to get his hopes up, though, and anyway, he’s managed with the limp for this long.

‘Where next?’ he asks.

‘Nowhere in the fleshworld,’ Sherlock says. ‘I want to have a look at the online taxation offices, see if I can get into Catherine’s account. I’ve got a password document from her handchip.’

‘Sherlock,’ John says, but by now it’s mostly just habit, and Sherlock doesn’t even bother to look up from his palm. They sit down on a bench between two of the trees in the middle of the road, and John prepares to do whatever Sherlock needs him to do to solve the case, and to keep on ignoring how close together they’re sitting and the tickle of Sherlock’s hair at the edge of John’s forehead.
Fifteen minutes pass, with Sherlock looking through tax files and John just sitting there, doing nothing. John begins to get restive. Eventually he says, ‘I might just –’ and starts moving.

‘No,’ Sherlock says. ‘Stay here.’

John stops moving. ‘Why?’ he says. ‘It’s not as though I’m being any use.’

Sherlock ignores him, and keeps reading. John begins to feel irritated. ‘Seriously, Sherlock, I really don’t like sitting here being useless, so –’

‘Your presence is – it helps me,’ Sherlock says. ‘You’re not being useless. Stay.’

It’s very cold, and John loathes pointless inactivity, and he isn’t furniture for Sherlock to use for his own convenience without any regard for how John feels about it. He could go somewhere warm, somewhere he could be useful, and in the process teach Sherlock something about relating to other people.

He leans back against the hard back of the bench, and watches Sherlock’s fingers slide against the palm of his other hand, scrolling through data. He stays.

* 

After Sherlock finishes with the tax files, John insists on dinner and a break from case solving, and is somewhat surprised when Sherlock agrees with almost no argument. Sherlock is also uncharacteristically quiet all the way to the restaurant, till John becomes concerned.
'Is something up?’ he asks. ‘You’re being…’

‘No, no, nothing,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’m just…coming to a decision about something.’

‘To do with the case?’

Sherlock doesn’t respond at all to that, and John knows better than to bother asking again. Sherlock goes on being quiet all all through dinner, too. John doesn’t try to make conversation, knows Sherlock doesn’t think much of pointless chatter.

Eventually, though, Sherlock says, ‘Your presence earlier on the bench felt both necessary and almost intolerable. I wanted you there so badly that when you moved I – it distracted me, I was so anxious for you to remain that I couldn’t focus. But when you stayed, when you were that close…’ He shakes his head. ‘Is there really nothing more we can do than wait?’

John’s throat is dry. ‘Nothing I can think of,’ he says. ‘Sorry.’

Sherlock shakes his head again. ‘How do people manage romantic relationships?’ he says. ‘Surely actual physical contact with the object of desire must make the feeling significantly worse.’

‘I dunno,’ John says. ‘In my experience, it sort of sates it. Or, not completely, at least not at first, you keep wanting them. But it’s not as bad. Or at least that’s how it’s been for me.’

He cannot believe that it would be true here, that touching Sherlock, getting his hands on this extraordinary man, would do anything other than make him want more and more with increasing intensity. But he keeps that to himself.

‘Ah,’ Sherlock says. ‘I see. As eating dulls hunger. I suppose that makes sense.’

Then he goes quiet again for a long time. Doesn’t eat much, either, though John manages to convince him to finish about half of his meal. The journey back to Baker Street is quiet too, and absence of Sherlock’s voice makes John feel strangely alone. It’s such a distinctive voice, its depth curling into every corner of whatever room it goes out into, making the acoustics seem to thrum in the listener’s head. Or at least, that’s what happens when the listener is John. For it to be gone for so long doesn’t seem right at all.
They step into the flat. It’s too early to go to bed, and they sit in their armchairs while the sky goes from sunset to dark blue-grey. And as John sits there thinking that he hates this, that silence between them is never going to be as easy as it was, that Sherlock is right there and John wants him, Sherlock looks up, looks straight at him with a gleam in his eye. It’s very similar to the look he has when he’s figured something out, something brilliant, but there’s an edge to it John hasn’t seen before.

‘Sherlock?’ he says.

Sherlock leans forward in his chair, hands resting on the armrests. He starts to smile slightly. ‘I’ve made my decision,’ he says. ‘Now all I have to do is persuade you to join me in it.’

Sherlock’s sudden bright amusement seems to turn up all the lights in the room, and John becomes aware of how much he was starving for it through even these few short hours of Sherlock being still and muted. The spark is infectious, and John smiles back at him. ‘Go on.’

‘I said that we shouldn’t have sex,’ Sherlock says, ‘but I came to that conclusion too quickly. I thought I had all the data, but since I said that further data’s accumulated at a frankly alarming rate.’

John translates this sentence from Sherlockese in his head, with consideration to their earlier conversations on the topic, and comes up with – ‘You hadn’t realised how hard it would be?’

‘I’m all in favour of self-denial when it’s useful,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ll happily avoid allowing digestion to slow down my mental processes, or sleep to get in the way of following up a lead. But ignoring this particular desire is making me less focused, not more. There’s no sense in that.’

John shakes his head, ignores his racing pulse and all the other things that Sherlock would call symptoms. ‘You’ve been living in this society a matter of weeks,’ he says. ‘You can’t remember who you are, you don’t know how anything works. You’re in an incredibly vulnerable position, whether you want to admit it or not, and I’m not going to take advantage of you. I know you sneer at rules, but seriously, the ones about E.L.I.-student relationships really aren’t stupid.’

Sherlock gets to his feet and start pacing; John can feel the rant coming on. And sure enough, Sherlock gets to the other end of the room, then turns dramatically on his heel to face John and says, ‘You’ve been confused all week over how much I know. I’ve watched you wonder how it is that I can seem to have no understanding at all of something one moment and understand it
perfectly the next. You think my knowledge is patchy, or that I’m pretending to know less than I do to get away with being rude. Sometimes that’s true. But sometimes – you remember on our first day you got irritated because I didn’t answer questions properly, and then when you told me we needed to work on that I told you exactly how questions should be answered. And you wondered why, if I knew that, I didn’t do it properly before. But I didn’t know, I observed. I worked out what you wanted from me from your initial response to the way I answered questions. And that’s only one example. You – you’re not understanding how much faster my mind processes information than yours. Than anyone’s I’ve met here, including other afters. Well – I suspect Mycroft may be an exception, but other than that. You’re assuming that I know as little about this world as any new after, but you’re not realising how quickly I can go from total lack of knowledge to complete understanding.’

The arrogance, the sweep of his body striding through the room, his fierce need to just make John understand. He’s breathtaking. It takes all John’s strength to say, ‘I get that you learn fast. But you’re still – so alone here. I’m the only person you know well. If you’d bonded with other people it might be different, but –‘

Sherlock interrupts him, looking incredulous. ‘You’re telling me that the very reason – the fact is that I don’t enjoy anyone else’s company, not for any extended period of time. You’re – you can’t deny me closer contact with you for appreciating the contact I have, that’s completely unfair.’

His petulance is more winning than it has any right to be. He’s stopped pacing, and has become unnaturally still, eyes fixed on John. Now he goes on, an expression of deep distaste appearing on his face, ‘If I agreed to go out and socialise with police officers, or talk to people in e-bars, would you have sex with me then?’

‘If you actually formed a meaningful connection with someone other than me, I guess I could – I mean, it would still be very much against the rules and not really appropriate. But at least then I’d feel that if I treated you badly or it all got screwed up somehow, you’d have someone to talk to.’

‘I’m not going to form a meaningful connection,’ Sherlock says. ‘The world’s full of idiots. Not that you’re not an idiot, but…you’re different somehow, and...’ He shakes his head. ‘Never mind. The point is – look, Lestrade’s reasonably tolerable, and my previous E.L.I., that Molly girl, she was mostly annoying for being unnecessarily worried about my welfare. If you somehow managed to harm me – which seems incredibly unlikely to me, I’m hardly particularly emotionally sensitive, am I? But if you did I’m sure I could go to either of them. If I actually felt any desire to “talk to someone”, which I wouldn’t. But I could. All right?’

John can feel himself wavering. Feeling the need for a stronger position, he gets up off his armchair and folds his arms. ‘You can talk rings around me about anything; we both know that. But I can’t let you talk me into this. I’m sorry – believe me, I would love to just give up on the rules, but…I will not do anything to make things more difficult for you than they already are.’
‘You’re already making things impossible,’ Sherlock says. Then he takes a breath, and his expression becomes less heated. He’s considering John now, and John realises he’s planning his next move, thinking up strategies. Sherlock’s brilliance is right now entirely focused on persuading John to fuck him, and oh, God, that’s unbearably hot.

John steels himself to defend against whatever line Sherlock takes, but what Sherlock finally says is entirely unexpected. ‘When I set up the stealth function for the military mode of your handchip, I looked through the log of your usage of the mode in order to delete it,’ he says. ‘You’d been turning it on every night and switching it off in the mornings.’

‘I used it to get to sleep,’ John admits.

‘Once the military mode’s switched on,’ Sherlock says, ‘it takes entering one further three digit number to actually get to the laser. The chance of you rolling onto your hand in such a way as to press that number was fairly small, but...certainly not non-existent.’

‘I know,’ John says. He focuses on a chair leg, follows the wood grain with his eyes. ‘I think that was what helped me sleep. Knowing there was the tiniest chance I might not wake up. Half adrenaline rush, half the relief of a possible way out. I’m aware of how fucked up that is. And I don’t know why you’re bringing this up now, but since you have – I am not a safe person, Sherlock, I am not stable, I faked it well enough to get the government to give me a job teaching athers and I faked it well enough to do what I think was a pretty good job with my first two students. If you know I’ve got an illegal laser and I used to use it like a fucking lullaby and you know I shot someone with it – the others didn’t see, but you must see, you see everything, and I don’t know why you’re still here –’

‘But I am,’ Sherlock points out. ‘You should trust me to make my own decisions. Just because the government wants E.L.I.s to treat athers like children doesn’t mean you can’t respect my judgement. And the reason I’m bringing this up now is because you said used to. You used to use a laser to help you get to sleep. When did you last do it?’

‘The night I moved in,’ John says, slowly.

And Sherlock advances. Walking towards John, not fast, but steadily, eyes fixed on him the whole time. John starts to back away, but there’s a wall not far behind him and letting Sherlock back him against a wall is an extremely bad idea. So he stays still, every muscle in his body tensing, till Sherlock’s well into his personal space. Sherlock stops when they’re a couple of centimetres from touching and says, ‘The next night you shot the maintenance worker.’
'Yeah,' John says. ‘And then we talked and then...when I went to bed, I don’t know, I...you’d put the stealth mode on so finding the military bit was more of a fuss, and I just didn’t bother.’

‘One of your primary coping mechanisms for months, and you didn’t bother,’ Sherlock says.

John thinks back to that night. He’d been almost high on the idea that he’d saved Sherlock, the memory of that serial killer crumpling, and Sherlock snapping back, eyes coming back into focus, brain coming back from the brink of nearly being gone forever. He’d thought there might be guilt, killing a human being, but his death seemed so entirely justified to John that there was little of that. And he’d saved a life. For the first time in months. And that it was the life of someone extraordinary, someone undoubtedly unique, didn’t hurt either. John had felt like the guardian of something precious, the way he’d felt when he was protecting earth from invasion but more concentrated, more direct and intense. Watching the laser light blink in the dark had seemed a very dull idea all of a sudden.

‘I suppose I haven’t needed it, since then,’ John says, at last.

‘I gave you that,’ Sherlock says, with certainty in his voice.

‘So what, I should have sex with you out of gratitude?’

‘No,’ Sherlock says, moving just very slightly closer. ‘You should have sex with me because we benefit from being close to each other and would surely benefit further from any increase in closeness. Sex in this society is often about intimacy, correct? The booklet says so, and I’ve already seen the way people obsess over sex and affection and the interaction between the two. I already mattered to you the night you saved me. It was – righteous violence, yes, that helped you, you wanted to fight for something important again. But it wasn’t just that. You weren’t defending an idea or humanity as a whole or anything so nebulous. You were defending a person, one person, someone that mattered to you. And you need things to matter. So much of your psychological wellbeing depends on you having people to care about that you can protect. And wouldn’t physical intimacy add to the kinds of affection you have for me? Because it would be very good for you, if it did.’

John’s hand moves slightly, without his meaning it to, and brushes against Sherlock’s. It hits him like electricity, that flash of contact. He stares down at their hands, and asks a truly pathetic question. ‘Would it add to the kinds of affection you have for me?’
Sherlock seems to freeze in place, and looks away. ‘I’d rather it didn’t,’ he says. ‘You thrive on caring about people, but I don’t think I do. I think I’d be much better off without it. The fear that physical closeness might make me feel – more, worse, is one of the things that made me think it would be a bad idea. But I don’t really believe there can be space in my head for any more than there is already. I can’t possibly – there can’t be more than this. At any rate, that’s what I’m counting on.’

John isn’t sure how to interpret that. Knows how he wants to. Cautiously, he says, ‘We’ve only known each other a week.’

‘You’ve seen what I read from someone in a second,’ Sherlock says, shrugging. ‘Think what I can get in a week. And you have no idea how much you give away with – everything. It’s exhausting. I never had so much data that mattered come off someone so fast in the weeks before I met you. But I wanted it. I wanted all of it. And no, you’re right, there is still more to you, there always seems to be more. But whatever else I read from you in the next few weeks, I don’t believe I could have any further emotional responses to it. I’ve been through at least nineteen separate categories of emotion in the past week alone. It seems impossible that there could be more to come. My hope is that whatever else I learn about you, my response will stay stable.’

John’s composure is long gone, though somehow, impossibly, he doesn’t move, doesn’t grip Sherlock’s beautiful fingers in his own and hold his hands tight, doesn’t reach out to touch those absurd cheekbones, doesn’t lean forward and kiss him and kiss him. He keeps still, and asks, voice remarkably steady, ‘Then what would the sex thing be about for you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Sherlock says, sounding immensely annoyed. ‘I just want it.’ He shakes his head. ‘You have no idea how much I want it. I can’t concentrate on anything.’

‘I have some idea,’ John says. Sherlock is so close, so close. And there are reasons, excellent reasons not to touch him, but it’s getting harder and harder to remember what they are.

The room is awfully still. It feels as though every particle in the air is hanging on their every move, or rather on their lack of movement. They’re both motionless, but it feels like they’re orbiting around each other, and they’ve held eye contact now for what feels like an age.

‘You really should defer to my opinion, you know,’ Sherlock says, with just the hint of a smile. ‘I’m much more intelligent than you are.’

Why that should be the thing that breaks down John’s resistance, this affectionate insult, this barely-there smile, he’ll probably never know. But he feels a small sigh escape him, and his hand
is moving to cup Sherlock’s cheek, and he knows the fight is over and his scruples have lost.

‘All right,’ he says, softly.

Even now there’s still a chance, he’s thinking that he could still back out, really should, but then Sherlock lets out a sigh that mirrors John’s own but is even quieter, and leans into John’s palm. As John watches, Sherlock’s whole body seems to relax, and his face moves gently against John’s hand, as if soaking up as much contact as possible. John is lost then, in the magic of Sherlock’s response to him, Sherlock’s simple contentment at being touched.

‘You should kiss me,’ Sherlock says, after a moment.

And when has John ever been able to say no to him, anyway? ‘All right,’ he says again. ‘Yes. All right.’

Sherlock bends his head low, and brings his mouth close to John’s, till their lips just barely touch. John holds that position for a moment, feeling Sherlock’s warm breath against him, then closes that last, almost non-existent bit of distance. For another, longer moment, their mouths are still against each other.

Plenty of E.L.I.s manage to keep up sex lives around their job, going out for dates, even having long-term relationships while living with their students. The first week of an assignment is always just an after and their E.L.I., but after that the E.L.I.’s family are allowed to move in. It’s almost encouraged, since it means the student gets to see a normal earth household in action.

John, though, has never managed to make dating around his job work. Or maybe the job was just an excuse, a way to avoid thinking about how shut down his body and mind both felt after he came back, how nothing else would ever be the same as going down on someone in a crashed scouting craft while awaiting rescue. He had quite a lot of sex in the army, all of it rushed and adrenaline-fuelled and strangely intimate. Since coming back, he’s had none.

Perhaps that long period of celibacy accounts for the heat in his limbs, the molten currents running through him with judders of electricity. For how rapidly his cock is thickening, his skin growing heated and his pulse hammering. Or perhaps it’s just Sherlock. Either way, John cannot wait any longer.

He brushes his lips over Sherlock’s, feeling them catch a little where they’re slightly chapped – his
own, that is; Sherlock’s are almost uncannily smooth. Sherlock’s lips part a little, and John closes his own around the lower of them, feeling it slide against him, touching it with the tip of his tongue just to revel in its rounded shape. His tongue progresses no further than that, though; they just stand there, on the carpet in the quiet living room, bodies devoid of any movement other than the slow shifting of their mouths against each other. He breathes Sherlock in, tastes him, draws in his texture and his scent.

John’s eyes have closed at some point, but he opens them again to find that Sherlock’s are closed too, and that’s somehow staggering, because he would have expected Sherlock to catalogue every moment of this with every sense available. The shut eyes make him wonder if Sherlock might actually be giving himself over to sensation, and that idea is dizzying.

His palm is still on Sherlock’s cheek, and the skin is soft beneath it. He strokes Sherlock’s face, then moves the hand to his hair, burying it in all those glorious curls. Then he tugs at them, quite gently. Sherlock’s head was already bent right down for the kissing, but now he lets John pull it to the side to expose his neck, moves with the tugging willingly. John presses hard kisses up his throat, and the slightest hint of teeth, though not enough to leave a mark. Sherlock is making low, clearly involuntary noises which go straight to John’s cock, and John turns his attention to Sherlock’s ears, and then the back of his neck.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock gasps. ‘This is –’ and John bites him, can’t help himself, though only softly. Sherlock actually moans at that, unexpectedly and loud, and tilts his head even further to give John better access.

John’s fingers dig into Sherlock’s scalp, and he moves to kiss Sherlock’s mouth again, more fiercely now, letting his tongue slip between Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock’s own tongue is unexpectedly clumsy, endearingly so, but he learns fast. He kisses soft and then hard, fast and then slow; the experimental quality of it might bother John more if Sherlock weren’t still making those noises as he does it.

But Sherlock’s hands are still dangling by his sides, and John feels he needs to ask about that. So, with very great reluctance, he pulls back, ignores Sherlock’s slight whine of protest (and the thrill that runs through John when he hears it), and says, ‘Try touching me.’

A slightly troubled expression flashes across Sherlock’s face, but he lifts his hand towards John. Sure enough, though, he flinches back before making contact. He makes a frustrated sound and tries again. After a few more tries, though, in which his hand comes within millimetres of John’s arm, he lets it fall back to his side and shakes his head. ‘It’s no use.’

John frowns at him. ‘You managed to touch Catherine’s face,’ he says, ‘when you were investigating. And you said touching people’s faces was the hardest of all.’
‘That was different,’ Sherlock snaps, and John realises how vulnerable he is, and concludes it would be better not to push him.

‘All right,’ John says. ‘It’s fine, don’t worry. I could touch you –‘ and he takes his free hand, the one not still resting in Sherlock’s hair, and reaches out with it.

He barely knows what he’s going to do – pull their bodies flush together, perhaps, feel Sherlock against him everywhere – but he doesn’t get a chance to decide. Sherlock jumps back, saying, ‘No. Don’t do that.’

John’s uneasy now. This is not going as he hoped, and perhaps Sherlock’s reconsidering, as he really should be. ‘You’d rather just kissing,’ he hazards. ‘Or nothing at all, if you’ve changed your mind then of course that’s fine, I’d never –‘

‘I haven’t,’ Sherlock says. He swallows. ‘I wanted to touch you.’

‘I don’t mind,’ John says, which is, if not the whole truth, not altogether a lie. He’ll take whatever Sherlock can give him, really.

‘I mind very much,’ Sherlock says.

‘We’ll figure something out,’ John promises – perhaps unwisely, when he currently has no idea how to fix this problem. But there has to be something, Sherlock cannot go on looking as dejected as he does now.

Sherlock shrugs. ‘Maybe.’

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to touch you?’ John thinks he manages to stay just short of pleading, but it’s pretty close.

Sherlock gives a short, sharp nod. Then, suddenly, his face lights up. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘I’ve had an idea. I don’t know if – it’s not as good as touching you. But at least I could see, I could make you – yes. Let’s go to my room.’
He strides off without waiting for John’s response, and John, somewhat thrown, follows him, gait somewhat awkward, still desperately turned on.

In Sherlock’s room, Sherlock turns to him, his expression now full on mad scientist. He looks happy again, which is good, although the excitement, in this context, is slightly worrying. ‘Get undressed,’ he says.

However disconcerting this is, that isn’t a command John’s going to disobey. He pulls his jumper over his head, unbuttons his shirt, aware all the while of Sherlock watching him. Sherlock’s pupils are extraordinarily dilated – more so than John’s ever seen in anyone before; his irises are almost entirely obscured by black. John could swear, in fact, that his eyes have actually slightly increased in size, the skin around them being pushed outward slightly, though obviously that’s absurd. John has never seen him look this wholly engaged, not with a puzzle, not with the violin. It makes John slightly lightheaded.

When he’s naked, Sherlock comes up close to him, moves his head so that his hair tickles John’s skin, makes it trail across John’s face and neck. John’s confused for a moment, then realises Sherlock’s getting as close as he can to touching him, and shivers slightly. Then Sherlock looks up. ‘Lie down on the bed,’ he says, and this is another request or order or something in between that John is decidedly happy to comply with.

John lies back, and Sherlock comes to kneel between his spread legs. He holds up his hand. ‘I’m going to add a setting to my handchip,’ he says, and starts tapping at it. He goes on speaking as he does: ‘It’s now going to be able to emit vibrations,’ he explains. ‘If I run my hand a few millimetres from your body, you’ll feel quite a strong vibration, which should, in a sensitive area, be rather intense. A few centimetres away and it’ll be much gentler. I’ll control how much pressure you feel by moving my hand, so it will almost be as though I’m touching you. The feeling should be –’ he smiles – ‘stimulating.’

John gives a hard swallow. ‘Oh God,’ he says. ‘Yeah, I can believe that.’

Sherlock taps a few more times at his handchip, and then says, ‘Done. Spread your legs a bit wider.’

John does, feeling incredibly exposed and painfully aroused. Sherlock is fully dressed and in control and this is not what John wanted, nothing like his repressed, half-formed fantasies of tenderly taking Sherlock to pieces. It feels a little bit melancholy and a little bit lacking and achingly, breathtakingly hot. His whole body is burning up with wanting, his cock pressing towards his stomach in a desperate bid for contact.
Sherlock braces himself with one hand beside John’s arm and leans forward, lowering his other hand till it’s a centimetre or so from John’s cock. John gulps to see it there, so close, and then Sherlock taps his palm with his thumb and the air around John’s prick suddenly seems to come alive.

John wouldn’t know how to describe it, the sudden invisible shuddering against stretched and sensitive flesh. He knows it makes him gasp, tilt his head back and resist an urge to writhe, to thrust his hips upwards in search of further sensation. But thrusting would do him no good, the pressure is everywhere and nonexistent at the same time, insistent and entirely maddening.

Sherlock makes an arch shape with his hand, holds it over John’s cock and begins stroking the air up and down. The vibrations travel with his hand, running along John’s cock, rippling and pressing, and he starts moaning and can’t seem to stop.

He risks a glance at Sherlock and immediately regrets it, because Sherlock looks utterly entranced by John’s reaction to this not-touching, staring straight at him and breathing raggedly. John is abruptly far too close to coming.

‘Wait,’ he manages to say. ‘Move your hand back for a minute.’

Sherlock smiles, and complies, and the vibrations are lighter and more maddening than ever. It’s almost like being tickled. John’s hips arch, and that gives Sherlock space to move his hand beneath John’s cock, send vibrations travelling up the underside. ‘Sherlock,’ John moans, and Sherlock apparently takes that as his cue to move his hand up to cup over the head of John’s prick. He moves it right in close, making John let out a sound that’s almost a yell, then back out again, and repeats this till John’s ready to scream.

‘John,’ Sherlock breathes, and John doesn’t dare look at him again, but he says Sherlock’s name back to him, hisses it out on breaths that are increasingly shallow and needy.

‘Come now,’ Sherlock says. ‘Please, I want to see it, do it now –‘ and he moves his hand right up close, a millimetre away at most, so close John could almost believe it’s touching, and the vibrations are pounding now and Sherlock moves his hand faster and faster. He starts to move it in circles now too, around and around John’s prick, trapping it in a tiny whirlwind of sensation that leaves John entirely breathless, Sherlock’s name catching in his throat.

‘Yes,’ John gasps. ‘I’m – yes –‘ and he comes, Sherlock moving his hand gently through it,
coaxing out shudder after shudder, till John finally sinks down bonelessly into the bed, and Sherlock moves his hand away. John is vaguely aware of him tapping the handchip and slipping off the bed, but his eyes are threatening to close and it’s hard to pay attention to anything much.

For a minute or so, anyway. Then he forces himself to come back online, and looks up at Sherlock, who’s hovering by the foot of the bed. ‘That was amazing,’ John says. ‘I can’t believe you thought of that. You’re incredible.’

‘We should experiment further with it next time,’ Sherlock says. ‘If you wanted to do this again, that is. I could try touching you elsewhere that way. Gentler vibrations might work well on your neck, for instance, or your nipples.’

John groans. ‘You’re going to break my refractory period,’ he says. Then, seeing Sherlock’s face light up, adds hastily, ‘Shorten it, I mean. I definitely still have one. No more vibrations in that area for the time being, please.’

Sherlock grins. ‘So you are interested in – exploring this further?’ he says, sounding oddly hesitant. ‘I thought perhaps you’d have it...out of your system now.’

‘Ha,’ John says. ‘No. Definitely not out of my system, worse than ever, in fact.’ He scrambles upwards. ‘I need to clean up – and don’t worry, I’ll set the cleaning bot to change your sheets – but...can I touch you, now? Now that we’ve figured out a way to make it reciprocal.’

He sees Sherlock tense up. ‘No,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’m sorry, I – no.’

John is desperate to push for an explanation, but he knows how well that would be likely to go. So he keeps his voice light, and says, ‘OK. Um, do you want to talk about anything? I mean, if you’re feeling...look, that really shouldn’t have happened, and I just crossed so many boundaries that exist for very good reasons, and if you’re feeling in any way not great about it then you should talk to someone. Preferably other than me, though of course you can always talk to me about anything you need –’

‘Urgh,’ Sherlock says. ‘I was hoping I could flood your brain with enough chemicals to shut your obsession with my supposed vulnerability down, but apparently it’s going to take more than one orgasm. I am fine. If you want a report on my current emotional state, I’m presently feeling a sense of great satisfaction at having found a way to sexually stimulate you and arousal at seeing your response to said stimulation. And irritation at your misguided attitude to my welfare, of course.’

John finds, alarmingly, that this makes him want to pull Sherlock down onto the bed and wrap his
arms around him. But that, obviously, is not on the cards. In all their talk of attraction and sex, Sherlock has never suggested any interest in non-sexual physical contact. Nor can John imagining him wanting that kind of relationship.

‘I’ll go and get cleaned up then,’ he says, standing up. He stretches up to kiss Sherlock’s forehead. ‘I’ll send the cleaning bot in as well. So...see you tomorrow, I guess. Unless there’s anything else you want?’

There’s an unexpectedly long pause. Then Sherlock says, ‘No. I don’t think so. Good night, John.’ His eyes are still dark, his expression impossible to read.

‘Good night,’ John says. There’s no point querying that pause. And it would be ridiculous to feel alone or like he’s missing something when the person he’s been lusting after just provided him with a spectacular orgasm. No: he will shower, and he will go to bed, and he will think as little as possible about anything till morning.
John sleeps poorly, despite the heaviness in his limbs, and has restless dreams. When he gets downstairs for breakfast, Sherlock is sitting at the table, leaning back in his chair and apparently lost in thought.

John greets him, gets a nod in response, and goes to make tea and toast. While the kettle boils, he puts the bread on the HeatWaste Outlet. He normally misses the speed of toasters – the army’s one of the few places still allowed non-energy-efficient devices for everyday use – but today the time alone in the kitchen feels welcome.

He eats the toast and drinks the tea standing up over the counter top. Eventually, though, he has to go back into the living room and face Sherlock. He doesn’t really know what he’s going to say, but Sherlock takes that decision away by saying, ‘Good, you’ve finished. We need to go and confront Jack Dryer.’

‘You think he knows something else?’ John asks.

‘I think he’s the murderer,’ Sherlock says. ‘Come on.’

*

On the way to Dryer’s flat, Sherlock tells John that the analysis of the chocolates has come back and they were indeed coated in a strong alkali, that the tax files showed Dryer to have recently inherited a small amount of money from his mother, and that further files Sherlock looked at after John went to bed showed him what he’d expected to find – that the gold heart pendant had indeed been made by Catherine, but had been sold at a sale of her work some months ago, which she’d made a record of.

‘So,’ John says slowly, ‘he let us think she’d given it to him, as a symbolic love thing, when he actually bought it.’

‘Yes, and why would he want us to think they were having an affair?’ Sherlock says. ‘My understanding is it’s the kind of thing people usually cover up. But it gives someone other than him a motive; he wanted us to focus on the jealousy angle.’
'What made you look up the pendant?’ John asks.

‘It’s too much of a coincidence that there was a chemical leak in the corridor by Catherine’s flat on Halloween,’ Sherlock says. ‘That leak meant she couldn’t go out and give those chocolates to children, ensured she would eat them herself instead. Dryer is the person who could most easily have told Catherine she couldn’t leave the flat – he had access to lots of chemicals, and spilling a few strong-smelling ones outside the door would have been enough to convince her. He also, incidentally, could have ordered strong alkalis and kept them in his bleach containers; no one would have thought twice about them and in the unlikely event that anyone found them there he could just say that he’d ordered bleach and the factory must have mixed them up. I thought from the start it was likely to be him. So I looked into tax records and the pendant issue, and it all supports that theory.’

‘So this is about inheritance tax,’ John says.

Sherlock nods. ‘I’ve been researching his mother’s estate. She was an avia engineer – and I looked into that; it takes seven years of training to qualify. They’re paid a great deal in consequence. She doesn’t appear to have been a profligate spender – yes, I hacked into the data on her closed bank accounts, she’s dead, don’t fuss – so where did the money go? She left everything to Dryer, and the amount he inherited couldn’t possibly cover it all.

‘Dryer lied,’ John says, slowly. ‘He pretended he’d inherited less money than he had so he wouldn’t have to pay tax on most of it.’

‘And if Catherine caught him, and he wanted to keep that money and avoid a stint in criminal rehabilitation, he wouldn’t have many options,’ Sherlock says. ‘I expect he tried to bribe her first, and she refused – she’d have been going to report that too, making his crime worse than ever. But she knew him and liked him, so she didn’t send the report straight away; she talked to him first. Probably offered him the chance to resubmit his tax form, pretend the lie had never happened. That way he wouldn’t be charged with anything – but he still wouldn’t get to keep the money. She confronted him the day before Halloween, and she never worked on Halloween. He’d known her for a while, and he was aware of that fact. She didn’t even check her work emails or log into her online office all day; I checked. And he likely knew that she wouldn’t. So if he could kill her before she got in contact with her colleagues the next day, he’d get away with it. In the ensuing chaos of having to unexpectedly replace a tax inspector his crime would go completely unnoticed.’

‘Brilliant,’ John says. ‘You, I mean, obviously, not him.’

‘Simple,’ Sherlock says dismissively, and looks away towards the tube car window. John wonders if they’re ever going to talk about last night, and if every time he compliments Sherlock it’s going to feel this awkward from now on.
He’s been trying not to think about it, but as minutes go by and the conversation shows no signs of
reviving, his mind wanders. He feels shaken up, unsure how to feel about what happened. Sherlock
claimed to want him, but didn’t want to be touched. Was that more brainwashing, or whatever’s
going on in Sherlock’s mind? Is it that Sherlock felt vulnerable and was afraid of losing control in
front of John? Or is being touched simply something that doesn’t interest him? John desperately
wants to ask, but he doesn’t dare. He may have screwed up their burgeoning friendship
irretrievably already, but he can at least avoid adding to the damage.

‘We’re at our tube segment,’ Sherlock says, voice level and inscrutable, and John gets to his feet.
Time to think about all this later after they’re done rounding up a murderer.

* *

‘It’s true,’ Dryer admits. ‘There’s no point in denying it, is there? You wouldn’t be here if you
didn’t have proof.’

Sherlock looks slightly taken aback at this easy acquiescence. But he just says, ‘Of course,’ and
John manages not to smile at the blatant lie. ‘I wanted to get your confession before I messaged the
police,’ he goes on – and of course he did, since the confession is in fact all the admissible-in-court
evidence that they have – ‘but I’ll do it now.’

Dryer stands placidly while Sherlock does that, and then waits quietly for Gregson and their
team to arrive. He doesn’t try to escape or argue.

John realises with a shock that he’s feeling a slight sense of anticlimax, that he’d hoped for
Sherlock to get more of a chance to be sparkling and laser-fast. Worse, he’d almost hoped to get a
chance to chase a criminal through the streets or tackle one to the ground or even – it’s appalling.
He can’t think like this.

‘I guess they don’t have any more need of us,’ he says. ‘We can see if Ms Hudson’s free for a bit
more experimenting, if you want?’

Sherlock nods, and they head back down into the tubes. Sitting in the car, Sherlock says, ‘That was
all a bit simple.’ And John can hardly tell him off for that when he was just thinking the same
thing.
'Maybe you’ll get another case soon,’ he says, consolingly. ‘And the experiment should keep you reasonably occupied in the meantime, right?’

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or you could let me bring you to orgasm again. That would certainly keep me occupied.’

John feels himself going red. ‘You, uh, you want to do it again?’ he says.

Sherlock looks almost taken aback. ‘Of course. It was – yes, I’d like to, unless you don’t…’

He’s uncharacteristically flustered, and it makes John not want to say the thing he feels he has to say. He steels himself. ‘I do, Sherlock, I really do. But I don’t know if I can. One-sided sex has never…it’s just not something that – it’s not that I didn’t enjoy it, because I did, really, it was incredible. And I really don’t want to sound like I’m putting pressure on you to let me touch you, because I would never in a million years want you to do something you didn’t want to do, and it’s all – totally fair enough, but I just…”

‘Fine,’ Sherlock says, his voice entirely lacking in any emotion. John can’t read it at all. ‘I understand.’

‘I’m sorry,’ John says.

There’s a long silence. John wonders what he can do to make things OK, curses himself for thinking any of this was a good idea. Then Sherlock looks back at him, and there’s something behind the calculated blankness of his expression that makes John’s heart twist. ‘You’re always very careful to say *afters* instead of *reps,*’ he says. ‘And it makes you uncomfortable when other people aren’t as careful.’

‘Yes,’ John admits. ‘We talked about it before. It just seems – polite, I don’t know. Even if you personally don’t care some afters do.’

‘Use of terminology considered respectful and appropriate might indicate conscious embarrassment over subconscious prejudice,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or at least, so my ongoing human behaviour studies would indicate.’

‘No,’ John insists. ‘Afters are just like anyone else, and I endeavour to treat them that way.'
Honestly, it’s not any more complicated than that.’

‘That’s just it,’ Sherlock snaps, looking frustrated. ‘We are not just like anyone else. If you – look, if I were different, if I looked or sounded or acted differently from –’

‘I said *afters* are just like anyone else,’ John interrupts. ‘I never said *you* were, Christ no. You’re unique.’

‘And you like that,’ Sherlock says. There’s no inflection to indicate a question, but John thinks he hears one.

‘Very much,’ he says.

Sherlock lapses into silence for another moment, then he nods. ‘All right,’ he says. ‘After we’ve run some more experiments with Ms Hudson’s help, you can try touching me.’

He looks more resigned than enthused, and John opens his mouth to say *no, I can’t, not if you don’t want it*, but then Sherlock says, ‘Please. I’d like to – just – don’t be disappointed, if it doesn’t go the way you want it to.’

‘I won’t be,’ John promises. ‘Whatever happens is fine.’

‘All right,’ Sherlock says, and leans his head back against the seat.

*

Ms Hudson says she’s free in a few hours, and comes over accordingly. Analysing a historical document and running a chemical experiment – or rather whatever alternatives John and Ms Hudson can come up with – are the only tasks left to set Sherlock now.

They decide that simply getting Sherlock to do a different experiment will work fine, and that analysing a legal document should do for the other task. John leaves them to it, and goes up to his room.
He spends a few minutes attempting to think of anything other than you can try touching me and please and I’d like to. Then he gives it up as a doomed enterprise and lets himself imagine touching Sherlock.

Sherlock didn’t even get undressed last night, so John has no idea what his body looks like. It’s clear from the obscenely tight shirts he wears that he doesn’t have breasts. John’s tried conscientiously to avoid glances at Sherlock’s crotch, but he’s caught himself doing it once or twice, and the line of his trousers indicates he probably has a cock, though John never let himself look long enough to be certain. John has no strong preferences about types of physical feature, though he knows some people who do. But he suddenly wants desperately to know so he can picture Sherlock’s body, the contours of it, its shapes beneath John’s hands.

There’s worry too, of course: Sherlock’s flickering expression, and his warning to John not to be disappointed. John isn’t sure what Sherlock meant by that – perhaps insecurity over his inexperience. Sherlock probably has had sex before, but no memory of it. It will probably not be his body’s first time experiencing sexual touch, but in a way it will be his brain’s.

All of which is yet another excellent reason why John should never have had sex with him in the first place. But it’s too late to undo that damage now, and endless guilt isn’t going to make it any better. He’ll just have to be vigilant about Sherlock’s wellbeing, however irritating Sherlock claims to find it.

He gives Ms Hudson and Sherlock an hour or so, and comes down to find them settled in armchairs, drinking tea and talking.

‘- claimed in court it was revenge. That he’d lost his brother to an after, that they must be complicit in what was happening and they deserved to die. But I – I knew him. He wasn’t a passionate man, not like that. I fell in love with him because he was so calm and steady.’ She shakes her head, and smiles. It is a placid smile, would be more suited to a comment about how nice the tea is. John comes to sit quietly on the sofa.

‘Oh, hello, John,’ she says. ‘Sherlock was just asking about my ex-partner.’

‘Fascinating story,’ Sherlock says.

John winces, but Ms Hudson only continues to smile. ‘I suppose it is, really,’ she says. ‘Anyway, I started doing some digging, and I found that he’d befriended all three afters beforehand; he’d been
seen with them at lots of local restaurants and things like that. Then I discovered that all three of them had made wills – unusual, they were all young, had only appeared a few years ago, and afters normally take a while to get round to learning about things like that and even longer to bother doing them.’

‘How did you find all that out?’ Sherlock asks, looking surprised, presumably at the idea that people other than him were capable of working things out.

‘Oh, just by talking to people, dear. People will tell you all sorts of things if you get them chatting. Getting to see the wills was a lot harder, though. Luckily my sister is a lawyer, and I managed to persuade her to help me come up with something. She didn’t like it, but she didn’t want my partner to get away with anything. She knew I still – felt about him. I think she was relieved that I wasn’t letting that stop me from – understanding who he really was. She wasn’t sure I was going to be able to. Quite honestly, neither was I.’

‘And the wills showed they’d all left money to your partner?’ John guesses.

‘More or less,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘Not directly to him, of course, the police had checked for that. But each will had buried in it a large legacy to a man named Cornelius Oldacre. It took a while, but my sister and I broke down the alias.’

‘Incredible,’ John murmurs, and is slightly amused to see Sherlock looking a bit put out. Apparently John is only allowed to say that to him.

‘He did have great contempt for afters,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘That was certainly true. That was why he didn’t care about killing them, but it wasn’t why he killed them, if you see what I mean. Oh, dear, sorry, I’m babbling. And I expect you just wanted to hear about the experiments, John?’

‘I’m very glad to have heard that story,’ John assures her. ‘But how did the experiments go?’

‘Mild satisfaction at analysing the document; great satisfaction at conducting the experiment,’ Sherlock says.

‘Thank you for helping with it all,’ John says to Ms Hudson.

‘It was no trouble at all,’ Ms Hudson says. ‘I’d better be going now; my girlfriend and I are getting
our photograph taken. She wanted it for our first anniversary. We’ve got lots of handchip pictures of course, but we wanted to get a really nice professional one to put in a physical photo frame.’

‘Lovely,’ John says.

Sherlock waves distractedly, doesn’t say goodbye. He’s suddenly moved into a thinking pose. Ms Hudson smiles indulgently at him and heads off.

‘Sherlock?’ John says. ‘Are you –’

Sherlock’s head snaps towards him. ‘Photographs,’ he says. ‘I’ve been an idiot. Which is to say I assumed Jack Dryer to be an idiot without due cause.’ He jumps to his feet.

‘What do you mean?’ John says. ‘Are you saying he – what, he didn’t do it, or - ?’

‘He certainly did it,’ Sherlock says, ‘but it wasn’t his idea.’

‘What are you –’ John starts.

Sherlock looks very grim. ‘Get your coat,’ he says. ‘I’d like to have another little word with Mycroft.’

*

John limps hastily after Sherlock to the tubes. ‘What are you talking about?’ he asks, sitting down.

Sherlock brings his fingers together. ‘Why,’ he says, ‘did Jack Dryer put that photograph of his mother on display?’

‘He told us,’ John says, frowning. ‘She’d died and he wanted a stable picture of her.’
‘But he could have kept it in his room,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or anywhere that people coming into the flat wouldn’t immediately see it. He must have known policen would be coming to talk to him, and by having that photo out he encouraged them to ask about his mother, when drawing investigators’ attention to the fact that she’d died recently should surely have been the last thing he wanted.’

‘Well, sentiment,’ John says. ‘He didn’t want to hide her away, he wanted to – I don’t know, honour her memory.’

‘I’m not convinced, but all right,’ Sherlock says. ‘In that case, when I asked about the photograph, why not just tell us he wanted a stable picture of his mother because he cared about her? Why mention she’d died?”

‘I don’t know,’ John says. ‘Not everyone’s you, you know, people make stupid mistakes.’

‘But it was a clever murder,’ Sherlock says impatiently. ‘Hiding the strong alkali in the bottles of cleaning fluid, cutting a small hole in the underside of the pumpkin and painting the inside with the fluid, faking the chemical spill outside the flat. The person who planned that murder wouldn’t have slipped up that colossally and given away his motive for no good reason.’

‘I guess, but –’

‘That’s not all,’ Sherlock interrupts, in full swing now. ‘The flat itself was wrong. Cleaning requires a dexterity that a computer can’t programme – yes, all right, there are cleaning and vacuuming bots and cleaning mist sprayers, but there’s always a certain amount left over that requires human work. It can’t all be done by computers the way so much else can. So cleaners must earn a lot.’

‘Yeah, they do,’ John says.

‘Well, then,’ Sherlock says. ‘In that case, it makes little sense that Dryer would live in that flat, in that area, and decorate it as simply as he has done.’

‘Maybe he just has simple taste.’

‘You’d think he’d at least want to live somewhere a little more central, perhaps nearer a countryside pocket. People do care about this sort of thing, don’t they? Then there’s the fact that
getting hold of that necklace, not to mention shipping a strong alkali from a space station, would
have taken some time. I wrote that off too; I assumed he’d simply managed to speed up the process
of ordering it – he must have ordered a lot of cleaning chemicals from there, I thought, so perhaps
he was familiar with the staff there and was able to speak to them to get a quicker delivery. Even
so, getting something delivered from a space station between the time he had his interview with
Catherine and the time we saw that tree turn blue would have been a tall order. But I ignored all
that. I saw what he wanted me to see.’

Sherlock shakes his head, apparently disgusted with himself. ‘I’ve been distracted,’ he says. ‘I
would never normally miss something like this.’

Oh. Not just disgusted with himself, then. ‘I –’ John starts.

Sherlock waves a hand. ‘No, no, it’s not your fault,’ he says. ‘And I’d rather not resort to ceasing to
take you on cases unless there’s no other alternative. Your presence in most respects is quite
stimulating to my intellect. You tend to get everything wrong, but the questions you ask can be
quite useful. It’s just unfortunate that you’re so attractive.’

‘Er,’ John says. ‘Sorry.’

‘As I said, not your fault.’ Sherlock frowns. ‘There’s something else, too, something about the
crime scene itself that wasn’t...’ He stares out of the window, looking frustrated.

‘I remember you stared at the tree a lot,’ John says, tentatively. ‘Though I guess that was just you
figuring out how she was killed.’

‘Oh –’ Sherlock says. ‘Yes, of course, that was it.’ He leans forward to the tube car panel and taps
something into it, apparently changing their destination.

‘We’re not going to Mycroft?’ John asks.

‘We are,’ Sherlock says. ‘But first, we’re going back to the crime scene.’

*
There aren’t any police officers at Catherine’s flat. Sherlock does something to the lock with his handchip, and the door swings open.’

Catherine’s body is gone and a digitally projected line surrounds the space where her body was. The pumpkin and sweets are gone too, presumably in an evidence room somewhere, as is the blue tree. Sherlock strides straight over to the model engine on which Catherine had smashed the tree.

‘Reconstruct it in your mind,’ he says to John. ‘She’s in pain. She realises she’s dying, realises even – she’s bright – that the sweets and the tree have something to do with it. So she picks up the tree, and she staggers over to that train, and brings the one down hard on the other. Then she makes her way back to the table and collapses in the chair. Why?’

‘She wanted to draw the police’s attention to the tree,’ John says. ‘Put it in the middle of the room, help them work out how she was killed.’

‘That’s what I thought at the time,’ Sherlock says. ‘But she probably had the time and coordination left to scribble a note. That would have been simpler. Instead, she chose to draw our attention to a particular location, a particular object.’

‘What do you think she was trying to do, then?’ John asks.

Sherlock crouches down and picks the engine up, starts looking closely at it. ‘She figured out the tree was important, and she trusted the police to work it out too. She hoped by putting an important object on this train, she’d bring it to their notice. Overestimated their intelligence terribly, I’m afraid, but fortunately for her I’m here.’ As he speaks, he wrenches the top off the engine.

There’s a small space inside, and John’s amazed to see that it’s beautifully painted even in there, where Catherine couldn’t have expected anyone to see. Sherlock, though, is not appreciating it; he makes a noise of frustration. ‘Perhaps I’m now overestimating hers,’ he mutters. ‘I was so sure –’

‘What did you expect to be in there?’

‘I don’t know. Something. Something she didn’t want found while she was alive but which had enough to do with her death that she wanted it discovered then. Unless I’m wrong. But –’ he frowns at it, vexed.
He turns it over several times in his hands, peering at it. It has tiny, elegant little wheels, glossy dark green paint, and is held together by miniature bolts. It must have taken her days to do. John feels an odd pang at the thought of it.

Then Sherlock’s eyes brighten in a way by now so familiar that John’s own expression warms at the thought of it. He stands up, still holding the engine. ‘Go and find me a screwdriver,’ Sherlock says. ‘The smallest one you can find. Look for a box of modelling supplies or something similar.’

John isn’t at all comfortable with the idea of going through a dead woman’s things, but Sherlock’s tone brooks no argument. He starts with a cupboard, moves to the shelf above it, and after five minutes or so manages to unearth a pack of tiny screwdrivers. He brings one to Sherlock, who begins to carefully unscrew the bolts, one by one. John watches as the engine comes apart, increasingly aware of how quiet and empty the room is.

Sherlock looks closely at each of the bolts, and finally holds one up triumphantly. ‘John, look at this.’

John comes over. ‘I don’t see...’

Sherlock shakes the bolt several times, and to John’s surprise the inside of it appears to begin to slide out. A moment later, Sherlock’s holding something tiny and metal between two fingers.

‘The bolt was hollow,’ he says, looking extremely pleased with himself. ‘She hid this inside. A data chip. If I just...’ He turns on his handchip and then presses the cylinder against his palm. A moment later, the chip starts to read the cylinder, and a box comes up asking for a password.

Sherlock guesses it in four tries, and, having gained access to the cylinder, begins to copy the information across. John watches transfixed as the word *Journal* appears on Sherlock’s palm.

‘Who goes to that much trouble to hide their diary?’ he wonders aloud.

‘Someone with unusual secrets,’ Sherlock murmurs, clearly immensely excited. He sits down in a chair – thankfully not the one where Catherine’s body was – and John leans over his shoulder to read the text as he scrolls. Sherlock reads faster than him, and he misses bits, but he gets enough:

3rd August 2156
I’m still in shock. I don’t quite know what to make of this. But I’ve decided I have to make a record of – whatever happens from now on. Hide it carefully, of course. But if something happens – this could be dangerous, really dangerous.

Who is Sebastian Moran? I have little reason to trust them, a voice on the end of a handchip call. And yet – what they said made sense. I don’t know. I need to think about this more.

8th September

God, it hurts. It still hurts. And yet the evidence Moran presented was compelling.

In the light of that information, where do my loyalties really lie? If it’s true, then the things that were done to me were – horrible, yes, but I agreed to them. Or the person I was then agreed to them. Is that person really me? She – or, I suppose, it would be more appropriate to say they. Maybe some people would say it. But she or they or whatever, has an entirely different set of memories.

I, she, they, it, would have been in support of Moran’s plan. Am I? How can I answer that question when the whole concept of I is in pieces? But Moran won’t wait much longer for me to make up my mind.

19th October

Moran swore I’d get answers. That I’d get to see where I really belong. I had no idea how alone I was.

If I work for this mysterious person and their even more mysterious employer. That’s the condition. I would become – well, a traitor, I suppose. I’m under no illusions about the work they want me for, using my government position for subtle spy work. Infiltration. Undermining.

People will get hurt.

I won’t see them get hurt. It’ll be – collapsing bridges, and data infected with e-stims. I’ll never even know about any individual event. But the totality of it, what I’m contributing to, I’ll know that.
But then – Moran swore to me, swore I’d get to belong somewhere. That I could do modelling without flinching from it, understand my sense of aesthetics far more truly than I’ve been allowed to before. They swore I could go home.

I want a home so badly.

21st October

Gave Moran my answer. They were pleased. I’m a bit terrified.

Now that I am officially a traitor (if I accept that I owed allegiance in the first place, which I’m not sure I do) I possibly should destroy this. But if things go wrong – if Moran and their employer doublecross me – I want a record.

They’re sending me my first instructions in a few days.

John straightens up, and Sherlock twists in the chair to face him. ‘A little more interesting than tax fraud,’ he says.

‘God,’ John says. ‘Do you think – they did double cross her? I mean, do you think Dryer killed her on their orders?’

Sherlock shakes his head slowly. ‘It’s possible, but I have another theory. Jack Dryer got his flat a few months before Catherine moved in – in other words, he’d have moved in about the time she first started the process of buying the flat. I don’t think that was a coincidence; I think he arranged to move in as soon as he knew she was going to be living there. Only a government job – and an important one at that – would give him the clout to move the people already living there out that quickly.’

‘You think he was there to spy on her,’ John says. ‘But at the point when he moved in, she hadn’t even been approached by this Sebastian Moran person yet.’

‘No,’ Sherlock says grimly. ‘It would have to mean that someone – most likely the Afters Coordinator – is spying on all afters. Or at any rate all afters that work in responsible positions,
particularly government ones.’

‘That’s insane,’ John says. ‘We don’t even have any reason to think you’re dangerous.’

‘Insane unless he knows something we don’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘I think we should go there now and try and find out exactly what he does know.’
John recognises the woman who tells them to wait outside Mycroft’s office: she’s the same person who was piloting the avia when Mycroft, well, kidnapped him. She said, then, that her name was Anthea, though when John asked if it was her real name she said no.

‘Nice to see you again,’ he says.

She gives him a distant smile, managing to convey the impression that she doesn’t remember him in the slightest. For some reason, John feels an urge to keep talking to her. ‘How long have you been working for Mycroft?’ he asks. ‘And are you in the After Management department, or are you like his own P.A.?’

‘We’ve been working together for twenty five years,’ Anthea (as he may as well keep calling her unless she gives him an alternative) says.

He stares at her. ‘I – I’m sorry, this might be a rude question, but – I mean, I thought you were about thirty.’

‘I’m forty three,’ she says, and gives him another distant smile. ‘People always think I’m an after.’

‘You’re not?’

‘No,’ she says. Her tone is as vague as ever but the denial rings false somehow, and John notices that Sherlock is watching her carefully.

‘Afters age more slowly?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Hard to tell, since we don’t actually know how old any of you are,’ Anthea says. ‘But you certainly show fewer visible signs of aging. People who know me know I’m not an after, of course, though they joke that maybe I’m half.’

‘My research says that afters can’t have children,’ Sherlock says.
‘Occasionally my friends make jokes that aren’t perfectly factually accurate,’ she says. ‘Appalling, I know.’ There’s no bite or sarcasm to her tone, it remains floaty, and somehow that makes it even better. John grins. Although actually it’s hard to imagine her joking with friends, having friends, but then presumably she’s not so detached with them, and this is her professional mode. He wonders if she considers Mycroft a friend: surely if they really have been working together for twentyfive years...

Her handchip buzzes, and she glances down. ‘Oh, you can go in now,’ she says, and disappears off down the corridor in an apparently aimless fashion – though John suspects that in reality she’s anything but.

‘How nice to see you two again so soon,’ Mycroft says when they enter. His tone suggests some doubt as to whether it’s really all that nice.

‘Yes, we’re here to talk about how you ordered Catherine Oakshott’s murder,’ Sherlock says, banging the door. John subdues a smile: Sherlock’s petulance around Mycroft is mysterious but still much funnier than it should be.

‘I assume there’s some logic to that accusation,’ Mycroft says, looking bored.

‘A man called Jack Dryer who lived in her building admitted to killing her,’ Sherlock says, ‘but his motive made little sense, and there are other things about him that seemed curious. I believe he was a government agent – he killed Catherine on the orders of someone senior, someone who’d been monitoring certain afters. I don’t believe anyone but you has both the power and the interest. He’d been given a cover story in case he was caught – a made-up but properly documented dead mother and an inheritance from her. I intend to look into that as soon as I leave here, by the way, and if I find, as I expect to, that the recently deceased Murillo Dryer who appears in the tax documents never existed – well, it would take a government department to create a deception as thorough as this one. So I will have proof.’

‘I see,’ Mycroft says, impassive.

‘Of course,’ Sherlock continues, ‘that cover story was never supposed to be used, it was a last resort. Instead he was told to purchase a necklace Catherine had made and bribe the person he purchased it from to say nothing about the exchange. I think that necklace was just part of an elaborate plan to create a false motive for Catherine’s boyfriend, Henry Baker, and frame him. You didn’t want to lose an agent to prison, and you certainly didn’t want him investigated. But he developed scruples. I think he got increasingly concerned about the plan, particularly the scapegoating aspect, and eventually he had a photograph of a woman printed and displayed it as his
“mother”, inviting an investigation into his cover story.’

‘And why, exactly, did I order this woman’s death?’ Mycroft says.

‘We found her journal,’ Sherlock says, looking Mycroft straight in the eye.

Mycroft sighs, and looks back at Sherlock for a long time. Then, finally, he says, ‘I suppose the two of you find this all very reprehensible.’

Is that an admission? It sounds an awful lot like one. The air whooshes from John’s lungs. ‘You had her killed,’ he says, her voice tight.

‘She would have caused many more deaths. My duty is to the people of earth in general and the United Kingdom specifically. I had to make the decision. If you’ve read her journal you know some of it, but she herself wasn’t aware of the full extent of the danger she posed. Neither are you. Believe me, there was no better choice.’

‘And framing her boyfriend?’ John challenges. ‘Was that necessary too?’

‘I would have pulled strings to have him released from criminal rehabilitation within a year, and the offence removed from his record,’ Mycroft says. ‘It’s true that he would still have suffered socially. But Dryer’s one of my best agents, and I couldn’t afford to lose him. Or rather he was – unfortunately he appears to have rather gone off the rails. I suppose the frame job was outside the sort of work he usually did; he found bringing someone innocent into the business distasteful, and he was confident that his own cover story would be sufficient to prevent my role from being discovered. Evidently his judgement there was lacking.’

‘The police didn’t think of it,’ Sherlock says, looking slightly self-satisfied.

‘Are you going to tell them?’ Mycroft asks, evenly.

‘There’s little point,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’m sure you can arrange to have it all covered up, and Dryer will deny it. No, I just wanted to speak to you about it, and enlist your cooperation, which I hope my silence will make you more willing to provide. What do you know about the person who approached Catherine – Sebastian Moran?’
‘Until recently, very little, though we’ve been investigating the name for some time. However, a week ago a man was arrested for brutally beating another man to death in the street. When arrested, he gave his name as Sebastian Moran. The crime appears to have been entirely motiveless and pointless. He’s due to be tried in two days’ time, on the 4th of November. It seems very unlikely that this is the same person who contacted Catherine, who appears far removed from crude and unreasoning violence. We have been investigating as to whether there could be any connection, but it seems almost certain that the person we are looking for is using a false name.’

‘And Moran’s employer?’

‘Nothing at all,’ Mycroft says. ‘They are so peculiarly elusive that we cannot assume they exist. Moran may have created a fictitious employer in the hope that we would concentrate on searching for them rather than Moran teirself.’

‘When you say that Catherine herself didn’t know how dangerous she was, what exactly do you mean?’ Sherlock asks next.

‘I’m afraid I can’t divulge that information,’ Mycroft says. He sighs again. ‘As you already know this much, I may as well enlist your help. I would appreciate it if you bring anything you discover about Moran to me.’

‘Why should I?’ Sherlock says, folding his arms.

‘Because we’ll both progress much faster if we pool our resources,’ Mycroft says. ‘But of course it’s your decision. Was there anything else you wanted?’

John isn’t quite sure how he feels. He has, after all, killed people for the sake of protecting earth, and he can hardly criticise either Mycroft or Dryer for doing the same. Somehow, though the frame-up does bother him. Perhaps that’s ridiculous when he’s prepared to excuse murder, but – Henry Baker would have spent the rest of his life trying to convince his friends and family he hadn’t murdered his girlfriend. And Mycroft appears entirely calm about it. Do they really want to work with a man like that?

And yet Mycroft’s right – Sherlock will undoubtedly want to know everything about what’s going on, to uncover this mystery, and Mycroft will be able to help. John doesn’t trust him a centimetre, but there’s no denying he has far better resources than they can find anywhere else.
‘I’ll consider it,’ Sherlock snaps.

Mycroft gives a slightly disturbing almost-smile. ‘That will have to do, I suppose,’ he says. It’s clearly a dismissal. Sherlock stands still for a number of seconds, as if just to prove that he doesn’t have to do what Mycroft tells him, and then turns on his heel and marches out, John following.

*

‘I wish I knew why he irritated me so much,’ Sherlock says, settling into his armchair. ‘But that was productive, at least. I can turn my attention to investigating Moran.’

‘What about the afters phenomenon?’

‘Well, they’re not unrelated questions, are they?’ Sherlock says. ‘Moran told Catherine who or what she was – maybe that was a lie, or maybe it wasn’t, but either way if we can track them down we ought to get something useful from them.’

‘True.’ John hesitates. ‘Do you plan to start investigating right now?’

‘I had planned to, yes.’ Sherlock gives him a penetrating look. ‘I suppose I could consider allowing myself to be distracted.’

‘If you –’ John starts, but he’s interrupted by his handchip beeping. He looks down at his palm.

Hey John! Just thought I’d let you know that I’ve got leave coming up in three days. I’m actually back on earth already but you know what it’s like, how long you have to spend going through processing in the transit hub. Anyway, it’d be really nice to see you when I get out. Are you around at all? Mary

‘Army friend with leave,’ Sherlock murmurs, and John grins at him.

‘Yep. Mary Morstan. Do you want to meet her, when she shows up? She won’t be around long; her
family’s all in India so she always spends most of her leave there. Nice of her to drop in on me first, it’ll be good to see her. I think you might like her.’

‘It may have escaped your notice, but liking people isn’t something I make much of a habit of,’ Sherlock says.

John shrugs. ‘Still think you might. Anyway, you’ve got a couple of days to think about it.’

He messages her back, then flicks off his handchip and looks back at Sherlock. ‘Decided whether you’re going to let me distract you yet?’

Sherlock looks up at the ceiling, then gives one brisk nod and unfolds from his armchair. ‘Your bedroom?’ he says, and John nods back at him.

‘All right,’ Sherlock says, and begins moving towards the stairs. As he steps onto the bottom one he pauses and half turns back. ‘Remember that I warned you not to be disappointed. If nothing – if I don’t respond as you’d wish. I enjoy being in bed with you, and if I don’t enjoy it in quite the way you’d like, you shouldn’t worry. You touching me is an experiment. We can decide what to do next depending on the results.’

‘OK,’ John says, puzzled but keeping his voice reassuring. ‘I understand.’ Which isn’t true, but hopefully will be soon. Despite Sherlock’s pessimism, John can’t help but feel that if he can only communicate everything going through his head with touch, things between them will go much better.

As they walk through the doorway of John’s room, Sherlock’s hand brushes against his. It’s a deliberate touch, though Sherlock’s trying to make it look accidental, and it makes John’s heart twist slightly. Sherlock can only touch him in ways that whoever it was fucked with his brain decided was socially appropriate. And apparently that means appropriate for a stranger or acquaintance, not a lover. Not even for a close friend. Sherlock wants the reassurance of reaching out to touch John, but this pathetic momentary brush of hands is all he can get.

John grabs Sherlock’s hand and squeezes it hard, then pulls him over to the bed. ‘Let me kiss you again first,’ he says, and Sherlock smiles and leans down.

The kissing is as lovely as before and John relaxes into it slightly. Whatever happens next, he’s had this much, and it was perfect. Finally, he leans back. ‘Can I undress you?’ he asks.
‘It would probably be quicker for me to do it myself,’ Sherlock says, tilting his head to one side.

‘Not about speed,’ John says, grinning. ‘I want to. So can I?’

‘Yes, all right,’ Sherlock says.

John doesn’t generally pay that much attention to people’s clothing – his favourite kinds of art are painting and video games, though there are lots of films and sculptures and make up designs he likes too. Occasionally he does see fashion that he admires, but it’s not something he thinks about much.

He notices Sherlock’s clothes, though. Mostly his shirts, and how closely they press to his chest. They’re all dark coloured, black or aubergine or deep blue, and stand out sharply against his skin. As John unbuttons it, a pale line appears down the middle, a gash of light. He leans down, presses his cheek to it, rasps stubble up Sherlock’s chest, then turns to press kisses to it.

‘John,’ Sherlock says, so softly John almost doesn’t hear him. He straightens up again and tugs Sherlock’s shirt up and off him.

John, like everyone else, almost always wears either cotton or polymis, which is cheap, light, warm, and doesn’t have the unpleasant plastic feel of older synthetic fibers. Sherlock, though, wears denim. Denim jeans. It makes not staring at his arse that much harder than it would have been anyway. There is, therefore, immense satisfaction in unzipping them, pulling them down, peeling them away.

John glances at Sherlock’s face and sees him watching as his jeans are removed, eyes already getting wider, darker. There’s something very hot about how quickly and how widely Sherlock’s pupils dilate, as though his body wants to give him as much to observe as it can, as if it wants to suck the whole scene into itself and keep it there.

When Sherlock is naked, John takes several moments just to look. His height is somehow even more striking now, the sheer amount of skin on display a delight. John’s drawn to touch him, runs a hand across his shoulder, the skin smooth and lovely against his fingers.

Sherlock does, as John thought, have a cock. It’s soft, but that’s not really that surprising at this stage. Sherlock is perhaps just slower to arouse than John is – which wouldn’t be difficult, right
now; he feels like he’s about to burst out of his skin just from looking at Sherlock. The idea that he’s about to touch him is almost too much.

‘You could lie down,’ John suggests. Instead, Sherlock sits – perhaps not keen on the feeling of vulnerability that might come from being stretched out naked on the bed – and John sits beside him.

‘Stripping me was more erotic for you than watching me do it myself,’ Sherlock says, thoughtfully.

‘Pretty erotic either way,’ John says. ‘But yeah, there’s something about taking your clothes off...I don’t really know why.’

‘Let me try it,’ Sherlock says, and John smiles, because everything’s an experiment with Sherlock. Perhaps he ought to mind that, but he doesn’t think it’s only an experiment.

‘Yeah, sure,’ he says, and Sherlock reaches for John’s jumper and pulls it up and off. His shirt and vest follow, and then he lifts his hips so that Sherlock can pull down his trousers and pants. He kicks them off and across the floor.

‘Seeing a little bit more skin revealed each time,’ Sherlock muses. ‘And yes – somehow being the driving force behind that skin appearing changes it. Possessiveness, maybe? Enjoying affecting somebody else’s body – I don’t know, I’ll have to think about it.’

John laughs at this, and grips Sherlock’s hair for more kissing. He keeps at it till Sherlock has lips even plumper than before and flushed cheeks. Then he leans his forehead against Sherlock’s cheek, lifts a hand to stroke his hair, and then brings both hands down to his shoulders, across his chest, stroking and exploring.

Sherlock’s making little noises again, just like the ones from last time, and they are no less arousing now. John touches his arms, his stomach, taking in as much of the sensation of Sherlock’s skin against his hands as he can get.

Sherlock’s cock still isn’t hard, which isn’t altogether encouraging, but perhaps he needs actual touch. John’s hand hovers above it, hesitant, till Sherlock makes an impatient sound and pushes it down.
John curls his hand around it, still slightly nervous, and tentatively begins to move. When, after a few strokes, Sherlock remains entirely unresponsive, cock showing no signs of hardening, John asks, ‘How does that feel?’

‘Fine,’ Sherlock says.

‘Fine,’ John repeats.

Sherlock glances at his face, and apparently decides he needs to elaborate. ‘The fact that you’re touching me has – enormous psychological appeal. But physically, there’s virtually no sensation.’

‘Oh,’ John says, slowly. ‘That’s what you meant when you said I might be disappointed.’

‘Yes. I’ve tried masturbating and, as the information you gave me had already reported, there was very little effect. I thought perhaps you touching it might have more of an impact, but – although, as I said, I’m enjoying the idea of your hands on me, I can’t feel much there.’

‘Right,’ John says, trying not to be fazed by this. ‘What else did the information say? I mean, are there places where you do have a lot of sensation? What about the prostate?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Sherlock says, ‘but you can try penetrating me if you like.’

‘Not if you don’t want me to.’

‘I don’t mind. We may as well exhaust all avenues.’

John hates this lack of enthusiasm, but he hates the idea of giving up more, so he reaches for the lube in the bedside table. It feels slippery on his fingers, a thin layer that’s almost like water, but he knows its consistency is thicker than it appears and that it’ll provide plenty of lubrication without getting sticky. He’s glad, now, that he bought stuff that seemed ridiculously overpriced for a masturbation aid.

Sherlock shifts to allow John to get his hand underneath him and slide his finger inside. He presses in with it, moves it, trying to find Sherlock’s prostate. Sherlock stares placidly at the wall for the
first minute or so, then turns back to face John. John keeps it up for another minute or so, but clearly this isn’t working, and he’s beginning to feel pretty stupid, so he pulls his hand back and looks at Sherlock, doing his best not to look miserable.

‘Sorry,’ he says.

‘It’s hardly your fault. I suppose perhaps I should apologise for not warning you more specifically. I just – hoped it might not be like this.’

‘This lack of sensitivity is common to afters, then,’ John says. ‘It’s not just you.’

‘Not just me, no. Apparently it’s usual.’ Sherlock shrugs. ‘It doesn’t matter to me, I’m happy just to touch you, but I know you don’t...that’s not really what you want from a sexual relationship.’

John stares at him, frustrated. Sherlock is still flushed, pupils still enormous, showing every sign of being extremely turned on except the most obvious. ‘There must be something I can do for you,’ John says.

‘You can let me touch you,’ Sherlock says, and his tone is – well, not pleading, not pleading at all by anyone else’s standards, but it’s as close to it as John’s ever heard from him.

‘You can’t touch me,’ John points out, and laughs hollowly. ‘God, this is hopeless.’ Sherlock’s expression shuts down, and John adds hastily, ‘Figure of speech. I haven’t lost hope at all. I – look, I could – er – against your leg, or between your thighs. Something like that.’

‘You don’t like the idea of my getting you off and not the reverse,’ Sherlock says. ‘I know that. You don’t have to do this. Though now you’ve planted the idea in my head of you rubbing yourself against me it would be very cruel to deprive me of it.’

John swallows. The chances of him denying Sherlock anything reduce significantly. ‘If you want it I’ll do it,’ he says, and that came out as much more of an honest declaration than he intended it to.

‘I want it,’ Sherlock says. His gaze is very heated now, and he lies back on the bed, any earlier concerns about vulnerability apparently forgotten. ‘What did you do with the lube?’
John finds it again and smoothes some onto the insides of Sherlock’s thighs. Sherlock seems affected by that touch far more than he did by the touches to his cock and arse, eyes closing in apparent bliss as John caresses down the insides of his legs.

John is up to date with his antivirus medication. Sherlock, meanwhile, hasn’t really had any opportunity to pick up an illness since his arrival, and his cock in any case doesn’t appear to be producing any fluid at all. Still, John makes sure: ‘We don’t need condoms?’

‘No, no, I need to feel you,’ Sherlock says. ‘Besides, you’re a doctor who’s obsessed with being responsible, you’re obviously rigorous about taking the same medication they pressed on me as soon as I arrived. I took it too, incidentally, since not doing so would have been a great deal of bother. So there’s no need to worry.’

John nods, and climbs on top of Sherlock. He tries not to put too much weight on him but Sherlock appears to disagree with this decision, moving his head to push at John’s shoulder like a cat, encouraging him to sink down and cover Sherlock’s body with his own. John sighs a little to feel Sherlock pressed against him, and then slides his cock between Sherlock’s thighs. Sherlock squeezes them together, and they are slick and hard and good and John starts to thrust.

The pressure and movement against his cock is good, the fact that this is Sherlock’s body he’s touching is better. Sherlock’s hands come and move towards John’s shoulders as if seeking to grip them, then ball into fists – as if Sherlock’s the one on the brink, the one desperately turned on and needing to be grounded. John gasps, looks up at the ceiling and then back at Sherlock’s wide and focused eyes, and Sherlock’s stare undoes him. He shakes, thrusts harder, and comes over Sherlock’s legs, moaning helplessly.

He doesn’t mean to collapse completely, sinking even further down onto Sherlock like the man’s a mattress, but he can’t help it. His body is so warm and heavy and Sherlock feels so spectacularly good; it seems so completely right that John should be curled over him.

‘Incredible,’ John says, his voice still a little hoarse and soft. ‘So good, Sherlock.’

Sherlock kisses his cheek, a startlingly chaste and affectionate gesture that makes John feel suddenly too hot. He needs to say something, so he says, ‘It’s only your hands, then. You can touch me however you like with your face, your lips, the rest of your body...’

‘I can,’ Sherlock agrees. ‘Oh, yes, fantastic, I must try stimulating you with my mouth. It wasn’t mentioned in the information, but people must do that.’
‘Oh, they do it,’ John assures him. ‘It can be uncomfortable though – I mean, there’s the gag reflex, and...you certainly shouldn’t feel you have to.’

‘Why on earth would I feel that?’ Sherlock says. ‘But it would be absurd not to try it. A way to touch you and actually have some control over the proceedings isn’t something to pass up lightly. And I can see by your face that you’re not at all adverse to the idea.’

‘Er, no. Definitely not adverse.’ John smiles, and Sherlock smiles back.

John moves his hand to rub it soothingly against Sherlock’s side – and Sherlock tenses, abruptly and hard. John frowns and lifts his hands, pushes himself upright again. Sherlock reaches out, hands opening and closing as if wanting to clutch at him, but John moves back. ‘Do you not like being touched there? Being held? Just – tell me if you don’t like anything.’

‘It’s not that. It doesn’t matter. Come back.’

John looks uneasily at Sherlock, but Sherlock’s arms are still out, angled towards John but unable to touch him, and the gesture seems almost yearning. So John lies down again – now more beside Sherlock to avoid continuing to crush him, but still close against him.

Then he drapes his arm over Sherlock, but as his hand brushes against Sherlock’s side, Sherlock flinches again. He attempts to hide it this time, his expression quickly going neutral, but he’s a moment too late. John removes his hand, increasingly puzzled, and looks down where he was touching. The only unusual feature there is a single tiny white line, presumably a scar.

There’s no way a tiny scar that looks completely healed should make Sherlock jerk like that when it’s touched. ‘Will you let me examine that for a moment?’ John asks.

‘It’s nothing. It’s miniscule, you’re being ridiculous,’ Sherlock says, scrambling into a more upright position.

‘Please,’ John says. ‘The way you’re reacting to it is very unusual, I just want to check it out.’

Sherlock looks almost pained. ‘Fine. I don’t care. Do whatever you like. But whatever happens –
just remember you were the one who insisted on looking into this. And that things were hardly going all that well anyway. Try not to put too much irrational blame on me, even if irrational irritation is something you’re quite fond of.’

Why is Sherlock so defensive about this scar? But there’s no point in asking, so John had better just investigate it, now that he has permission. He touches it with two fingers, and hears Sherlock draw in breath sharply.

Under John’s finger, the scar seems to grow slightly. He strokes it again; Sherlock lets out another breathy sound, and John sees that the scar seems to be opening up. He racks his brains for anything in his medical training that might explain this and comes up with nothing. But then he’s not trained to treat afters. ‘Does it hurt?’ John asks.

‘No,’ Sherlock says, his voice sounding deeper and slightly strange. ‘It doesn’t hurt. It’s not a wound. John, please leave it.’

‘I’m worried about you,’ John says. ‘If it doesn’t hurt, why do you keep flinching like that?’

‘Can you not observe anything for yourself?’ Sherlock snaps, and then, softer: ‘Just let it go.’

‘Tell me what’s wrong,’ John says, tone dangerously close to pleading. But Sherlock’s lips are clamped shut and he now won’t even look at John.

John touches the scar again, and again Sherlock’s breathing goes slightly ragged. But John’s watching him now, and he also sees Sherlock’s eyes flutter closed, his neck tilt back slightly. Is it – surely it can’t be. Sherlock’s going to mock him to death if he’s wrong, but he has to ask. So tentatively he puts forward the question: ‘Does it feel – good?’

Sherlock’s eyes open again. He looks closer to anxious than John’s ever seen him. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘But John, you don’t have to –’

John drags his finger across the scar, and Sherlock’s sentence vanishes into an unintelligible squeak. ‘Do you want this?’ John asks. ‘I mean, are you enjoying it?’

‘You have no idea,’ Sherlock says. ‘But I am fully aware of how bizarre this is, and how far from your usual experiences. I can’t imagine you’d want to.’
‘If you’re enjoying it, I want to,’ John promises, and begins moving his finger again. The line is no longer a line so much as a narrow slit, widening slightly with every touch until John can just get the tip of his finger inside it. Sherlock moans low and deep when he does that, and if John had been slightly freaked out by how weird this is, he stops caring at that sound. He tries lifting his fingertip out and then pushing it back in again, effectively fucking the strange little slit, and Sherlock writhes and moans and tries to twist upwards to get more contact.

John bends down to kiss him, still keeping up the rhythm with his finger. With his other hand he strokes around the outside of the slit. This is bizarre and ridiculous and incredible; Sherlock is aroused beyond speech and has a tiny fleshy hole in his side that’s vibrating slightly around John’s finger, John doesn’t even know if this would qualify as sex by definitions he’s previously held to, but it’s undeniably hot.

‘John,’ Sherlock says, his voice strained and even deeper than before. John looks at him, at where his chest is moving with the rapid breaths he’s taking and his skin is flushed. Where his head’s tipped back, his eyes shut, lips parted.

‘God, you are so lovely,’ John says, and Sherlock moans again at that and that makes John kiss him again.

‘You can go faster,’ Sherlock urges, so John does, moving his finger in small but rapid circular motions, and Sherlock’s gasping and letting slip fragments of words and then he says, ‘Oh, I think –’ and suddenly John’s finger’s immersed in hot liquid.

He removes it, but the moment of delight in having caused something that seems like it may have been some sort of orgasm disappears instantly as he sees the liquid on his finger, and that’s now trickling slowly from the slit, is dark red in colour.

‘You’re bleeding,’ John says, sitting bolt upright. ‘Oh shit, what have I – it was a wound, wasn’t it, I swear to God –’

‘It really wasn’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘Did you not see any of that? The liquid isn’t blood. I don’t know what it is, but apparently we all produce it after – well. After sex. The way sex is for us.’

‘You knew, then,’ John says. ‘I mean, you knew what I had to do to – turn you on.’
'You can do *that* by being in the same room,’ Sherlock says. ‘To physically stimulate me, you mean. Yes, I knew, but I hadn’t planned to tell you. You’re so keen on treating afters as exactly the same as befores, I thought you’d be alarmed and thrown by something so...different. Very few befores seem to know much about our bodies, and this aspect in particular appears to have been kept quiet. I suppose few of us want to draw attention to our peculiarities.’

The blood-coloured liquid is still making John nervous, but the slit is already closing up, turning back into the tiny, unnoticeable white line, so he supposes it’s all right. And it’s the wrong consistency for blood anyway.

‘That must have been very odd for you,’ Sherlock says. ‘And it’s taken your assumptions about reps being just like anyone else to pieces, hasn’t it?’

‘Not really,’ John says. ‘Just because you’re physically different doesn’t mean you’re different in ways that matter. And yeah, it was strange, but – that doesn’t mean it was bad. It was...seeing you like that was...’

Sherlock studies his expression. ‘Good?’ he says, sounding remarkably unsure, for him, and even slightly nervous.

‘Incredible,’ John assures him. There’s some cleaning mist in John’s bedside table; he grabs it and sprays it over them. They’ll need a shower tomorrow, but right now he doesn’t want to move.

He’s suddenly incredibly sleepy, lethargy catching up and soaking into his body. He lies back beside Sherlock and curls an arm over him. He’s just starting to drift when Sherlock says, still in the same uncharacteristic tone: ‘Do you want me to leave so you can get some sleep?’

John tightens his grip. Half-asleep, he just murmurs, ‘Stay,’ but then a moment later realises he’s being rude and excessively controlling in his now slightly out of it state, and adds, ‘Only if you want to, obviously.’

Sherlock doesn’t reply to this, but he turns slightly, leaning further into John’s embrace, and drapes one of his legs over both of John’s. John smiles, and lets himself drift into sleep.
‘-years ago, so if it is him where has he been in the meantime?’

John blinks, eyes gradually adjusting to the dim light filtering through the curtains. ‘Huh?’ he says.

Sherlock is sprawled on top of him, his chest pressing against John’s, covering his entire body. His face is looming ten centimetres or so from John’s face, and he’s holding up his handchip.

‘How long have you been awake?’ John asks.

His voice comes out as a mumble, but Sherlock seems to hear, as he replies: ‘An hour and a half. Lying on top of you like this seems to be conducive to my thought processes, for some reason. I’ve made excellent progress. Weren’t you listening?’

‘I was asleep,’ John mutters, shutting his eyes again.

Sherlock makes a _tsk_ noise as if John’s behaved entirely unreasonably and says, ‘I suppose I’ll just have to repeat myself. It seems almost certain that Moran is an after, yes? Otherwise why would tey be so invested in telling another after – possibly more than one, Catherine may have been one of many approached that way – about their origins, or recruiting them like that?’

‘Yeah,’ John says; he’s nowhere near awake enough for a more developed response. He kisses the bit of Sherlock’s shoulder he can reach.

‘There’s no after on record named Sebastian Moran,’ Sherlock continues. ‘So presumably someone was using a false name to speak to Catherine. Whoever it was probably _is_ on record as an after, just under another name. There is, though, one other possibility – not a particularly likely one, admittedly.’

John kisses Sherlock’s other shoulder. Sherlock repositions himself slightly, body pressing even more closely against John’s, and says, ‘When afters appear, word of their appearance usually reaches the After Management department within half an hour. They’re collected, told to pick names and genders, given somewhere to live and assigned an E.L.I. Generally speaking, they agree to this. Even I did, and I’m hardly naturally compliant. I didn’t know where or who or what I was, and...’ He shakes his head; John opens his eyes again and strokes his arm. ‘It’s hard for you to
understand just how confusing it is. We all arrive terrified.’

John hates that thought, Sherlock’s arrival, alone and afraid with a man trying to beat him to death, and he wraps his arms around Sherlock’s back. Sherlock rolls his eyes at John’s sentimentality, his protectiveness, but John doesn’t care. Sherlock says, ‘Very occasionally, an after finds the government’s attempt to control them even more alarming than the prospect of navigating the unfamiliarity without guidance, and tries to escape. I say escape because, though E.L.I.s and being put on a list of afters and all the rest of it are presented as a kindness, they are not optional. In every one of these situations, the police tracked the afters down and brought them back. They eventually accepted E.L.I.s and went on to be upstanding members of the community.’

There’s a trace of irony in Sherlock’s voice, and John is slightly uncomfortable. ‘If you –’ he starts, barely knowing what he wants to say.

But Sherlock interrupts him. ‘Not now,’ he says. ‘There is only one instance on record of an after managing to successfully disappear. They arrived in December of 2130, took the name Melas Sinope and the gender male, and signed on with an E.L.I., a young woman named Mina James. This after never showed any signs of being unhappy with his situation and was recorded as learning fast and being obedient. Then, when his month was almost at an end, he and his E.L.I. both disappeared. The police looked for them but never found either.’

‘And you think –’

‘It’s probably entirely unconnected,’ Sherlock says. ‘But we have an after of clearly unusual intelligence, who must have planned his escape from the beginning and pretended to be content and compliant until he was ready to carry it out, and who managed to convince his E.L.I. to become his accomplice. And we also have someone that is almost certainly an after who apparently bears some animosity towards the country or the planet and is carrying out a plan of sabotage. They probably aren’t connected, but it’s interesting. Interesting for my investigation into the afters phenomenon even if it doesn’t turn out to be useful in searching for Moran.’

‘True,’ John says. He shifts slightly, and becomes suddenly much more conscious of the fact that he’s naked and has a similarly naked Sherlock Holmes on top of him. His cock approves of this situation and considers that it would be further improved by the addition of some friction, but his brain is abruptly online, and the sudden influx of thought – and the memories that rapidly come into focus – aren’t altogether welcome.

He tries not to tense up, but Sherlock observes faster than John can hide. His expression goes blank, the early morning warmth they were sharing a moment ago evaporated. He pushes himself upright, out of John’s arms, and slips out of bed. ‘You’re still tired,’ he says. ‘You’ll be no use to me like this. Come down to the living room when you’re ready to help with the work.’
John means to say Sherlock’s name, stop him leaving, tell him to come back to bed and let John touch him, but shame and arousal and confusion fight in his chest, and he takes the cowardly option of murmuring, ‘All right, I might try and get a bit more sleep.’

Sherlock doesn’t reply, but shuts the door with what seems a bit more force than necessary.

Being left alone with his thoughts is easier than facing Sherlock right now, but still far from pleasant. John finds himself reliving the night before and finding himself more embarrassed and confused and turned on than ever. Because – what the hell was that?

John’s never subscribed to a definite theory about the afters, but he leaned slightly towards the idea that they’re from earth’s future. He always preferred the theories that said they were human. Sherlock’s body, last night, didn’t seem awfully human.

Although – in a way John’s being ridiculous. All right, Sherlock has slightly unusual sex organs in a slightly unusual place, but sex for him really seemed to work in a pretty similar way to all the befores John’s been with, and to John himself. Consistent stimulation of a particular area, arousal building up to a climax...surely if Sherlock actually were some sort of alien or another species he’d be more different?

John has no idea. And he thinks of Sherlock’s vulnerability yesterday, of him saying, I hadn’t planned to tell you...I thought you’d be alarmed...proving those insecurities right is the last thing in the world that John wants, and yet – in the cold light of day it all seems to matter much more than it did last night.

John’s been helping Sherlock with this mystery, this question of who or what are the afters, largely for Sherlock’s sake. But perhaps John does need to know for himself as well. He’s only known Sherlock a couple of weeks, and he’s trusted him with more than he has anyone for a very long time.

But no, this is ridiculous. John doesn’t regret trusting Sherlock, has had the most incredible two weeks of his life, and now he’s let Sherlock go and sit downstairs knowing that John’s upstairs thinking about how he’s a freak.

Does he really want Sherlock any less now that he knows what sex between them is going to entail? Or is he just embarrassed to want it, prejudice and assumptions he’d be sure he didn’t have welling up at the worst possible time?
He forces himself to picture the scene from last night, Sherlock’s gasps, John’s finger tentatively pressing into his side. Forces himself to remember how much it turned him on at the time, and, more than that, how much joy there was in sharing intimacy and arousal with Sherlock.

_You, John Watson, are a fucking idiot_, he tells himself, and he swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands up. His bad leg is shaking like mad, and he almost falls before he grabs at his cane, lying by the side of the bed where he dropped it last night.

Apparently worrying over how much of a dick he’s being aggravates the effects of the psychebullets much worse than being chased by criminal gangs, and it takes him twice as long as usual to get down the stairs. Sherlock is sitting in his armchair, looking at his handchip, and doesn’t look up at any point during John’s slow progression downwards. John comes to stand in front of him, and Sherlock continues to ignore him for a few moments, before finally looking up. ‘It’s apparently escaped your attention that I’m working,’ he says. ‘I knew observation wasn’t your strong point, but this is impressively dense even by your standards.’

‘We need to talk,’ John says.

‘No. _You_ need to talk, or at least you feel that you do. You want to tell me that you’re sorry for leading me on but that on reflection you don’t think a continued sexual relationship will be best for either of us. You feel the need for this pointless conversation in order to reassure yourself that you haven’t done anything wrong, so let me reassure you instead: last night you were riding on two weeks’ worth of sexual frustration. It’s understandable that you got – swept up in things. You don’t need to do it again and I can assure you that I won’t tell anyone, so I don’t see why any further conversation on the topic is necessary.’

Sherlock’s right, John decides. Talking is, in fact, not what’s needed here. He drops the cane, and lets himself sink to his knees.

Sherlock tries not to look visibly taken aback, and he doesn’t ask what the hell John’s doing. John isn’t fooled, though. Sherlock gives a disgusted sniff that’s supposed to indicate that John is doing something ridiculous and beneath Sherlock’s notice, and goes back to reading the screen on his palm.

Sherlock’s wearing his dressing gown, having presumably picked it up from his own room after he left John’s, and it’s tied tightly. John reaches for the belt and opens it with a couple of flicks. Sherlock’s eyes flick up from his handchip to stare at John, but he still refuses to ask what John’s doing. John smiles slightly to himself and pulls the dressing gown open and pushes it off him.
Sherlock makes no move to resist. He’s still staring, still unable to admit that he doesn’t understand what’s going on. A sudden burst of affection makes John nuzzle gently at his side, just below the little white line. He looks up, meets Sherlock’s eyes deliberately for a second, and then looks back down and licks a stripe over the line.

Sherlock whimpers. His mouth hovers open, but no words come out. His hand flops to the armrest, handchip forgotten, and he’s no longer even trying to pretend not to stare. John flicks the line with his tongue again, and feels it start to swell gently and part.

‘John,’ Sherlock says, and John manages to slip the tip of his tongue into the tiny gap. Sherlock makes a low, desperate sound.

‘I’m not going to pretend this isn’t weird,’ John says, placing his hand on Sherlock’s thigh and stroking gently. ‘It might take a bit of getting used to, and yeah, OK, I did freak out a bit this morning, and I’m sorry about that. But I am not letting go of this now I’ve got it. We’re going to figure it out, and we’re going to have a lot of sex while we do, all right?’

Sherlock stares at him, then moves his mouth without making a sound, and finally gets out, ‘All right.’

The slit’s still widening. John resolutely pushes away any thoughts about this being strange and pushes his tongue in as far as it’ll go. Sherlock makes another sound: apparently sex makes him entirely nonverbal but certainly not quiet, and John likes it a lot. He probes the tiny hole with his tongue. The inside is remarkably smooth, smoother than skin, and soft. It’s actually quite appealing, he decides, even if it is bizarre, and it trembles slightly against his tongue as he presses at it.

‘John,’ Sherlock says, drawn out and ragged. John kisses the slit, pressing at it with his lips while stroking the inside with his tongue, and Sherlock *yells*. Hot liquid soaks John’s mouth, slightly oily in texture and oddly tasteless. He sits back, looking up at Sherlock with just a trace of smugness.

‘It’s a brighter red this time,’ Sherlock observes, reaching down to touch John’s mouth and then holding up his fingertip so John can see. The liquid is indeed much brighter than last time, almost orangey, and clearly not blood.

‘Is there anything I can say that will stop you running experiments on it?’ John asks.
‘Nothing whatsoever. In fact, would you get me a petri dish from the kitchen?’

John raises his eyebrows, hoping that the gesture adequately expresses the sentiment: *oh come on, even you can’t be that lazy.* Sherlock says, ‘I’m in the middle of working something out, I can’t get up now and distract myself. Besides, I’ve gone all...floppy. It happened last night too, which means it’s caused by sex, which makes it your fault.’

‘You are talking such bollocks,’ John tells him. He gets the petri dish anyway.

*

The rest of the day passes quietly. The only interesting thing to happen with the investigation occurs when Sherlock, after some grumbling about how he doesn’t *have* to share information with Mycroft if he doesn’t want to, messages him the idea about the disappeared after. Shortly he gets the reply: *Government records have sufficient information on that after to rule out possibility of involvement. Not Moran.*

‘He doesn’t want me investigating that after,’ Sherlock says, sounding both intrigued and smug. ‘There’s definitely something there. Interesting.’

His grin is infectious, and John returns it, before going back to looking up the names of afters from government lists and noting ones with criminal records. Sherlock thinks Moran is quite likely to have a spotless record, but it’s worth checking just in case.

John tries touching Sherlock again in the afternoon and is neatly dodged. Sherlock affects a stern expression and says, ‘Absolutely not. What was the point in us having sex if I’m *still* going to be distracted all the time? We need to learn to ignore these urges, and we’ve got a mysterious criminal to investigate.’

The whole issue of the strangeness of Sherlock’s body has distracted John, and that distraction coupled with Sherlock’s eagerness and responsiveness to touch almost made John forget that Sherlock’s goal in having sex with him was to stop wanting to have sex with him. He tries not to worry about that: after all, Sherlock clearly still very much wanted it this morning, and if this only lasts a few more days then surely it’s still better than nothing. And John isn’t supposed to be having sex with Sherlock at all.
That night, Sherlock follows John up to his room and climbs into bed with him without a word. John isn’t sure if cuddling will be welcome, so tries to take up as little space as possible, but then Sherlock makes an impatient noise and reaches for John’s arm. When he can’t touch it, he *tisks* again and elbows it until John gets the picture and drapes it over him.

‘What’s the significance of *hands*?’ Sherlock says. ‘This isn’t just about us having been trained to behave appropriately in the society we’re placed in. I could go around snogging everyone I met in the street if I liked.’

‘I would not approve of that, just so you know,’ John says, and then immediately flushes. What on earth was that? He and Sherlock aren’t in a romantic relationship, and even if they were he has no reason to assume Sherlock would want it to be monogamous. It’s true that John’s never been particularly poly, but he’s never before blundered ahead assuming his partner’s preference is for monogamy.

‘Sorry –’ he starts, but Sherlock cuts him off.

‘I have no interest in kissing anyone but you,’ he says. ‘I don’t care if you kiss other people, or have sex with them, but I’ll object enormously if you start spending more time with someone else than me. *I am* your job, after all.’

‘I don’t spend all my time with you just because you’re my job,’ John says, and kisses him.

Sherlock lets him for a while, and then pulls back. ‘You’re distracting me. I was trying to point out that reps’ conditioning or teaching or whatever it is is particularly concerned with us using our *hands* in the same ways that befores do. Why is that?’

‘Much as I enjoy listening to you thinking out loud,’ John says, ‘I really need to get some sleep.’

‘Is it to do with how whoever sent us perceives manual and digital contact, or with how they think people here perceive them?’ Sherlock says. John sighs, and shuts his eyes.

* 

John gets to sleep much faster than he would have predicted, Sherlock’s voice gradually becoming lulling rather than distracting.
He dreams he’s playing a video game about the war. There are a lot of games about the war, and they’re uniformly annoying. It’s hard for the media to report much of what goes on up on the starline or the spectral fields, since they’re rarely given access to the particle transit hub to get out there, so people don’t really know what it’s like.

The dream game is a particularly bad one, and in his dream John disapproves of it thoroughly, but if he stops playing for even a moment then the Gliesans will be able to advance.

Then John’s in the game, a dot amongst explosions and lasers, and a soldier in front of him disarms a Gliesan by slicing its hand away with a well-aimed shot but it wraps its other hands around her throat and –

‘John!’

He wakes up very fast, sitting up so quickly he bashes the back of his head against the headboard. Sherlock is standing by the bed, looking down at him with an expression of something like concern on his face.

‘I’m fine,’ John says. ‘Sorry if I woke you.’

‘It’s important for a detective to understand as much about medicine as possible,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve been doing a great deal of reading – I have you as my consultant, of course, and the police doctors as far as that goes, but it’s helpful for me to be able to have an idea myself of what might have killed someone.’

John is way too tired to follow this; he just nods blearily.

‘In my reading the other day I came across a section on psychiatry. I almost skipped it; how people feel and so on is your area, but I thought it might be useful for persuasion and manipulation.’

‘OK,’ John says, wondering if there’s any chance at all he’ll be able to get back to sleep.

‘And I found,’ Sherlock says, his voice now with an edge to it, ‘that there’s such a thing as medication for nightmares. A pill you can take before bed that strongly reduces the likelihood of
dreaming and has no major side effects.’

‘I don’t take it,’ John says.

‘Yes, thank you, John, I had managed to deduce that much for myself.’

Sherlock is actually angry, John realises. ‘What I do about my nightmares is up to me,’ he says.

‘Or don’t do,’ Sherlock says.

‘I suppose you want to know why?’ John says, increasingly angry himself now. How is this any of Sherlock’s business?

‘I know why,’ Sherlock snaps. ‘I’ve known you for two weeks, you think I can’t work out what particular kind of stupidity you’re engaged in at any given time? You won’t let me help you with your leg, either. Tell me, in the army, when things went wrong, did you fix every injury and problem anyone had entirely by yourself or did you, in fact, have a team of people supporting you?’

‘That was different,’ John says. His anger is washing away again. ‘We were working together.’

‘We work together, don’t we?’ Sherlock says. He’s looking slightly less angry now too. He sits down on the bed, at an angle to face John.

‘I’ve let you in more than anyone else,’ John says, realising as he says it how frighteningly true it is. He adds, ‘And it isn’t as though you’re particularly great at accepting support from outside. You don’t even let me teach you.’

‘I don’t need teaching,’ Sherlock says. ‘But I do accept help when it’s actually useful. You didn’t see me bothering to try and run the tests on what killed Catherine myself when other people with access to better resources would be able to do it much faster while I took care of other things.’

‘That wasn’t personal,’ John points out. ‘Never seen you ask for help when it’s personal.’
‘I ask you for help all the time,’ Sherlock says, staring at him. ‘Not verbally, but – you must know that. I told you that I...was attracted to you, that I couldn’t control it, I admitted not being in control to you. I – you – you have no idea, do you, what you are to –’ He cuts himself off, shakes his head as if to clear it. ‘You should get a prescription for anti-nightmare medication.’

‘I’ve managed this long without it.’

‘No, you haven’t.’

John grins, acknowledging that, and pulls Sherlock down to lie on top of him. With Sherlock’s chin resting against the top of his head, he murmurs, ‘I wasn’t waking anyone up with them, before. It seemed so pointless to try and fight them.’

He feels Sherlock’s head shake, then a kiss to his hair. Then Sherlock’s voice, close to his ear: ‘You’re an idiot. Go back to sleep.’

*

The next morning, John wonders if Sherlock’s strange midnight tenderness was all just part of the dream.

Sebastian Moran’s trial is today – which is to say that the trial of a thug who killed a man for no reason and whose name appears to be Sebastian Moran is today. It seems very unlikely that he has anything to do with the Moran that Sherlock’s hunting, but they can’t rule anything out.

That means they’re stuck at home, refreshing their handchip screens to keep up with the trial report page, which is, of course, immensely dull. Sherlock, who had apparently already been doing this for an hour before John woke up, has already lost patience, and is taking it out on John. Or at least, that’s John’s diagnosis of the situation, though as the morning wears on he no longer cares much about analysing Sherlock’s behaviour and just wants to punch him.

John first starts to wonder if something’s up when he comes into the room and Sherlock ignores him, but he assumes Sherlock’s just engaged in observing the trial report, and sits down opposite him, turning on his handchip to join in.

There’s a message from Mycroft with a picture of Moran attached. He’s standing in front of a
building, and from his relative size compared to the door behind him it looks like he’s probably about John’s height. He’s probably about forty or a bit older, is wearing a thick, buttoned up jacket, has no facial hair, and is glaring at the camera like he wants to blow it up with his mind.

‘He doesn’t really look like an after,’ John comments. The indefinable something is missing.

‘Yes, by all means rely on your own assumptions to make that decision instead of actually researching it,’ Sherlock says. ‘If you’d bothered to look him up you’d already know he isn’t one.’

‘Right,’ John says, casting a glance at Sherlock. ‘Sorry.’

They settle into reading the report updates. At one point, the prosecuting lawyer comments that Moran isn’t recorded as having been employed at any point in the recent past, and indeed that it has proved impossible to find out anything about what he’s been doing for most of his past life. In fact, the lawyer concludes, it seems virtually certain that Sebastian Moran is a false name.

‘Seem to be a lot of people using that as a false name,’ John says. ‘Could that be important?’

‘Are you actually trying to be this stupid, or does it come naturally?’ Sherlock says. ‘You’ve an impressive talent for it, either way.’

John doesn’t bother to retort: Sherlock always has to get the last word, so that will only make him think up another insult. Instead he says, ‘If you’re going mental with boredom, maybe you should have a break.’

‘What, and leave you to monitor the report? I can hardly rely on you to realise what’s important.’

John rolls his eyes, and goes back to perusing his handchip screen. Moran’s lawyer (who is legal aid, and therefore conducting the case via an online video link) comments that the very senselessness of the crime surely suggests Moran may not have understood what he was doing. The witness he’s cross-examining seems unconvinced by this, replying that the attack seemed eerily calm and measured, Moran showing no anger as he beat his victim.

John thinks this is very strange, but he decides against saying anything. As the report drags on, though, he makes the mistake of letting out a small yawn. Sherlock turns on him instantly. ‘If you’re so bored, there’s no need for you to stay,’ he says. ‘Don’t think you’re contributing
anything.’

‘What is wrong with you this morning?’ John asks.

Sherlock gives him an incredulous look. ‘I’m making no progress with this investigation –‘

‘You’ve only been looking into this for a day.’

‘I should have been able to solve it in half an hour. If you weren’t here distracting me –‘

‘I’ve barely spoken,’ John protests.

‘You don’t have to speak to distract me,’ Sherlock says. ‘I can hear you thinking. And I can see you – look, it doesn’t matter, the point is that my brain isn’t working as it should be. I observed people and how they seemed to think when I first arrived here and from those observations I thought my brain was unique, extraordinary, but perhaps I came to that conclusion too hastily, because it turns out it can be derailed by the slightest – just – if you want to be useful, then don’t move, don’t breathe, and face the other way. Or leave. Whatever you prefer.’

‘Fine, I’ll go to my room,’ John says, because as little as Sherlock deserves to get what he wants right now John doesn’t have any particular desire to remain here.

Once there he keeps reading the trial report, because however useless Sherlock might think he is he still wants to keep up with the investigation. Or at least, he keeps reading it for a couple of hours, at which point it suddenly stops updating.

He thinks it’s a problem with his handchip at first, something wrong with the connection, but then a message appears at the top of the report:

_The trial is no longer in progress due to unforeseen complications._

John stares at the message, bewildered.
He considers going downstairs to ask Sherlock if he’s got any idea what’s going on, but that idea doesn’t hold much appeal. Instead, he tries doing a search for Sebastian Moran trial.

There’s not much, but a few results down he finds someone’s personal profile, not privacy-locked, which says: OMG im watching a trial for my law school course and the guy being tried (sebastian moran) just got replaced

John stares, refreshes the page, and yes: the major newsblogs have caught up now.

**Accused criminal disappears during trial**

A few minutes ago we received a report that a criminal who plead guilty to brutally beating a man to death vanished and was replaced in the middle of his trial. While criminals have been known to disappear from criminal rehabilitation this is the first time that someone who committed such a serious and violent crime was replaced before facing justice at all. No information yet on the after who appeared, update to come.

John waits ten minutes to see if any more information comes through, but when the newsblog finally updates it just contains the note that the after has apparently been rushed straight to Montague Street and has chosen a name and to identify as male. There’s a photograph, too, though it’s taken from the side and doesn’t reveal much. He looks to be pale and dark-haired, with a slightly intense stare.

Even if Sherlock’s still being a dick, John needs to talk to him about this, so he hurries downstairs. ‘Presumably you’ve heard?’ he says.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘We should go and see him –’ He looks down as his handchip screen refreshes itself, and then after a moment raises his eyebrows.

‘Well,’ he says. ‘That’s certainly new.’

‘What?’ John asks. ‘Have they got more information on him?’

‘Apparently,’ Sherlock says, ‘he’s claiming he can remember where he’s from.’
Chapter 15

John protests that there’s no way the authorities are going to let he and Sherlock see the new after, but Sherlock is confident that they’ll be able to use John’s E.L.I. status to worm their way in somehow.

They get to Montague Street and approach reception, where Sherlock starts spinning some plausible tale and John says ‘That’s right’ at appropriate moments. Before they can get very far along though, John hears a small, dry cough, and turns around.

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘Hi, Mycroft.’

‘Hello,’ Mycroft says. ‘I suppose you’re here looking for Jim Moriarty?’

‘That’s the name he picked, then?’ Sherlock says. ‘Not a very interesting one.’

‘He chose it from the suggested list,’ Mycroft says, ‘as is usual. There appears to be nothing extraordinary about him other than the unfortunate circumstances of his arrival and his claims about his memory.’

‘That’s...really quite a lot of extraordinary, isn’t it?’ John says. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Sherlock smirk.

Mycroft’s smile becomes tighter, thinner. ‘Rather a lot,’ he agrees. ‘He’s in Meiringen block, room 38. Let me know how you get on.’

Well, that was easier than expected. Although John isn’t quite sure how pleased he should be about Mycroft helping them, when they still don’t really know the full extent of his motives for doing so.

Still, Sherlock clearly isn’t going to be dissuaded from investigating this development, and John admits to some curiosity on his own part. So he just says, ‘Thanks. Meiringen block’s just next door, isn’t it?’ and heads in that direction. Sherlock gives Mycroft a suspicious glare, and then strides along after him.
When they get to Jim Moriarty’s room, the door is wide open, and its occupant is standing there talking to Molly Hooper.

‘Molly, hey,’ John says, and she turns round.

‘Oh, John, hi!’ she says, looking surprised, then anxious. ‘There hasn’t been a mix-up, has there? I thought you had someone already – I mean, they just assigned me just now, but if you’d rather –’

John breaks in to rescue her. ‘No, no, you’re right,’ he says. ‘This is Sherlock, I’ve been working with him for a couple of weeks now.’

‘Oh, Sherlock!’ Molly says, suddenly noticing him and looking enormously flustered. ‘I, er - I - it's nice to see you again.’

Of course; Molly was assigned to Sherlock before John was. Sherlock looks very much as though he might be about to say something cutting, so John quickly turns to Moriarty and says, ‘So you two have been assigned together?’

‘Yes,’ Moriarty says, turning to look at them. John feels slightly disconcerted. In the newsblog photo the man had looked – a little frightening, almost, and deeply intense. But now he looks sweet and nervous and a little awkward, fidgeting slightly. It wasn’t quite what John had expected from someone who’d made such a dramatic entrance to 22nd century earth.

Moriarty goes on, ‘I, um, I’m very lucky to have got Molly.’ He smiles at her affectionately. ‘She’s been telling me all sorts of things already. I just, I’m just sorry I caused so much trouble.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Molly says.

‘Not at all,’ John agrees. ‘Don’t worry. Criminals have disappeared before; it’s...a bit unfortunate, since we don’t know where they go, but it’s definitely not your problem, and I’m sure there’s procedures in place for when this happens.’

Moriarty gives a nervous smile. ‘OK,’ he says. ‘That’s good.’
Just as John’s thinking that Sherlock’s putting up with all this small talk and reassurance with remarkable patience, Sherlock says, ‘Yes, lovely, everything’s marvellous, now – you’ve been saying that your memories are intact?’

‘Y – yes,’ Moriarty says, the smile disappearing. He looks anxiously at Sherlock. ‘I didn’t even have any idea, at first, that there was any reason why they wouldn’t be. I just, I said something about my boss and then everyone asked if I could remember who he was and I said of course and then – I, yes, I caused yet more trouble.’ He gives a small laugh, looking a little distressed.

‘What did you say about your boss?’ Sherlock says. John can hear him forcing himself to be patient, to talk calmly.

‘I just said that – it was when the government people picked me up and I said that my boss had said I could end up anywhere and he’d make sure I wasn’t inside a wall or something and he’d get the right country but beyond that he didn’t have much control. I was apologising for being somewhere it was obvious I wasn’t supposed to be.’

‘So this is a job,’ Sherlock says.

‘We were being sent into the past,’ Moriarty says. ‘Because, in the war – well,’ he stops and looks uncomfortable. ‘I shouldn’t tell you. You can’t know the future. That’s, you know, the one thing we really aren’t allowed to do.’

‘You aren’t supposed to change the past,’ Sherlock says.

‘No – no. Just observe it. We lost – we only have theories as to how, but there was a hundred year or so period and we had no records. The history was – gone. So they thought they’d just send people back and we’d make notes and find out what happened. But we weren’t sure when – whatever it was that happened to destroy all of the records – we didn’t know exactly when that had happened. Because it could have been that there were records for 2125-2239 and then at the end there was some big disaster – or it could have been that something happened nearer the beginning, something that made society regress or – we just didn’t know. I mean, as I say, we had theories, but we couldn’t be sure, so they sent people back to the whole period. This is –?’

‘2156,’ John says. ‘November.’

_Time travel after all, he thinks. But if afters are just humans from the future then what about –_
'Good, good, that's where – when, I mean, when I was trying to go,' Moriarty says.

John’s still reeling from all this new information, but a particularly crucial question strikes him, far more important than the entirely inappropriate one fluttering around his brain. ‘At your end – in the future I mean – did people arrive?’

Moriarty frowns. ‘No,’ he says. ‘The disappearances – people have been disappearing here, I’ve been told. We didn’t – that isn’t right, we never intended that – and no, no one arrived where we were. I really don’t understand. I need to get back somehow and let them know.’

‘Somehow,’ Sherlock repeats. ‘You don’t know how?’

‘The device I used ought to be strapped to my waist,’ Moriarty says. ‘But, well, I got here and it wasn’t.’

‘You have a portable particle transit device?’ John says. ‘God. In our time those things are the size of a room.’

‘I had one,’ Moriarty says, looking upset. ‘But now…’

‘The afters are all still here,’ John says, trying to sound as gentle as he can. He can’t even imagine how Moriarty must be feeling right now, and any thoughts of asking intrusive questions about bodies and sexuality flee from his mind. ‘The ones who arrived thirty years ago, they’ve grown older here, they’re in their sixties now. Weren’t you all – you in the future, weren’t you worried that people weren’t coming back?’

‘A little,’ Moriarty says. ‘But we only started a few hours ago, you see. We’d hoped people would reappear instantly but they could easily be out by a few hours or even days. It’s hard to be precise. But now, of course, it turns out that they aren’t trying to get back at all, because they don’t remember who they are, and even if they did, their devices haven’t made the journey.’ He looks almost tearful. ‘My parents are – and my siblings, I don’t – I’ve got to do it somehow.’

Molly gives him a tentative pat on the shoulder, looking upset. ‘It’ll be all right,’ she says. ‘Now we know where you’re from, we can figure out how to get you back.’
‘But what about your people?’ Moriarty says. He sniffs. ‘Maybe that’s what happened – maybe our theories were wrong. Maybe there are no records because our bungling made everyone vanish and there was no one here for those years.’

‘It’s all right,’ Molly says again, helplessly. ‘It will be, I mean. We’ll sort it out.’

‘Thank you,’ Moriarty says. ‘I – it was nice to meet you, John and Sherlock. Perhaps we could all meet up another time and talk?’

‘Certainly,’ Sherlock says. John can already see him slipping away into thought, processing what he’s heard. John could do with some time to process too. This sudden, neat solution is a lot to take on board.

*

They’re silent all the way home, sitting opposite each other in a tube car. John stares at Sherlock, and Sherlock stares into space. John is desperate to know what Sherlock has to say about all this, about Moriarty and his story, but restrains himself from asking. Let Sherlock have his time to think, first.

They get inside the flat, and Sherlock sits down on the sofa, fingers steepled. John stands silently for a few moments and then says, tentative, ‘So – did you believe him?’

Sherlock looks up. ‘Not enough data yet,’ he says. ‘There was one thing – just slightly curious, I’ll need to look into it and possibly speak to other reps. Apart from that, though, it did sound plausible enough. But why would his memories have stayed intact and no one else’s? And what could have caused historical records for a hundred year period to vanish? This really raises more questions than it answers.’

‘I know,’ John says. ‘But it must be – encouraging?’ He says it without much certainty. Sherlock went into this mystery looking for a challenge, and if the additional questions are solved with as much unexpected ease as the initial one seems to have been, he isn’t going to be happy.

Sherlock shrugs. Then he says, in an apparent change of topic, ‘Reps can’t serve in the military, but, as I saw from Catherine, they can work for the government. How high up can they get?’
‘Depends on the department,’ John says. ‘The only one where there’s official limitations is the Galactic Office. Elsewhere, in theory, they can get as high as they want, but...the Afters Coordinator has never once been an after. There are civil rights groups who protest against that a lot, but it’s unlikely to happen any time soon. There’s very few afters in the After Management department at all, let alone in senior positions.’

‘Interesting,’ Sherlock says, thoughtfully. ‘After all, as far as I can see the work of the After Management department doesn’t involve much opportunity for betrayal, or for anyone to do any harm. But clearly its senior staff think differently. Except – I do wonder whether Mycroft might have an unregistered rep as an assistant.’

‘Anthea?’ John says. ‘But she mentioned openly that people sometimes thought she was an after.’

‘Clever thing to do if you know people suspect you,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘No, her saying that doesn’t bother me – what does is that, as I said, there’s only one recorded case of an after escaping. I suppose it could be her, but she said she’d been working for Mycroft for twenty five years and that would mean she’d managed to get a job with him within months of escaping, when her picture would still have been being circulated by the police.’

‘But Sinope was a man,’ John says.

‘Sinope ticked a box that said male when they were told to pick a gender,’ Sherlock says. ‘As a rep, I can assure you that gender identity and presentation mean very little to most of us. He wouldn’t have had any problem changing his presentation to make people less likely to recognise him.’

‘Have you seen his picture?’ John asks. ‘Does it look anything like Anthea?’

‘I haven’t seen it,’ Sherlock says. ‘I can’t. It’s disappeared from the archives and no copies of it are anywhere to be found. The same thing, incidentally, has happened to all pictures of Mina James.’

‘Hm,’ John says. ‘That’s a hell of a coincidence – but I mean, surely the only people who would have wanted to destroy those pictures are Sinope and James themselves, and how could either have them have done it while on the run?’

‘Quite,’ Sherlock says.
'She didn’t say she’d worked for Mycroft for twenty five years,’ John says slowly, remembering. ‘She said they’d worked together. Back then, Mycroft might not have had anyone under him at all. I can’t believe he’d be fooled into hiring a fugitive, but someone he worked for might.’

Sherlock considers this. ‘You’re right about Mycroft not being fooled,’ he says. ‘He would have realised who she was, even if she was his colleague rather than a subordinate.’

‘So you think she might be Sinope and Mycroft’s hiding it?’ John says. ‘I guess that would explain why he didn’t want us investigating Sinope, but...why would he do that?’

‘I actually think it’s probably simpler than that, though the Sinope theory is interesting,’ Sherlock says. ‘Apparently Sinope looked significantly younger than most afters – about nineteen or twenty. Nevertheless, if Anthea were really the age she looks like, she’d be too young to be him. So why go out of her way to tell us that she’s older than she appears? No, if she is an after, she probably never escaped, did her time with an E.L.I. like everyone else. And at some point Mycroft, who, obnoxious as he is, isn’t an idiot, realised that administrating reps would go better with an actual rep to advise him. He knew officials from the other departments would interfere if he tried to hire one openly, so he approached someone and gave her a new identity.’

‘Right,’ John says. ‘Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But – what’s that got to do with all of this? You don’t think she might be Moran?’

‘I hate guessing,’ Sherlock says, ‘but if I had to guess, I’d say she was fanatically loyal to Mycroft. Though of course, a traitor might take pains to appear that way. But no, that isn’t what I was thinking. I’d just like to understand Mycroft Holmes a little better. At the moment I’m not sure what he wants or why he’s so interested in me, and – well, I don’t like being in the dark anyway, but I suspect being involved in his schemes without understanding them could be dangerous for both of us.’

John thinks of Catherine, sprawled out dead in the same chair she’d sat in to carve a pumpkin just the day before, and says, ‘I think you’re probably right about that.’

‘As for Moriarty,’ Sherlock says. ‘Well – you and Molly Hooper are friendly acquaintances at least, aren’t you? Perhaps you could arrange for the four of us to have a joint teaching session of some kind. I’d like to talk to him again.’

John accordingly messages Molly. He’s meeting Mary for lunch tomorrow, so slots in Molly and Moriarty in the afternoon. Then he sits down with Sherlock to watch the footage of Moran’s disappearance.
The media weren’t allowed to take footage of the trial, only report it verbally, in theory to protect the privacy of those involved. However, High Court trials are apparently officially recorded, and Mycroft, of course, has a copy of the clip, which he forwards to them.

John’s only ever twice seen a replacement happen in front of him; both times it happened so fast he could barely comprehend it. Moran’s is no different. There’s no slow phasing out, no gradual onset of transparency. He’s there one moment and the next he’s gone and Moriarty is standing there looking bewildered.

‘The instantaneous nature of it backs up the particle transit theory,’ Sherlock says. ‘All the particles within a given area vanish at once and are instantly replaced.’

‘And Moriarty said it was particle transit too,’ John reminds him. ‘But...why is it always people that disappear and get replaced? I mean, we’ve never had an after appear without a before disappearing, if you see what I mean. If they’re just picking a box at random you’d expect it to sometimes contain a person and maybe sometimes –’ he winces – ‘part of a person. And sometimes nothing at all, and sometimes animals or bits of pavement or whatever.’

‘Whoever’s doing this, they’re clever,’ Sherlock says, a smile playing about his face. ‘We talked before about the possibility of somebody ending up inside a wall with a box of air around them, and the wall caving in. Well, replacing people is a neat way to avoid that. If somebody’s already managing to survive in a particular place, the person who replaces them is likely to be able to as well.’

‘But how could the people orchestrating this know there was a person in a particular place?’

‘We know they can’t control exactly where they deposit an after – otherwise they wouldn’t need to use the box method, they’d use the other method of particle transit where you just mark certain particles and transport those. But it is possible that the particle transit machine they’re using is capable of detecting human signatures. Probably through long-range DNA readings. It locates a random human signature, marks a box around them, and swaps that area with a designated area next to it.’

‘But Moriarty says they’re not just using one particle transit machine, that everybody had their own. And...if this theory was right, all the befores who vanished here ought to appear exactly where the time travellers left from. But he says no one’s appeared there.’
‘There’s no other theory that explains why every after always replaces a before,’ Sherlock says. ‘Either Moriarty’s lying to us, or his journey’s damaged his memory more than he realises, or his boss was lying to him.’

‘Why would he lie, though?’ John says.

‘Can’t know that without further questioning him,’ Sherlock says, ‘which, as I said, I plan to do. Don’t you think, though, that it seems like something of a coincidence, Sebastian Moran disappearing just as we were investigating him?’

‘But I thought you didn’t even think that Moran, the one who disappeared, was important.’

‘I didn’t at first,’ Sherlock says. ‘But – the witnesses all said that he was completely calm and measured when he attacked his victim. And he did it in plain sight of said witnesses. You thought that was strange too, I saw your face when you were reading the trial report.’ He shifts restlessly in his seat, runs his hands through his hair. ‘There’s something here. I almost had it – there was something in what we were saying before – something about how particle transit works –’ He breaks off, lets out a frustrated sigh.

‘It’ll come back to you,’ John says.

‘That hasn’t been my experience of lost memories so far,’ Sherlock snaps.

John immediately feels bad. ‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘I know it’s…it must be frightening. But afters never have any memory problems once they’ve arrived. It’s just before...’

‘Just our entire lives up until that point that we lose; what a relief.’

There’s nothing to say to that. John’s still standing in front of Sherlock where he sits on the sofa, and he bends down to wrap his arms around him. Sherlock tenses for a moment, then lets his head drop to John’s shoulder.

‘It’ll be OK,’ John says.
‘A platitude’s exactly what I needed, thank you, John,’ Sherlock says, but the intended sarcasm is suffocated by the way his face is pressing into the fabric of John’s shirt. The words come out sounding not only muffled but oddly sincere.

John strokes Sherlock’s back and hair till his own back begins to hurt, and he reluctantly straightens up. ‘What are you going to do now?’ he asks.

Sherlock leans back. ‘There’s a few things I could look into,’ he says. ‘Melas Sinope replaced a sixteen year old girl called Anna Bests; I doubt she’s significant, but I’d like to briefly research her just in case. I could look up the history of Sebastian Moran – the one who disappeared today, that is; I’ve done some research on him already, of course, but not as much as I might have done, since I wasn’t convinced of his importance.’

‘You could do those things,’ John agrees. ‘Or…’

Sherlock meets his eyes. ‘Practising self-denial,’ he says, but he doesn’t sound entirely convinced.

‘You’ve been doing that since yesterday morning,’ John says. ‘Surely that’s enough practice for now.’

Sherlock tilts his head to one side, and appears to be considering. Then he stands up, and is abruptly well into John’s personal space, their bodies all but touching. ‘I want to check something,’ he says. ‘Touch me.’

John swallows, wonders if he’ll ever get used to Sherlock saying things like that. ‘Where?’ he asks.

‘Anywhere. Doesn’t matter. You need to decide, I can’t know in ad-‘ his words are cut off by the low sound he makes when John pushes two hands under his shirt. One caresses his back, the other slides upwards to rub at a nipple. John doesn’t know whether Sherlock’s nipples are even at all sensitive, given that his cock isn’t, but then maybe Sherlock’s reacting like this simply to the fact of John touching him, and that’s a ridiculously heady thought.

‘Now kissing,’ Sherlock instructs, ‘and keep touching me.’

John is entirely happy to comply with both of Sherlock’s suggestions. He loses himself a little in the slide of their lips against each other, but doesn’t forget to keep stroking Sherlock’s back and
chest, relishing the feel of the skin beneath his palms.

Then Sherlock pulls away, breathing heavily. ‘As – as I thought,’ he says.

John starts unbuttoning Sherlock’s shirt; Sherlock makes no move to stop him. ‘What’s as you thought?’

‘Once you start touching me, I lose all thought of self-denial, all the intellectual reasons for not having sex with you recede, become – blurrier, more distant. I start to forget why I shouldn’t and focus entirely on the sensation, on you being close.’

John pulls back. ‘I don’t want to push you into anything,’ he says. ‘If you don’t like your mind being overwhelmed like that I can...’

‘It’s too late now,’ Sherlock says, stepping forward to bring them back close together again. ‘I want it too much not to. I’ll have to work out tomorrow what to do about getting better at resisting, but now –’

‘Yes,’ John says, tugging off Sherlock’s shirt and dropping it on the sofa. ‘Fuck, yes.’ And kisses him again, harder this time.

Sherlock kisses so carefully, with such evident deliberation and attention; John loves it and yet still wants to make Sherlock lose control entirely. He brings a hand down to Sherlock’s side and finds the now almost familiar line of raised skin. He strokes it delicately, and feels it start to move beneath his finger, responding to him. Somehow, now that he’s getting used to it, it doesn’t feel so very different from stroking a clitoris or a cock. This is still a body, a body he wants desperately to please, pushing itself towards his fingers, wanting his touch.

Then he suddenly realises that his hand is on Sherlock’s left side. And the last two times – he’s sure – the line was on the right. He jumps, and looks at Sherlock. ‘Uh – does it – can it move?’

Sherlock lets out a low laugh. ‘There are two of them,’ he says. ‘I hadn’t got round to letting you know.’

John looks down at Sherlock’s right side, and yes, sure enough, there’s the line he’s familiar with. He looks back to the one on the left, under his index finger, and strokes it again.
Sherlock’s lips part, and John strokes again, harder. His cock is filling in his trousers, starting to become uncomfortable. As long as he focuses on how hot this is rather than how bizarre, he’ll be fine. And Sherlock’s face, his sheer responsiveness, does a lot to make keeping that focus easier.

What happens if I touch both lines at once? John wonders, and promptly decides to find out. He continues his tortuously slow up-and-down stroking of the line on Sherlock’s left side, and lets his other hand dart to Sherlock’s right and press the line there hard.

Sherlock’s reaction is electric, and everything John could have hoped for. His neck tips back, a loud gasp escaping his throat. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘That doesn’t – I never thought –’

‘Is it too much?’ John asks.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock gasps out. ‘Keep doing it.’

John doesn’t need to be told twice. The line on the left is beginning to open up now. The narrow ridges of skin that form the entrance of the emerging hole are, John discovers, extremely sensitive, Sherlock shivering as John trails a finger across one then the other. They can only handle a very delicate touch, and John gives them that, letting fingertips brush them gently and getting more and more aroused by Sherlock’s reaction.

‘John, please,’ Sherlock says, and John doesn’t even really know what he’s asking for, but he slips a finger inside the little gap while his other hand continues to press and stroke at the line on Sherlock’s right, which is now beginning to open up too.

The hole on the left hand side, John discovers, is noticeably deeper than the one on the right; he is able to slowly push his little finger in all the way. Sherlock lets out a strangled whine at that, and a sound almost like a whimper when John pulls it out again, just as slowly. Unlike the right hand one, the left slit doesn’t appear to vibrate, but it’s warm around John’s finger as he fucks it, and he thinks he can feel it pulsing around him very slightly, as if trying to pull him in deeper.

John lets his other hand roam around Sherlock’s body, and his lips brush across Sherlock’s neck and ear. Sherlock is starting to tremble slightly as John slides his finger in and out of him, and John pulls him even closer, wanting to hold him through it. He lets his left hand drift back down again, to the slit on Sherlock’s right, and strokes across its entrance while pushing deep inside the one on the left. Sherlock cries out at the contrasting stimulation, and stumbles, knees giving out, before collapsing back onto the sofa.
John sinks down on top of him. His cock is pressing at the inside of his pants so insistently now that it’s becoming painful, so he unzips his trousers, kicks them away, and pulls his underwear down and off. He settles down over Sherlock, his cock pressing against Sherlock’s stomach so that every tiny movement either of them makes causes it to rub deliciously against him.

He slips his fingers back into position and resumes what he was doing. The noises Sherlock makes at that are, John thinks, he could happily listen to forever. He’s powerless to stop his hips twitching forward, his cock attempting to hump Sherlock’s stomach. He forgets to be embarrassed about how weird this is, or ashamed at fucking a student, or to think about anything at all other than how fucking turned on he is and how beautiful Sherlock is like this. John’s shirt and Sherlock’s trousers are still on. John’s skin is hot, and Sherlock’s must be too, judging by the flush that covers it. John wants to kiss every centimetre of that skin, and he makes a start as his fingers work at Sherlock’s sides: one shoulder, then the other, his right nipple, the dip in his neck.

He moves his fingers in a circle inside the hole on the left, while rubbing fractionally harder at the opening of the one on the right. And then suddenly Sherlock is moaning, and the left hand hole is rapidly widening inside, while its entrance becomes narrower. It grips John’s finger tight, and he moves it around in the suddenly wide space, stroking as much of the inside as he can reach. The noises Sherlock is making get increasingly loud, and then he finally lets out a small, desperate breath, and quiets. The slit releases John’s finger, and he pulls it out to watch the slit rapidly close up again, much faster than the right hand one did the last two times.

The right hand one, John realises, is still fully open, and when he briefly slips his finger inside it he can feel it pulsing faster than ever. He rubs hard at it, just inside, on the underside of the entrance, and Sherlock buries his head against the back of the sofa, stifling his moan. The hot liquid John’s now expecting – though none came from the left slit – pours out, more, he thinks, than last time. It’s much darker this time than last – really more brown than red. John wonders whether the different colours mean anything, and if so what.

He doesn’t wonder it very hard, though, because his brain is mostly a mindless blur of want. Something about seeing Sherlock undone like that is turning him on desperately, and he’s agonisingly aware of the pressure of Sherlock’s stomach against his cock and the lack of movement or friction.

‘Rut against me,’ Sherlock says, his voice even deeper than usual. ‘I want you to come on me.’ He arches up in invitation, making John’s cock slide against him, and that’s all John can take. He thrusts himself up against Sherlock a handful of times, then presses his face into Sherlock’s neck and comes hard over his stomach and thighs.

He stays there, wrapping his arms around Sherlock’s shoulders and just enjoying being close,
feeling the movement of his chest as Sherlock breathes and his pulse thudding against John’s cheek.

He’ll need to move eventually, of course. Sherlock’s covered in John’s come and the strange liquid that might be his own, and John doesn’t want to leave him like that for long. And then – well, there’s mysteries to solve, the very nature of the sex they’ve just had a puzzle in itself. But with all those mysteries occupying Sherlock’s attention, John isn’t sure when he’ll next get to do this, so he’s going to enjoy the afterglow for as long as he can.
‘You sure you don’t want to come?’ John asks Sherlock.

‘Busy,’ Sherlock says. ‘But as you’re obviously fixated on the idea of introducing us, I suppose you can bring her back here afterwards and we can exchange pleasantries before you and I go to meet Molly.’

‘Ta,’ John says. ‘See you later, then.’ Sherlock gives a sort of half-hearted distracted wave in return.

Mary’s already at the restaurant when he gets there. He recognises her from behind: her distinctively military cropped black hair, the little bit of her chin that’s just visible as she slightly turns her head. He’s seen her in profile probably more than face-on, sitting beside her in her scouting craft, and knows the shape of her face, her head, better than anyone’s. Seeing her again, even before they’ve so much as talked, soothes an ache he barely knew he was feeling.

‘Oi, Mary!’ he calls, and she twists in her chair. She always moves fast, even when it’s totally unnecessary, an instinct born of years spent in places where to respond too slowly to a shout could easily mean death. John developed those instincts too, but he was never as quick as her: only the very quick got scouting jobs in the first place.

‘John!’ she says, jumping up. She strides across the room and envelops him in a hug, then pulls back and looks him over. ‘Jesus, you’re looking well. You’re supposed to be wasting away pining for me and Bill and mess hall dinners, you wanker.’

‘I am, I swear,’ John says, grinning at her. ‘Though maybe not the dinners part.’

‘You are not,’ Mary says, sitting back down at her table and gesturing for John to do the same. ‘Not nearly enough. You have the distinct look of a man who’s been eating decent food and shagging in an actual bed. It’s sickening.’

John makes the mistake of hesitating for a split second at that, and Mary gives him a satisfied smile. ‘Aha,’ she says. ‘Well, who is it?’

‘That I’m...’
'Having delightful sex with that makes you glow with smugness, yes.'

'Can we catch up first?' John says. 'I want to hear about the starline, and you and Bill, and everything. And I’m going to need a drink of something before I tell you about my love life.'

'Course,' Mary says. 'As long as you don’t think you’re going to get out of telling me altogether.' She settles back. ‘Well, the first thing to say about how I’ve been is that I’ve missed you like crazy. We all have.’

John swallows at this, and nods. It’s hard to know how to reply. Mary is concise and, for all her honesty – bluntness even – and air of total openness, very restrained about showing her feelings. There’s a lot buried behind what she’s just said, and he doesn’t quite know how to respond to it.

He was with Mary that day, the day he ended up in the pit, when the Gliesans shot down her scouting craft. She chose to stay in it and fly it straight into the Gliesan ship that shot her, parachuting out at the last minute before impact, but John didn’t have that choice. Medics were too valuable, and his training had been extremely clear that the second a craft started to go down he was to parachute out immediately.

He still remembers every detail of that fall as if it happened in slow motion. The bullet to his shoulder. The psychebullet to his leg. The laser, clean through his parachute, just as he was trying to manoeuvre away from a crater.

Mary had been with the rescue team that picked him up, hours later, but he’d been nearly unconscious by then and using every gram of willpower and focus he had to stay awake. He definitely hadn’t been in any condition to ask questions. It wasn’t till after the surgery to remove the bullets, after a week recovering in hospital, that he started asking about his rescue and found out that he owed her his life even more than he’d realised.

He’d thanked her for it when she came to see him, but he’d been a bit stiff, a bit withdrawn. Seeing her there in uniform while he lay in bed in hospital pyjamas and waited to be cleared for particle transit to go home made his guts twist. It made him hate her a little bit, and he couldn’t bear that, so he withdrew and tried not to feel anything at all. Even at the time he knew he owed her better than that, after everything she’d done for him and, more than that, everything they’d done together. But he couldn’t manage it, not knowing that goodbye was impending, and they’d ended on a note of slightly cool politeness.
Mary, though, would not appreciate him bringing up any of this stuff. So he just says, ‘I’ve missed you too,’ and hopes she knows how much he means it.

She smiles at him, reaches out to squeeze his hand, and then starts telling him about the starline. How Bill’s ‘all but fucking married’ to one of the cooks and Mary suspects he’s getting snuck extra, better food in consequence (‘seriously, not on’). How the medic that was attached to her to replace John isn’t half as good (‘well, OK, he’s good, but he’s vain as anything, and assumes I’m the same way, worries more about scarring than speed’). And she tells him that on every scouting mission she sees slightly fewer new Gliesan ships appearing in the sky, and she and the other scouts are hopeful that Gliesan numbers are thinning, that they’re having trouble replacing the troops they’re losing.

She doesn’t say she thinks that the end of the war is in sight, that earth might actually win rather than just keep up the same exhausting stalemate, year after year. Saying it out loud would seem like bad luck, and it’s an idea that seems arrogant, hard to conceptualise, when the war’s been going on fifty five years, bar a peace treaty that was maintained between 2108 and 2113. They’re just too well matched: the Gliesans’ planet has superior resources and in consequence their technology is slightly better, but earth is bigger, so the humans have the advantage in terms of numbers. The two planets have been shredding each other’s armies to pieces for years just to stay even. But if all the things Mary’s carefully not saying are really true – could the war actually be coming to an end? It’s lasted longer than either of their lifetimes, and John has no idea what to think about it. He doesn’t think Mary does either.

He doesn’t have the words to talk about the war ending, so instead he says, ‘Give your medic a break. I was like that too when we started, remember? You had to train me.’

He’d been assigned to Mary straight out of training. He had other jobs too: half the week he was at the hospital, and occasionally he was dispatched with a contingent of fighters attacking the incoming Gliesans or patrolling somewhere. But riding with a scout had been the bit he was looking forward to most: flying in the tiny craft right amongst the enemy.

Scouting crafts had clear roofs so that the scouts could see around them fully, but many scouts, Mary included, removed the roofs and wore spacesuits and clear helmets instead, claiming that they could see better that way. This meant, of course, absolutely no protection from lasers, and also made it easier for the anti-scout patrols to aim at her. They liked to slice off limbs, since while the medic was stitching them back it was hard for the scout to control the craft.

Mary lost an arm ten minutes into John’s first mission with her. He’d been clutching his kit and waiting for the moment it was needed, and he sprung into action immediately. The stitches, once the arm was back on, would melt and spread naturally into her flesh, gluing her back together and then dissolving away into the bloodstream to be eventually excreted harmlessly. Inside her body, there would be no sign that anything had ever happened. Careful, slow stitching would ensure that
the same was true externally, but the fast stitching required in this situation would leave a scar.

John, that first time, had tried for a compromise, stitching very fast but still trying to take enough care to ensure the scar would be small. Then Mary had slapped him with the hand that was still attached to her body, yelled, ‘You’re not making a sodding work of art, get on and save our fucking lives,’ while blood poured out of the stump at her other shoulder, and John had hurriedly sped up.

‘I told you once,’ Mary says, now. ‘And slapped you round the head, admittedly, but you deserved that. This guy I’ve told a dozen times and I still can’t shake him out of it. He’s going to get us both killed. Christ, you’d think he’d have noticed that the places where my limbs meet my torso are already just great big scars, what more damage does he reckon he’s gonna do?’

It’s true. Mary’s shoulders, her thighs, and the sides of her hips are a mass of thick scars. She has scars elsewhere too, but the repeated damage and repair of those areas left a far more dramatic legacy. The single time they had sex, John had run his fingers over the scars almost reverently. He had made them; their relationship over the years was there, marked on her body, part of its fabric.

They both ordered via handchip before they got here, and lunch arrives before too long. Mary’s ordered something creamy and luxurious; John remembers that impulse to treat himself while on leave, have things he couldn’t have on the starline just for the sake of it.

‘Anything else I should know?’ he asks. ‘Bill’s in a paradise of love and preferential treatment, got that. What about you? Are you...’

She shakes her head, then smirks. ‘Nah. We can’t all be Three Planetary Systems Watson, you know.’

John groans. ‘I was in the spectral fields for an hour and a half.’

‘Yeah, and in the course of that hour and a half, did you or did you not exchange blowjobs with someone from attack division?’

‘There was nothing to do,’ John retorts. ‘We were bored sick. I wasn’t trying to set a record.’

It’s an old joke between them, well-worn, and John suspects Mary’s trotting it out now to try and soften the slight awkwardness at not having seen each other for so long, at everything that’s
happened. He doesn’t mind; it’s more or less working, as it’s making him think of how she wound him up when she first found out; when he got back to the starline and she just raised her eyebrows and said, ‘Wow, I should try and get an attack mission, if that’s what they spend all their time doing out there.’ She always enjoyed the rivalry between the attack and defence divisions to the fullest.

‘Well, I’ve never heard of anybody else managing it,’ Mary says, grinning.

‘That’s only because barely anyone’s been to three planetary systems,’ John says. ‘Attack division was short on medics, they asked for someone from defence for one mission, it happened to be me, and yes, OK, I wound up having sex while out there. If it’d been you, you’d have done the same, and you’d be mocked to death as Three Planetary Systems Morstan for the rest of your life.’

Mary laughs. ‘I can only dream of such greatness,’ she says.

Conversation becomes increasingly easy after that. They have a couple of glasses of wine with their meal, and Mary finally says, ‘I skimmed your personal profile when I got back. And I think you definitely need to tell me about Sherlock Holmes.’

John grins, and then takes a moment to be alarmed that just hearing Sherlock’s name makes him grin like that. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘Sherlock. God. Where do I begin with Sherlock?’

*

By the time they’ve finished up at the restaurant and travelled back to 221 Baker Street, John’s rambled about Sherlock for an embarrassing amount of time, Mary’s described her latest more unusual injuries in an amount of detail that traumatised everyone walking near them on the street, and the awkwardness is completely gone. He’s not entirely without trepidation about introducing her to Sherlock, but he still reckons they’re going to get on. Probably.

The stairs are slightly awful, though, John walking ahead and acutely conscious of his cane and his slowness. But Mary at least doesn’t say anything about it, smoothly keeps up their conversation as they walk up and gives no indication of noticing.

Sherlock is in the kitchen when they get in, bent over some new experiment, but looks up when they enter, appraising them. ‘Hm,’ he says. ‘So you’re Mary. My predictions were mostly accurate.’
John flashes Mary a look that says, *I did warn you.* Mary grins. ‘Go on then,’ she says. ‘Do the thing.’

‘It’s not a –’ Sherlock breaks himself off with an aggrieved sigh. ‘All right. You’re a scout, predicted that from the glimpses I got of John’s attitude towards you. *Didn’t* predict your interest in Gliesan society and culture, *did* predict that you’ve had sex with John. What else? You’re fluent in at least two languages, probably three, and you find learning new languages deeply compelling. No children, no pets except possibly some sort of virtual creature, no current romantic relationship. And you enjoy being in the army. Love it, even.’

Mary’s grin gets broader. ‘Awesome,’ she says. ‘John, you need to hang on to this one.’

John grins too at that. Sherlock can’t resist flattery, not when he can read that it’s genuinely meant, and he doesn’t, in John’s opinion, get anywhere near as much of it as he deserves. And John wants to reply to what Mary’s just said, say *Believe me, I intend to,* but he suspects it might not come out as jokey as he’d like, so he keeps quiet.

‘How did you get all that?’ Mary asks Sherlock.

Sherlock resettles himself in his seat, clearly about to enjoy himself very much. John’s grin gets slightly wider. Sherlock says, ‘I won’t bore you with the more –’ he waves a hand – ‘*mundane* details. Children and partners and the like. But the rest...the way you’re holding yourself, I can see some of your palm. Your handchip’s on, and I caught a glimpse of the screen; there’s a city in silhouette and what looks like a maze. They aren’t displayed artistically; there’s writing around them, though I can’t read it from here, they’re clearly part of a text. If not artwork, why would you be looking at images? Like most afters I know very little about the Gliesans, but John’s mentioned that their language is based in imagery. The images on your screen had the look of symbols, of symbolic language, and then I managed to catch sight of the numbers 581 – which, since the Gliesans take their name from the star Gliese 581, or so I’ve learned, seemed to confirm it. So you’ve been reading a text about the Gliesan language, and the most probable explanation for that is that you’re trying to learn it. The language, again from information I’ve gathered recently, appears to work completely differently from any earth one. It has no alphabet; for the most part it doesn’t have symbols representing particular words or sounds or morphemes – it has a few, like the ones you’ve started with, but those are exceptions. Drawn images don’t represent spoken language; there is no spoken language, they don’t even have tongues. So learning Gliesan is an extraordinary endeavour, and only someone with a brain trained to think in multiple languages would have any chance of getting anywhere. I can’t imagine that you get much opportunity to talk to Gliesans while they’re shooting at you, so you’re learning their language purely out of cultural interest for its own sake. There’s a few scratches on your palm, too; I’ve had those myself, they happen when you’re so fascinated by what you’re reading on your handchip screen that you scroll
too vigorously. So you find this all more than just moderately interesting.’ He stops for breath.

‘Incredible,’ Mary says. ‘OK, what else was there? Oh, yeah, you figured out I was a scout and that I enjoyed it. Or did John tell you that?’

That last question is definitely deliberate baiting, and Sherlock, of course, rises to it. ‘He hardly had to tell me anything so obvious. All he said to me about you was that you were a friend from the army. I guessed you’d be a scout because John was clearly closer to you than anyone else, and since medics are paired up with individual scouts that made the most sense. The way you automatically looked around, scanning the flat to an extent greater than a casual curious glance, when you stepped through the door made me certain. I also predicted that you enjoyed being in the army because I assumed John would have made friends with people who felt the same way he did, but once I saw you your clothing confirmed it.’

‘My clothing?’ Mary says.

‘Soldiers wear very thin, grey polymis t-shirts under their uniform. They last a long time, they’re easy to clean, they’re lightweight. I have no idea why I know this, it seems entirely unnecessary information, but apparently whoever sent me here thought I needed to know about military clothing choices. You’re on earth for leave, yet you’re still wearing an army t-shirt. I’ve seen other soldiers on leave around – can read it in the types of scar they have, their posture – and they all, without exception, have been wearing non-polymis clothing. Which I would imagine is a kind of psychological distancing tactic – they want to enjoy sensations, materials they can’t get normally, make themselves feel the fact that they’re back on earth. But you’ve chosen to stay in that military mindset, to make yourself feel instead how temporary your leave is.’

‘I hadn’t even thought about it,’ Mary says. ‘I just threw it on, but yeah, of course, that’s why. God, you’re terrifying. Fantastic. Was that it? Oh, no – how did you know about the time John and I shagged?’

‘I didn’t,’ Sherlock says, with the hint of a smile, ‘but I do now.’

Mary laughs out loud. She has a deep, warm laugh, alarmingly loud for those not used to it, but to John, who knows it very well, it’s only comforting. ‘Should’ve seen that one coming,’ she says. ‘All right, well, it’s lovely to meet you, Sherlock. I can see what John sees in you.’

‘What he...ah. I wasn’t sure whether you’d tell her,’ Sherlock says, pressing a cork into a test tube and standing up.
‘I trust her,’ John says. He glances at Mary. ‘You know you can’t tell anyone, right? I am – so out of line with this.’

‘Of course I won’t tell anyone,’ Mary says. ‘Sherlock’s an adult, clearly about a billion times cleverer than your average adult. I don’t see why you should feel bad about it.’

‘He’s my student,’ John says, but he stops there, can’t face going over the rules and the reasons for them all over again. He’s made his choice, and the guilt is his problem, not Mary’s.

After that, John puts the tea on, and the three of them settle down on sofa and armchairs to talk. Unfortunately, neither Sherlock nor Mary are much for small talk, nor are they enormously interested in what counts as appropriate conversation with a relative stranger. In consequence, fifteen minutes in and Mary’s leaning forward, looking slightly devilish, and saying, ‘How did you two get together, anyway? John completely failed to tell me.’

Sherlock shrugs. ‘We were attracted to each other. It became the only sensible step to take.’

‘Yeah, fine, abridge it all down,’ John says, rolling his eyes. ‘Leave out the bit where you ran an experiment to determine your attraction and put your hand all over my –‘ The memory, the realisation hits him square in the lungs, momentarily tightens his breathing. He stops abruptly.

‘Don’t stop there,’ Mary says, in mock indignation.

‘I was wondering when you were going to ask about that,’ Sherlock says. His tone is even, his expression very still. ‘But perhaps we should talk about it later.’

‘Fine,’ John says. He stares at Sherlock, wondering how it could have taken him this long to notice the discrepancy, to be puzzled. To wonder whether Sherlock’s been lying to him. And yet why would he feel the need to lie, when John’s made it clear that he’s fine with just about whatever Sherlock will give him?

‘Do you think you’d ever be interested in learning another language?’ Mary asks Sherlock, and John has to smile at her entirely blunt and unsubtle changing of the subject. God, he’s missed her.
‘Possibly,’ Sherlock says, thoughtfully. ‘It might be something to occupy my mind when there isn’t enough on. I wouldn’t mind attempting Gliesan; my lack of knowledge about them is infuriating.’

‘I thought you said only someone who’d already learned how to think in other languages would have a chance of learning Gliesan,’ Mary says.

‘That would be true of any ordinary person, certainly,’ Sherlock says. Mary snorts; Sherlock looks vaguely put out. John feels the now familiar wave of affection towards him, but it’s tinged with a lingering anxiety. *I’ve known him two and a half weeks,* he reminds himself. *I don’t even know what he is. What am I doing, letting myself get this attached?*

It’s too late; John knows that perfectly well. The affection runs deep and is wearing deeper grooves into him with every hour he spends at Sherlock’s side. And there seems a good chance that they’re going to get some answers about who Sherlock really is from Moriarty. John just hopes that they’re answers he’ll like.
‘We’re meeting some friends – well, not exactly friends,’ John says to Mary. ‘You want to come along?’

‘Not exactly friends,’ Mary repeats. ‘That sounds...interesting.’

So then John tells her – with frequent interruptions and corrections by Sherlock – about the investigation, about a man called Sebastian Moran who might or might not be relevant, and a man now called Jim Moriarty who replaced him. Mary’s eyes widen at that. ‘You don’t mean the time travel guy,’ she says.

Apparently news of exactly what Jim Moriarty’s story is has spread to the newsblogs by now. ‘That’s the one,’ John says. ‘You want to come along and talk to him? We’re going pretty much now.’

‘Definitely,’ Mary says, getting up. ‘I mean, I won’t be able to stay long, I’ve got other things I need to do this evening, but I’ll definitely just come and say hello. This is incredible, I can’t believe you guys have actually met him.’

John moves to get up, then realises that his cane, which he leaned on the edge of the armchair when he sat down, has slipped and rolled away while they’ve been talking. He pushes himself to his feet and lurches for it. Pain stabs through his leg, and before he knows what’s happening he’s on his knees.

Somehow, the idea of Mary, who saw him in the pit and saw him in the hospital, seeing him like this as well, is too much. And yet there’s no retreat, no way to save face. He grabs his cane from where it’s lying and uses the armchair to pull himself up by.

‘On second thoughts,’ he says, voice casual, ‘maybe you two should go. I should probably stay and rest my leg.’

‘Damn your leg,’ Sherlock says, getting to his feet, and John can’t bear to look at him as he does so, at the amount of grace he brings to even that simple movement. ‘If you’d just listen to me – it’s curable.’
Mary’s head flicks towards him. ‘It’s a psychebullet,’ she says.

‘A fragmented psychebullet,’ Sherlock says, a pointless correction that must just be for the enjoyment of being slightly more right than someone. ‘And as I’ve been trying to tell John, the channel that allows the fragments to affect his brain isn’t one-way. If he’d practice, he could push back.’

If they go on talking about him like he’s not there John is going to get up and leave. But Mary, at least, is a vaguely decent human being, and she turns back to John and says, ‘What’s he on about? Have you tried this?’

‘Not yet,’ John says.

Mary regards him for a moment. Then she says, ‘OK. Shall we go, then?’

John thinks of repeating that he’ll stay, but he does want to hear Sherlock question Moriarty. He gets stiffly to his feet, and follows the others out.

*

Outside, as they head for the tubes, the conversation turns naturally around Moriarty and the drama of the headlines lately. Mary says, ‘Scott Baynes has been saying he’s making it all up.’

Scott Baynes is the leader of the SPP – the Social Preservation Party, which is, in John’s view, no more than a load of bigots. He says as much. ‘Of course Baynes would say that. Dunno if you’ve heard about the SPP, Sherlock, but basically they think the afters are like, invaders, or they’re polluting earth society or some crap like that. They’d hate to think you’re just human time travellers, it would fuck up half their rhetoric. I mean, I’m sure they’ll rally and come up with something about the future pillaging the present, but not unless they exhaust every other option first.’

‘I’m not saying you’re wrong, John,’ Mary says, ‘but you’ve never lost anyone, have you? Had someone you cared about get replaced, I mean.’

John looks down. ‘No. I’m sorry.’
Sherlock looks her over. ‘Your mother – no, your father,’ he says.

‘Yes,’ Mary says. She gives a peculiar half-smile, one John last saw from a hospital bed. ‘To be clear, I’m not saying any of the shit the SPP spews out is remotely OK, but...Baynes’s sister disappeared when he was nineteen. And it’s – you don’t see them die. You don’t get to mourn. They’re just gone. You don’t imagine what you could have done differently, there was nothing, you were powerless, there was never even the option of saving them –’ she breaks off.

‘I’m sorry,’ John says, again. He has no idea what to say beyond that. Mary never talks about this. She mentioned once, years ago, that her father had been replaced, but she’s never discussed her feelings on the subject.

‘That thing, that not being able to save someone, that total lack of control – people deal with it in different ways,’ she continues, as if John hasn’t spoken. ‘My mum, she nurtured anything she could get her hands on. She saved whatever she could because she couldn’t save my dad. Or, I mean, that’s how I read it, anyway, obviously I’m oversimplifying, but – yeah. And me, I joined the army because they were fighting an enemy you could see and shoot at and I couldn’t reach the enemy who’d actually hurt me, didn’t even know who they were. Or, no, OK, that’s – I’m definitely simplifying there. I guess if that was really what I wanted I’d have applied to be a fighter rather than a scout. I had a bunch of reasons for joining the army, and mostly I just thought I’d be fucking great at scouting and I wouldn’t be bored and I’d be a defender of the earth and all that crap. But stuff about my dad did come into it, I think.’

‘Yeah,’ John says, helplessly. Dear God, he’s useless.

‘So, look, dealing with it by taking it out on all the afters when it’s clearly not their fault is awful,’ Mary says. ‘But – I dunno, I don’t even know what I’m saying. I guess I just feel sorry for him sometimes. But he’s still a wanker.’

Sherlock, who hasn’t spoken once since the topic started, stirs. ‘From your perspective, yes, Baynes is a wanker,’ he says. ‘An unpleasant man, who says things you find distasteful. From mine, he’s something simpler: someone who doesn’t consider me a person. I’m not capable of sympathy for him any more than he is capable of sympathy for me.’

Thankfully, they’re only a couple of paces from the tubes entrance at that point, and the change of scenery gives John an opportunity to change the subject and break the awkward silence that follows. As they climb into the tube car, he says, ‘Molly’s nice, anyway. I think you’ll like her.’
Mary laughs. ‘John, you’re worse at awkwardly changing the subject than I am,’ she says. ‘Sherlock, I’m sorry, you’re right, I shouldn’t be making excuses for Baynes. But I find that easier to take from you than befores who’ve never lost anybody, that’s all. No offence,’ she adds to John.

‘None taken,’ John says. ‘It’s a fair point. It’s just hard not to get angry sometimes when you see how people treat afters.’

Mary smiles. ‘He’s always been a bit angry about it,’ she says to Sherlock. ‘But definitely more so now. Has he been defending your honour?’

Sherlock’s mouth tips up slightly at one corner. ‘He hasn’t had much of a chance,’ he says, ‘but I think he’s quite upset about that. He’d jump at the opportunity.’ Mary giggles.

John groans. ‘Why did I think it was a good idea to introduce the two of you?’ he says.

‘Because you’re an idiot,’ Mary says happily, and Sherlock’s mouth does its little not-smile again. John gives out another groan, but can’t quite suppress his own smile from bursting up. He’s still worried: worried about what Sherlock knows and hasn’t been telling him, about all the things Sherlock can’t tell John about himself because he doesn’t know either. But he’s in a tube car with his best friend and his – his Sherlock – and they’re both more or less smiling and that, whatever else might be going on, is pretty wonderful.

Before he’s even really aware that he’s going to say it, the words come out of his mouth. ‘Sherlock,’ he says, ‘I’ll try your ideas about my leg.’

The not-smile becomes a full-on smirk. ‘I knew you’d –’

‘Try,’ John stresses. ‘And you’re not to be a dick about it. Just – later, when we’re done with Moriarty, you can explain further, and I’ll give it a go, but only as much as I happen to feel like, and then I’ll stop and you won’t whine about it. OK?’

Sherlock nods. He doesn’t say anything, for which John is grateful, but his eyes are bright. And God, Sherlock’s endless nagging about John’s leg is irritating, and yet...Sherlock cares. John’s physical state appears to genuinely matter to him. And maybe that’s just because John being impaired is inconvenient for him when they’re working together, but then maybe it isn’t. At least not entirely.
They’re meeting Molly and Moriarty in an underground bar in Kilburn. John’s been there once before: like all underground buildings it’s a bizarre shape, consisting of many narrow corridors, designed to fit around the tube tunnels. John doesn’t like them much, personally, because they always feel cramped no matter how big they are, with one corridor totally empty and the next crushed full of people who’ve squashed in to be near their friends or queue for the bar.

His first flat, when he got out of teacher training at the age of twenty, was an underground building. The rents are much cheaper than surface level buildings, but there’s no council housing, so most of John’s neighbours were students and newly employed people. He’d hated the lack of space, but he’d enjoyed the culture, the tunnels illegally dug between flats without planning permission, taking a wrong turn on what he thought was the way home and stumbling into an unexpected house party. It had been a bizarre couple of years, teaching secondary school Biology during the day and coming home to artificial sunlight still blasting through the virtual windows long after the real sun had gone down. Things had gotten particularly complicated after Harry dropped out of university and moved in with him in his second year there, and he’d thought of his life as being pretty hectic. And then, at twenty two, he’d joined the army, and learned how placid everything before that had actually been. He’d known, before that, that he was missing something, but it wasn’t till he joined up that he found out what. And once he did know exactly what had been absent from his life before the army, he was sure he’d never be able to go back to it.

And yet here he is. Back in civilian life. Teaching again, albeit in a very different way, and – happy. Concerned about any number of things, yes, but for all that, happier than he’s been in a long time. He would never have predicted that in a million years when he was in the pit, or in hospital. And thinking of that, he can’t resist reaching out to give Sherlock’s hand a brief squeeze, even though it makes Mary smirk at him and raise her eyebrows and say, ‘My God, Sherlock, you’ve turned him soppy.’

Molly and Moriarty are waiting for them when they arrive, leaning against a wall in a corridor near the door and pressing themselves back every time someone wants to get through, apologising each time. John snorts – apparently Molly’s managed to find herself a student as anxious and over-polite as she is – and heads towards them.

‘Mr. Watson,’ Moriarty says when he sees them. ‘Hi, nice to see you again.’

‘It’s Captain Watson,’ Sherlock says, a note in his voice John can’t quite place.

‘It was Captain Watson when I was actually still in the army,’ John says, rolling his eyes at Sherlock. ‘Honestly, call me John.’

‘Oh,’ Moriarty says. ‘Thank you. Me too. I mean, that is, you can call me Jim. Not John, obviously.’
‘Will do,’ John says smiling, trying to set him at ease. ‘Bit crowded here, isn’t it?’

‘Sorry!’ Molly says. ‘I just chose it because it’s easy for us both to get to, and if we want a drink it’s quite cheap, and –’

‘It’s fine,’ John interrupts hastily. ‘It’s nice. Don’t mind the crowds much really, and yeah, cheap is always good. This is my friend Mary, by the way.’

Sherlock gets a look of alarm, which probably marks a fear that they’re going to descend into lengthy small talk. ‘It’s too loud in here for me to ask questions,’ he says. ‘We should go back up to the surface and find a restaurant.’

‘This was a bad choice,’ Molly frets.

Sherlock ignores this, already striding for the door. The rest of them hurry after him. He continues striding once he gets up the steps and back to the street, purposeful, as if he knows where he’s going, even though it’s unlikely that he’s ever been to this particular area before. He certainly hasn’t been here with John.

‘Where are you going?’ John says, limping as rapidly as he can in order to fall into step beside him.

Sherlock moves his arm in an expansive gesture, taking in the people around him. ‘Look at them,’ he says. ‘It’s a matter of milliseconds to work out where they’re all going. I’m simply following a couple who I know are heading to a restaurant that’s a reasonable quality and within our price range.’

‘Fantastic,’ John says, and though Sherlock just strides on, John reads pleasure in the slight tilt of his lip.

‘I won’t come into the restaurant,’ Mary says to Jim. ‘I’ve got to be getting on. I just wanted to say hello. Things must be pretty tough for you at the moment.’

‘It’s OK,’ Jim says, looking at the floor. ‘I just – it’s all pretty overwhelming. Molly’s been a star, though.’ He gives her an affectionate smile.
‘I have some questions for you,’ Sherlock says to Jim. ‘First of all, about pronouns –’ he breaks off. For a moment, John isn’t sure why. Then he follows Sherlock’s gaze, and sees Sherlock looking down at his own hand, his left one, the one which holds his handchip.

The back of it seems to be swelling slightly in three places, and discolouring, turning an almost orangey colour. As everyone watches, horrified, the swellings shape themselves into three small pellets, and detach themselves from Sherlock’s hand. The hand looks normal, skin closed up, no sign of anything wrong. The pellets start to roll off; Sherlock catches them with his other hand and picks them up.

‘What the hell?’ John says.

Sherlock opens his mouth to answer, but then shuts it again. The pellets are opening, tiny shoots growing out of them as if they’re seeds, or pips. The shoots stop after only a few centimetres and part at the top, to reveal, inside each, a small data chip.

‘What the hell?’ John repeats.

‘I don’t know,’ Sherlock says quietly. ‘But there seems to be an obvious way to find out.’

‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea,’ John says. Molly nods, looking nervous. Sherlock ignores them both, and presses all three data chips against his left hand at once.

The chips open simultaneously. But no options box appears; instead, three pictures materialise on the screen.

The one on the left is a picture of a hummingbird. John thinks it’s a 3D photograph at first, though there’s a strange fluidity to the lines that seems wrong somehow, but then he realises it’s an extraordinarily detailed and lifelike digital painting. There are, he’s fairly sure, holographic elements to it; it’s more real than conventional 3D, looks as if it could fly out of the screen at any moment.

The image on the right shows a sign on a building. The picture is zoomed in, so that not all of the sign is visible, but it’s shiny and sleek. A lowercase c is followed by a capital X, and the edge of the sign is visible after that, but the letter preceding the c is almost entirely cut off.
The middle image is of a wall with words spraypainted onto it, or at least a digitally produced image of one. The words read: *Give him a puzzle...*

There’s a pause, in which Sherlock stares at his handchip and everyone else glances at each other. Then John says, ‘Do you know what it means?’

‘It –’ Sherlock starts, and then falls silent as the middle image begins to change. Still a wall, still spraypainted, but now the words read: *...and watch him dance.*

And a building at the end of the street explodes.

John and Mary, operating on years of instinct, move first. John leaps forward, bringing Sherlock to the ground, while Mary ducks, pulling Jim and Molly down with her and curls forward. But after a moment, when no debris flies past or hits them, John risks looking up. Ahead, the street is littered with rubble, but they’re well out of the damage area. ‘Stay down,’ he tells Sherlock, and gets to his feet.

Mary follows suit, pushing Jim down when he tries to do the same. ‘You guys stay here,’ she says. ‘I’m going to go and have a look. And don’t worry, this sort of thing is my job. John, you stay and watch this area.’

‘There might be someone injured,’ John says.

‘Yeah,’ Mary admits. ‘But – look, it’s probably just some kind of accident and has nothing to do with whatever the fuck those things were –’ she gestures towards Sherlock’s hand – ‘but if it is related then...’

The rest of the sentence, unspoken, rings in John’s head. Then Sherlock could be a target, could be in danger, and one of them should be with him. John hesitates, then nods. ‘If you find anyone still alive,’ he says, ‘just message me the letter A. And then call an ambulance.’

Mary nods once, briskly, and sets off for the building It’s a smallish block of flats, only three storeys, and now with a gaping hole in its side. The chances of it having been completely empty of people do not seem good, but John hopes desperately anyway.
Jim and Molly get up shakily, looking frightened. Sherlock stands up and returns to examining the pictures. John reaches for his cane, which he dropped when he leapt to shield Sherlock. His leg still isn’t hurting, adrenaline buzzing through him, but it will be any second.

‘Do you think everyone’s OK?’ Molly says in a small voice.

‘Unlikely,’ Sherlock says, and starts rapidly typing, fingers making the tiny motions against his palm necessary to form words on a handchip. Molly looks at the floor.

Still scanning the area, John says, ‘What are you typing?’

‘Looking up major games design companies,’ Sherlock says.

In the distance, people are clustered around the wrecked building, but there’s no one within ten metres of where they themselves are standing. No unusual objects either. John’s eyes sweep the pavement, the trees down the middle of the road, the windows of the buildings around them, but pick out nothing obviously worrying. ‘Why?’ he says. ‘Is this about the pictures? Do you know what’s going on?’

‘The note said it was a puzzle,’ Sherlock says, talking incredibly fast, and scrolling on his handchip. ‘I solve crimes, odds are there’s a crime to be solved. But where? Picture on the left: holographic painting. Haven’t seen artwork like it on walls, handchips, anywhere, obviously incredibly expensive to create. Wouldn’t spend money like that unless to make money – where does art make a profit – video games, film. Letters in the sign: lowercase c followed by a capital X; unusual combination, very unusual, should be easy to find – trying games companies first. There, yes, see.’ He flicks his handchip onto public, and John sees the list. Sherlock jabs one name on it with his finger: zcX. John knows the name, it’s one of the biggest games companies in the UK.

He scans the area again, still not picking up anything unusual, and says, ‘So how do you find out if there’s been a crime there?’

‘We visit,’ Sherlock says. John’s handchip beeps; he looks down.

*Two dead. No one injured. I’ve called the police; coming back now.*

‘Mary’s on her way back,’ he says.
‘No need to wait for her,’ Sherlock says. ‘Come on.’

_Sherlock and I need to investigate this_, he messages Mary. _Can you get Jim and Molly safely home?_

Sherlock shifts impatiently. Mary messages back, _Of course._ ‘Mary’s going to come and help you guys get home,’ he says to Molly and Jim. ‘I’ve got to go with Sherlock to look into these pictures.’

‘OK,’ Molly says, voice a bit squeaky, but sounding reasonably calm. ‘Do you think we should wait to go and talk to the police when they arrive? I mean, because we’re witnesses, aren’t we?’

‘Mary called them, they’ll have her details, so they can reach you through her if they need to,’ John reassures them. ‘You should get safely back to your flat and recover from seeing that.’

‘All right,’ Jim says. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’ve got politeness conventions down perfectly already,’ Molly says, smiling at him. ‘Even when you’re probably in shock. Well done.’ There’s a lot more strength in her voice when she says this, and it occurs to John that she’s probably a very good E.L.I. if her instinct is to praise and nurture even when she’s this shaken.

Jim smiles shyly at her, and John and Sherlock set off for the tubes.

*

‘So,’ John says, in the tube car. ‘Someone’s set you a puzzle, and a building’s blown up. Are they related?’

‘I suspect we’ll get confirmation if they are,’ Sherlock says.

‘Right,’ John says, not liking the sound of _any_ of this. ‘And what the hell were those things that came out of your hand? How could someone affect your body like that?’
Sherlock shrugs. ‘When you get a handchip installed, it’s given the capacity to send out electronic signals that affect the nervous system. When someone calls you on your handchip and you press answer, you can just hear them talking, can’t you? You don’t have to, I don’t know, hold your hand to your ear or anything like that. That’s because the handchip’s converting the sound into electronic data and sending that data directly to your brain. So if somebody hacked a person’s handchip, they could affect that person’s body. Only to a very limited extent, don’t look so worried. The handchips are extremely carefully programmed to be unable to do any damage to the bodies they’re in, so you can’t hurt someone by controlling their handchip.’

John shakes his head, bites his lip. This is sounding worse by the second. ‘So somebody hacked your handchip and...’

‘Sent it data files, had it turn them into physical data chips, and produce them from my skin,’ Sherlock says, succinctly. ‘Don’t fuss about it.’

‘Don’t fuss about it,’ John repeats. ‘Sherlock, someone who might or might not be a bomber hacked your body –’

‘- and won’t get a chance to do it again,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve set up safeguards now. And as I said, even if they did do it again, there’s a very limited amount they could achieve.’

‘I guess...’ John says, though he can’t help but be worried. ‘But why would someone choose to make pips come out of your hand anyway? I mean, if they had your handchip i.d., which they clearly did, why not just send you the files the normal way?’

‘That part’s easy,’ Sherlock says. ‘Look how disturbed you are; that’s the effect they were after. Wanted to alarm me, make me feel under their control, but apparently didn’t realise I knew enough about how handchips work not to be concerned. What puzzles me more is the fact that they sent three pips. Why not just put the images on one data chip?’

‘No idea,’ John says. He moves on to the next thing that’s been worrying him. ‘How are we going to get into zcX?’ he asks. ‘We can’t just show up and tell them we think some sort of crime’s happened there.’

‘Lestrade,’ Sherlock says. He’s typing as he speaks, and John leans forward to peer down at his hand. Believe crime may have been committed at zcX company headquarters. Speak to them and tell them I have police permission to investigate.
‘Say please or something at least –‘ John starts to say, but Sherlock’s sent the message before he finishes the sentence. ‘Never mind.’

‘I don’t,’ Sherlock assures him. John rolls his eyes.

It takes a certain amount of back and forth messaging before Lestrade agrees to do as Sherlock asks, but by the time they reach zcX headquarters, he’s caved, and they’re greeted by a man named Alexander Holder who actually turns out to be the C.E.O.

‘The detective who called me said it was confidential,’ Holder says. ‘Can you give me any details at all?’

‘No,’ Sherlock says. He brings up the picture of the hummingbird on his handchip. ‘Can you tell me which member of your art team created this image?’

Holder looks at the image, and raises his eyebrows. ‘That looks like a still from Lucy Parr’s animation work,’ he says, ‘but if you wanted to speak to her about it, I’m afraid that’s not an option. She went home ill earlier today, and I’ve just received word that she was taken into hospital and died there about half an hour ago.’

‘I see,’ Sherlock says, keeping his face impassive. ‘Was she close to any other staff members?’

‘There’s Arthur Stevenson,’ Holder says. ‘He’s in animation too. Can’t you tell me any-‘

‘Thank you for your time,’ Sherlock says, and sweeps impressively out of Holder’s office.

‘Er, yeah, thanks,’ John says, and hurriedly limps after him.

* 

The animators have half a floor to themselves, a brightly lit room with large windows and eight desks all carefully spaced apart from each other. There’s a computer embedded in each desk, and
beside it an array of brushes designed for use with a screen. Arthur Stevenson has the desk nearest the door, as proclaimed by a holographic name tag floating above it, but Sherlock ignores him and heads for the desk above which the name Lucy Parr still hovers.

It looks, as far as John can see, much the same as the others, except possibly less tidy – the brushes, rather than being lined up at the side, are spread out all over the surface around the screen. There’s a heap of paper with some sketches on, including at least one hummingbird that John can see, tucked into a shelf beneath the desk, and a stationary pot with some scissors and pencils. Sherlock’s attention seems briefly drawn by a small brownish mark on the desk to the right of the screen, which could, John supposes, be blood, but hardly from anything much bigger than a papercut. The only major difference between this desk and the others is the fact that this one’s unoccupied, and its screen is blank.

The other animators are sending curious glances their way, and after thirty seconds or so of examining the desk, Sherlock turns his attention to Stevenson. After a brief introduction, in which the phrase confidential investigation proves useful yet again, and it becomes clear that everyone in the office already knows about Parr’s death, he moves onto his first question: ‘You and Parr were friends?’

‘I don’t know about friends,’ Stevenson says. ‘She didn’t exactly have friends. But she talked to me more than anyone else.’

‘Do you know how she died?’ John asks.

‘Food poisoning,’ Stevenson says. ‘I think so, anyway, someone said something about that, but I don’t really know. Why – ‘ he breaks off, catching sight of the hummingbird picture where it’s still displayed on Sherlock’s handchip. ‘Oh, you’ve got a still of Beryl.’

Sherlock glances from the hummingbird to Stevenson. ‘Parr – named her designs?’

‘Not all of them,’ Stevenson says. ‘But when she was trying a new animation or art technique, coming up with something different, she’d always do an animal to illustrate it and she’d always give it a name. She was a bit, um. I mean. She was an interesting person.’ The way he says interesting, John doesn’t think it’s a compliment.

‘Did Beryl – ‘ Sherlock pronounces the name with distaste – ‘mean something particular to her?’
‘Well,’ Stevenson says, ‘not – I mean, there was...she got a bit upset about it all.’


‘I doubt it’s got much to do with...whatever you’re doing?’ Stevenson says. There’s a question in his voice, but Sherlock doesn’t answer it, and after a moment Stevenson goes on. ‘She claimed this new art technique she had was revolutionary, this totally different way of using holographic methods to make something just zing out of the screen, you know, feel really alive. She said it was new and different enough from existing techniques to get a patent. And she sent some stills and some moving images and some very basic gameplay to the patent office, but they rejected it, said it wasn’t different enough. And she – she went a bit mental, to be honest.’

‘Mental,’ Sherlock repeats.

‘Yeah, well, she had this whole conspiracy theory going.’

‘Which was?’ Sherlock says, patience reserves starting to visibly run low.

‘She thought someone had tampered with the files she sent to the patent office. Replaced her work with very similar stuff, but just a bit less innovative.’

‘What made her think that?’ John asks.

‘I don’t know,’ Stevenson says, with a small laugh. ‘She was always a bit – I mean, you always kind of wondered when she was gonna go off the rails.’

‘But did she offer any logical basis at all for her claims?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Something about the hummingbird’s tail,’ Stevenson says. ‘Or maybe its neck? Can’t remember. Something really specific, like – she’s, I mean she was... obsessively particular. Used to give the rest of us a hard time about not doing enough research. As if we were scientists and not people making a bloody videogame, but anyway. She always did loads of research and the animals she did – they were her speciality – always had really specific colouring and stuff. And Beryl was...’ he screws up his face in concentration. ‘Oh, yeah, a Buff-tailed Coronet. And apparently the notes from the patent office described the thing and mentioned something about its markings and they weren’t quite right. And instead of being like, yeah OK maybe I remembered something wrong for
once in my life, she decided someone was trying to scam her out of a patent.’

‘It doesn’t sound like you were very fond of her,’ John says.

Stevenson shifts in his chair. ‘Look, I don’t want to be horrible about her when she’s dead,’ he says. ‘And I feel bad because – like I said, she talked to me. I think she sort of liked me, or more than she liked anyone else, anyway. But mostly she just liked her work, and she had no patience at all with the fact that the rest of us had, you know, actual lives outside animation.’

‘Do you think it’s likely that she mentioned her conspiracy theory to anyone besides you?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Definitely not,’ Stevenson says. ‘She barely spoke to anyone else, and when she told me she said I shouldn’t tell anyone.’ He pauses. ‘Can I see that image again?’

Sherlock shows him his handchip. Stevenson frowns. ‘That is – really beautiful work,’ he says. ‘I wish I could see it move.’

‘Aren’t her animation files on her work computer? Or her handchip?’

‘That was all part of the conspiracy theory. She claimed all the files from both got wiped.’

‘But you don’t believe her?’

‘It all seems a bit far-fetched, doesn’t it? Who’d want to do that?’

Sherlock looks thoughtful. ‘Excellent question,’ he says. ‘Who would you say are zcX’s biggest rivals?’

*  

They leave without saying goodbye to Alexander Holder, John rushing to keep up with Sherlock as usual, but when they get to Assemblance Studios – which Stevenson named unhesitatingly as
zcX’s primary competitor – it’s already closed for the evening. Sherlock then messages Lestrade to ask him to get them access to the morgue where Parr’s body is, but gets the reply: *I’ll do my best, but it’ll take at least until tomorrow.* There seems little they can do but head home.

On the way, Sherlock gets another message from Lestrade, which reads: *Right, another thing. Finally managed to get in touch with the team that was sent to the site of the explosion. They’re keeping it quiet, but it wasn’t an accident.*

And ten minutes after that, another message comes through, one whose handchip i.d. is blocked. *I hope you’re enjoying my puzzle, Sherlock. Listen, I’m in no rush, so take your time solving it. Let’s say...oh, three days. That should be FAR more than you need, but I’m feeling generous today.*

‘If you don’t solve it by then...’ John says.

‘Another explosion, I’d imagine,’ Sherlock says. ‘But of course I’ll solve it by then.’

‘Who would do this?’ John asks.

In answer, Sherlock just shakes his head, and stares out of the tube car window. There’s nothing to see, so John assumes he’s thinking, trying to gather his ideas on the case, and keeps silent, not wanting to distract him.

Three days, by Sherlock’s standards, is an enormous amount of time to solve a case – as long as whoever’s orchestrating this keeps their word. John suspects, though, that they will, that they’re less interested in blowing up buildings than they are in playing some kind of sick game with Sherlock. Somehow, the thought isn’t particularly comforting.
Back at the flat, Sherlock paces restlessly around the living room. There’s very little else they can do till the next morning, and when John suggests just that he just devote the time to thinking about the data they already have he snaps that he ran through it a thousand times on the journey home and that there’s nothing more to be gleaned from it.

John watches him from the sofa for a while. Then, when Sherlock’s agitation begins to grate more on his nerves than he can cope with, he says, ‘I could do something to take your mind off it for a while, if you want.’

Sherlock freezes and looks hard at him. ‘I thought you were angry with me,’ he says.

‘I...I’m not exactly angry,’ John says. ‘Or maybe, I am, a bit. But mostly I’m worried and upset and – I do, I really do need you to tell me how it is that you could put your hand on my chest one day and then be unable to touch me the next. But you’re practically vibrating out of your skin, so just...if you need to do something to quiet your brain a bit first and then explain, I can live with that. Just promise me that you had a good reason for lying. And that you’ll tell me about it afterwards.’

‘I never lied,’ Sherlock says. He starts walking towards John. He looks slightly shaken, face startlingly open. ‘And you’re sure you’ll – I mean yes, of course you are, you wouldn’t have offered otherwise, but –‘ he breaks off, staring at John like John is something extraordinary, and John moves to stand up, to touch him somehow, but Sherlock gets there first, moving forward and settling on top of him, curling around him, touching John with just about everything but his hands.

John kisses him, and Sherlock kisses back enthusiastically. When John moves to touch his side, though, he flinches away. ‘Not that,’ he says. ‘I need my brain quieter, yes, but not – not melted. Let me –‘ and in one swift movement he’s slid off John and is suddenly on his knees.
John’s blood rushes south at a rate that leaves him dizzy. ‘Oh,’ he says, breathless. ‘You don’t have to.’

‘You already told me that when I first brought it up,’ Sherlock says, and as he says it he shifts backwards, readjusting his long frame till he’s able to get his head level with John’s cock. John tries to focus on the words coming out of his mouth and not its location, and they turn out to be: ‘And I said it would be absurd not to try it.’

‘Wouldn’t want to be, uh, be absurd,’ John manages to get out, and then he watches, transfixed, as Sherlock very slowly brings his head in nearer, till his mouth is pressed to the crotch of John’s trousers.

John reaches out and pulls down the zip with unsteady hands, fingers brushing against Sherlock’s mouth as he does. Sherlock’s tongue flicks out to taste them, and John’s hands get even less steady. He pulls his trousers down and shoves them away with his foot, then slides back and spreads his legs to give Sherlock easier access.

Sherlock tilts his body forward to reach John again. He pushes the point of his tongue into the rapidly forming wet patch on John’s underwear, and drags it upwards. The slight slide of fabric against John’s skin is maddening, his every nerve sensitised. He murmurs Sherlock’s name, and Sherlock rewards him by sucking, just a little, through the cloth.

John’s hands, resting on the sofa at his sides, curl, uncurl. He looks down at the top of Sherlock’s head, pressed close to him, and the flash of combined affection and lust that rushes through his entire body is staggering, but not really a surprise. It’s an entirely appropriate response to the situation. To Sherlock, here, doing this for him, wanting him.

Sherlock continues mouthing along John’s pants, periodically pressing his tongue against the places where the fabric’s become particularly damp and clinging. And finally, when John’s starting to feel like every nerve in his body’s relocated to his cock, Sherlock says, ‘Pants off.’

His voice. It’s even lower-pitched than usual, almost hoarse. ‘This turns you on,’ John says, his own voice a wreck, and Sherlock’s barely done anything yet.

‘Immensely,’ Sherlock says. ‘Your reactions – and the closeness – pants off, John, now.’

John looks down just as Sherlock looks up, and meets his eyes, which are already black pools
again. Seeing that, all he can do is whisper, ‘Jesus Christ,’ and do as Sherlock says. His pants join
trouser in a heap by the sofa, and Sherlock greets his newly freed cock by pressing his cheek
against it. John stares at the smear of fluid left there, and reaches out to touch it, to feel where his
cock’s lying against Sherlock’s skin. ‘Do something,’ he begs.

Sherlock moves his head back, but rather than taking John in his mouth he just gazes intently at his
cock in a way that’s deeply hot but also slightly makes John want to giggle. He’s about to make a
jokey comment when his brain finally comes back online. Sherlock may well have given blowjobs
before, but if so he doesn’t remember. He’s sitting like this and staring because he’s trying to
figure out what to do. ‘No teeth is the main thing,’ John advises. A carefully limited amount of
teeth wouldn’t, in fact, be entirely unwelcome, but it’s probably best to keep the advice simple for
now. He adds, ‘Bit of suction, use your tongue a bit. And don’t try to take it too deep; pull back if
you start gagging. And obviously...I mean, it goes without saying, but if you don’t like it then just
stop.’

John expected a glare from Sherlock at his having the temerity to give advice, and it appears on
cue, but he barely has time to register it before Sherlock’s mouth is closing around the tip of his
cock.

John can’t look down at Sherlock or this will be over in seconds, so he fixes his eyes determinedly
on the wall and forces himself not to buck into Sherlock’s mouth as Sherlock slides it a little further
down and then sucks, once, fairly gently.

‘Oh Christ,’ John says. He clenches his fists. ‘You’re going to kill me.’

Sherlock makes a pleased sound around his cock and John swears, spreads his legs wider in
unabashed physical begging.

Sherlock takes John slightly deeper, and John loses himself in the sensation for a moment. But
after a short period of time, though it still feels incredible, John can see that Sherlock’s starting to
have trouble, struggling to keep John’s cock exactly where he wants it without using his hands.
He’s not gagging, but he doesn’t look entirely comfortable either, and John’s also worried about
losing control and thrusting into Sherlock’s mouth. ‘Stop a moment,’ he says, and Sherlock pulls
off, looking disgruntled.

‘I don’t want to stop,’ he says, crossly. ‘It was perfect. Extremely arousing, enough to make my
mind go a little unfocused without dissolving entirely into static the way it would if you touched
me, and requiring enough concentration to keep me grounded.’
‘But I was hurting you,’ John says, ‘or at least causing you discomfort. I could see.’

‘It was worth it,’ Sherlock says, and starts to lower his head again, but John brings his legs back together. Sherlock gives an irritable huff, and says, ‘Your solicitousness is not wanted, John.’

John bites his lip, and says, ‘I know I said we could do this and you could talk about the touching thing later, but...maybe we should just have the conversation. Get it over with. If I understood better what’s going on with you, then –‘

‘Fine!’ Sherlock snaps. ‘I didn’t tell you why I could run a touching experiment on you and yet not curl my fingers around your cock or wrap up your hands in mine or rake my nails down your back or stroke your hair or trace patterns across your face or any of the things I really want to do. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know. Having had some days to think about it, I suppose I do, now, have a hypothesis I’m fairly certain is correct. Sharing it won’t help, and it’s...I’m – I’d much rather not share it. But you place a high value on honesty and if I don’t tell you you’ll feel as though you’re missing out on information that’s crucial for our partnership, even though the information is actually completely trivial.’

John fidgets. ‘I don’t want you to feel forced into telling me more than you’re comfortable with,’ he says, ‘but you’re right, if you don’t, I’m not going to be able to stop wondering what I don’t know.’

‘I realise that,’ Sherlock says. He fixes his eyes on a point somewhere to John’s right. ‘My aversion to touching people with my hands is conditioning of some kind, as we’ve discussed. My theory is that I was told many times not to by whoever taught the reps before sending us here – it’s clear that we were taught. When the amnesia set in, things that had been impressed on me large numbers of times acquired a disproportionate amount of importance, because they’d reached a layer of subconscious behaviour that held more sway when my consciousness was stripped of its informing memories.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Like you say, we’ve discussed all that, but –‘

‘I’ve been fighting that conditioning since I arrived,’ Sherlock continues. ‘And when there’s no other complicating factor, when my conscious mind is entirely certain that it wants to touch someone and is using all its energy to oppose the conditioning, I can do it. Having practiced thoroughly, I would say that I can now even do it with very little discomfort.’

‘So you’re saying...’ A heavy weight makes itself felt in John’s stomach. ‘If you really want to touch someone you can, so you don’t want –‘
‘I want to touch you more than any – look, the mind is complex, I haven’t been giving its complexity enough credit,’ Sherlock says, cutting over John. ‘At a deep level, there’s the conditioning. At a conscious level, and at almost every other level, there’s wanting you, wanting my hands on you. But – I –’ he’s shifting off his knees, settling down with his back to the sofa, facing away from John. He sounds almost embarrassed. ‘I suppose there may have been some level of my brain which held a degree of concern about my lack, not necessarily of actual experience but at least of remembered experience which in the context comes to in effect the same thing, and was concerned about the quality of sexual stimulation I might provide, and perhaps feared a cessation of our sexual activities despite the fact that I had originally expected that to be the natural result of our urges being fulfilled. Irrational, illogical and inconsistent, but there it is.’

John takes a moment to translate this. Then he says, ‘You’re insecure?’ He winces at the note of incredulity in his voice; he doesn’t want to sound like he’s mocking Sherlock. He just didn’t quite expect an explanation so incredibly...normal. That thought is, however, one he had certainly better keep to himself if he wants any chance of ever having sex with Sherlock again.

Sherlock looks put out. ‘Insecure, and the subject of systematic conditioning and comprehensive modification of memory,’ he says. ‘The – emotional issues I could certainly have overcome without difficulty if a large section of my brain weren’t working against me.’

‘If a large section of my brain weren’t working against me, I wouldn’t be using a cane,’ John says. ‘And according to you, it’s possible for me to get to that point.’ He resettles himself, suddenly feeling a lot more confident. This is what Sherlock was hiding: something about as normal and human as it’s possible for anything to be. John’s paranoia, in hindsight, looks entirely ridiculous. ‘You’ll get there too,’ he promises Sherlock. ‘We’ll just – work up to it gradually. You’ve got me off enough already without even being able to touch me with your hands, and it’s been amazing, so there’s no reason to worry that it wouldn’t be if you gave me a handjob or whatever.’

‘Yes, I already pointed out my awareness of the fact that the feeling’s irrational,’ Sherlock says. ‘That ought to remove it but doesn’t. It’s loathsome.’

‘Yeah, tell me about it,’ John says, and Sherlock finally smiles. John reaches down to haul him back up onto the sofa and Sherlock moves with him, collapsing on top of him and kissing him hard.

As they’re kissing, John strokes Sherlock’s hands, and they spread out as if trying to take in as much of his touch as possible. Looking down at their smooth surfaces, he has to repress a shudder at the thought of the pips emerging from them earlier. They’re beautiful hands, he thinks, and he cradles them as if he has any way of protecting them from further transformation.
And suddenly a memory stirs. So long ago it had completely slipped from his mind. He’d been twenty-three, already into his second year of army doctor training, and he’d slept with a guy training to be a fighter. Breaks were all too rare, but there’d been one every week where John’s class happened to break at the same time as one of the fighter classes, and he and the guy, whose name John can’t even remember any more, had snuck into any convenient cupboard for kissing and thorough groping.

The third or fourth time this happened, John remembers now, the guy had whispered, ‘Are you into...handchip stuff, at all?’ When John inquired, puzzled, what that meant, the guy had just said ‘Never mind’ and distracted John with another round of groping, but what John now remembers is that when he’d grasped the guy’s hand he’d felt odd bumps rapidly retracting into the skin. He’d assumed, at the time, that he imagined it.

Since then he’s heard a bit more about sexual ‘handchip stuff’ – jokes on comedy shows about politicians secretly liking it, occasional ads online – but never looked into it. He always vaguely assumed it involved the illusion rather than reality of changing body parts, but given what he saw today...

‘John?’ Sherlock says, and John realises he’s been quiet for too long.

He looks back at Sherlock and says, slightly tentatively, ‘You didn’t seem that freaked out by those things coming out of your hand earlier.’

‘I already told you there was no reason to be,’ Sherlock says, looking slightly surprised at the change of topic.

‘I know,’ John says. ‘And if you’re really not traumatised or anything...those safeguards you put on my handchip when we got home – do they block out any body altering properties?’

‘Of course not,’ Sherlock says. ‘It couldn’t work without interfacing with your body. It just prevents anything from outside causing your handchip to alter your body without permission. You can still enable apps to do it if you want to.’

‘Ah,’ John says.

Sherlock narrows his eyes at him. ‘You’re grinning, why are you grinning?’
‘I’ve always been pretty vanilla,’ John says, ‘but I’ve heard...I think there’s things you can do with handchips.’

‘Things,’ Sherlock repeats. ‘How illuminating.’

‘I’ve never tried it,’ John says, shrugging. ‘Never looked into it or anything. Might be awful. But I think there might be apps that can do temporary minor body alteration, in which case...’

‘I might be able to produce a controllable body part attached to my hand that could touch you,’ Sherlock says, looking suddenly much more interested.

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘I mean, I want you touching me. But, um, if – you said you liked...what we were doing before. So if you went back to that, the handchip might be able to give you something that could let you have a bit more control. And it might be a good way to work up to touching me yourself.’

Sherlock’s already turned on his handchip and is rapidly scrolling. ‘No, no, dear God no, possibly, possibly, absolutely not...ah. This looks marginally more promising.’

‘Which one?’ John asks, trying to peer over to see Sherlock’s palm.

Sherlock pulls his hand away from John and presses it to his chest, then grins wickedly. ‘I can show you, if you want to know,’ he says. ‘Or I could just start without you knowing what’s going to happen.’

John’s cock jumps. He hesitates. It would probably be better to make sure Sherlock hasn’t picked anything too bizarre or awful, and yet – John trusts him. And the risk is not as off-putting as maybe it ought to be. Very far from off-putting, in fact; he’s getting harder at the thought of it. He looks back at Sherlock and says, quietly, ‘Dangerous.’

‘Could be,’ Sherlock agrees, gaze electric and impossible to detach from.

John swallows. ‘If I tell you to stop –’
‘Yes, of course I will, obviously,’ Sherlock says. He smiles; then the smile becomes a smirk as he adds, ‘But I don’t think you’re going to.’

‘Oh God,’ John says. He sits back again. ‘Yes, all right, do it. Whatever it is, I want it. God, but I want it.’

The words barely get out of John’s mouth before Sherlock’s scrambling back up off the sofa and sinking to his knees again. ‘Close your eyes,’ he says.

John does. There’s a few moments of breathless anticipation, and then Sherlock’s mouth closes over him again.

At first, it’s just that, though just really isn’t the word for the enveloping warmth of Sherlock’s mouth, its slick movement, the maddeningly careful and deliberate motions of his tongue. John lets himself be vocal in his appreciation for it, because Sherlock’s reaction to that is the hottest thing of all, the small noises John can hear him making as he sucks.

And then John feels something curling around the base of his cock. It wraps round a couple of times – or perhaps there’s two of them, it’s hard to tell. It’s very smooth, slides easily over him without needing any extra lubrication. And yes, there are two of them, because they’re sliding around and around him in opposite directions, a perfect counterpoint that leaves him gasping.

He opens his eyes.

The things wrapped around his cock are – well, they can really only be called tentacles, one growing out of the palm of each of Sherlock’s hands. Sherlock appears to be able to control them, making them slide and rub against John. ‘Oh God,’ John manages to say. ‘Sherlock, fuck.’

Sherlock pulls off him in order to say: ‘Glad you approve.’ John lets out a small noise of protest, but Sherlock meets his eyes, and seeing the fierce spark there is worth the loss of heat and suction

‘I really, really approve,’ John says.

‘There’s a few more features included in the app,’ Sherlock says. ‘Close your eyes again.’
John does, and sighs in appreciation as Sherlock’s mouth moves back onto him. A moment later, he makes a sound of combined arousal and surprise as the smooth, almost textureless surface of the tentacles ripples and shifts against him, and suddenly starts to feel very, very good indeed.

‘Have you somehow turned them ribbed?’ John says. ‘Oh my God.’

Sherlock’s tongue strokes the head of John’s cock, and the ribbed tentacles keep up their constant movement around the base, the stimulation never letting up for a second. John squeezes his eyes shut even tighter, and feels the textures shift: Sherlock makes them very slightly rougher, so that there’s a slight element of danger about their movement against the tender skin, and John gasps and has to fight again to keep his hips still. Then John feels a slight movement of Sherlock’s mouth which, in retrospect, he will be certain was another wicked smile, and the tentacles start to gently vibrate.

‘Ungh,’ is all he manages to get out in response to that. His nerve endings are alight, overwhelmed with stimulation, his cock throbbing desperately. He’s going beyond words, making increasing numbers of loud but entirely non-verbal noises, but he’s aware of how close he is to coming, and forces out the words, ‘Not much longer, you might want –’ as he opens his eyes to look down at Sherlock once more.

Sherlock’s eyes are closed, but there’s something determined about the way his face is set. As John watches, one of the tentacles detaches itself from John’s cock and retracts back into Sherlock’s palm, melting away as though it was never there. The other tentacle moves up to make up for the absence, its tip stroking around the place where Sherlock’s lips form a circle around John’s cock, making John acutely aware of that meeting point, of what’s happening. He moans again.

The now tentacle-free hand is moving too. Very slowly, with slightly jerky, awkward motions, but getting nearer and nearer to John. John watches it, transfixed, suddenly realising what Sherlock’s trying to do.

Sherlock’s eyes screw up tighter. The nails on the hand that’s moving dig into its palm. And then with one sudden, darting movement, it jumps forward, and Sherlock lays two fingers on John’s cock.

John comes so hard that for a moment he’s aware of nothing else, distantly hearing the sounds he knows are coming from his own mouth, focused entirely on the feeling of those hands, the vibrations still rolling through him. He vaguely feels Sherlock’s mouth slip off him, but can’t mourn its loss because as it leaves Sherlock’s fingers stroke once up John’s cock, wringing out another shudder from him, his whole body caught in waves of bliss.
As awareness finally comes back and he starts to tip into over-sensitivity, he feels the remaining tentacle uncoil from him. The hand lingers a moment longer, but then the fingers disappear too, and John, though feeling completely limp and boneless, manages to move his head to look at Sherlock again.

‘You are –’ John says, and then he can’t find the words, so he lets himself slide forward and off the sofa to the floor. He leans heavily against Sherlock, wraps his arms around him, and kisses his neck, his cheek, his hair. ‘Extraordinary,’ he decides. ‘I know I say it all the time, but – extraordinarily...extraordinary. Just. You –’ and, brain still wonderfully hazy, he gives up on words, and returns to kissing, which is really a superior form of communication anyway.

Sherlock rubs his head into John’s neck like a cat, which strikes John as immensely endearing. When he’s managed to get enough coherent thought back to form a sentence, he says, ‘You did it. You touched me.’

‘It’s hardly an achievement,’ Sherlock says. ‘It shouldn’t have been difficult in the first place.’

‘But it was, your brain made it difficult, and you still did it. Don’t give me any not an achievement crap.’

‘Yes, captain,’ Sherlock says, smirking, and then looking quizzical and tilting his head to one side. ‘Hm. I find saying that slightly arousing, that’s interesting.’

‘Definitely something to explore at some point,’ John says. ‘Are you sure I can’t do anything for you?’

‘This level of arousal is ideal for occupying my mind,’ Sherlock says. ‘Post-orgasmic lassitude will clear it and I’ll be painfully bored. So no, don’t touch me until we make some progress with the case.’

‘I guess your attempts to get better at resisting are working,’ John says. ‘But – orgasm doesn’t just happen once for you, does it? At least last time, it seemed like your two slit things came or whatever it is separately. So if I just touched one –’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘Your touching two at once was staggeringly intense,’ he says. ‘But I don’t require it to feel satisfied, for a sense of—completion. The first time, when you just touched one, my mind still felt cleared and...soft, blurry, I don’t have a word, but – anyway, one was
enough. I can’t have an orgasm at all if I want my mind to stay like this.’

A small grin makes its way onto John’s face as an idea occurs to him. ‘Orgasm doesn’t necessarily have to happen,’ he points out. ‘I can touch you without letting it get to that point.’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says, pulling his head back and staring at him. ‘Continued stimulation without release...it would be agonising, wouldn’t it? But it does have a strange appeal, and it would certainly keep me occupied...’

‘You want to try?’ John says. He’s not going to be getting hard again any time soon, but despite that he feels a flicker of arousal at the thought of Sherlock more undone even than last time.

‘All right,’ Sherlock says, but the neutral words are belied by his tone and expression. John has no doubt at all that he wants this.

There is, though, one more thing he wants to ask. ‘Can I...I mean, I don’t know if you’d like – but those handchip things were incredible, and...I’d quite like to try using them on you. If you want.’

‘You certainly seemed to enjoy it,’ Sherlock says. ‘Wouldn’t mind seeing for myself what it’s like. I’ll send you the app; it’s £3.38, by the way.’

‘Oh,’ John says. ‘I suppose – you don’t mind having spent that? I mean, it’s a bit late now, I guess, but...your starting out loan’s not running out or anything?’

‘I’ve bought a bit of simple lab equipment, and I’ve shared food costs with you,’ Sherlock says. ‘But that’s just about all. I’ve got plenty of money left.’

‘Good,’ John says. ‘We should talk about managing money at some point –’

‘Feel free to stop talking before you wipe my arousal out entirely,’ Sherlock says.

John giggles. ‘Yeah, all right,’ he says. ‘Less talking, more weird handchip tentacle sex, got it.’ It only takes a few taps to download the app, and then he watches in slightly alarmed fascination as his skin shifts in his palm and a fleshy shape starts twisting upwards and forming into a long,
‘This is weird,’ John says, staring at it, but he’s mostly saying it because he thinks he should, because everyone knows sex apps are a bit weird and kinky and out there. In reality, the part of his brain going this is weird is very small, and dwarfed entirely by the part going fuck yes. He looks back at Sherlock. ‘Take your clothes off.’

Sherlock does, scrambling out of what he’s wearing with a speed John can’t help but find flattering. Look at him, John tells himself. He is normal and human in every way that matters, and he’s also completely extraordinary. You’re the luckiest man in the world to get to do this with him. So pull yourself together and stop worrying about where he came from and what he is, because none of that is important: what’s important is where he is now, which is here, with you.

Sherlock reaches out. John watches him struggle, push through, and manage, this time, to lay four fingers on John’s shoulder.

‘You’re amazing,’ John tells him, meaning it more than he knows how to get across. The feeling of Sherlock’s fingers against his skin is breathtaking in its normalcy: they were always going to find their way there eventually. They belong there. He is naked with tentacles growing out of his palms and about to have sex – again – with an after whose body is nothing John ever imagined or wanted, and he feels entirely, peacefully, at home.
Chapter 19

With Sherlock naked now, John decides that it’s time to move this to a bed, and opts for Sherlock’s, since it’s nearer. Sherlock removes John’s shirt, which John thinks seems a little late at this stage, but then Sherlock says, ‘It’s not for your benefit, I find your body visually stimulating,’ and John no longer has any desire to argue.

Sherlock spreads unashamedly out on his bed, limbs sprawling and content, and John takes a moment to enjoy the sight before crouching over him and stroking the fingers of one hand from his shoulder down to his side. John doesn’t, however, touch the little white line, running a finger around it instead. He makes an identical movement with his other hand, the touch undoubtedly frustratingly light.

‘Touch me properly,’ Sherlock says. His tone is more imperious than desperate, but John plans to change that. Time to see what he can do with his temporary handchip additions.

Controlling the tentacles is almost alarmingly easy; they obey his instincts as easily as his hands do. He makes them snake one way then another, and then down towards Sherlock’s sides. He brushes the two white lines simultaneously, and Sherlock gasps and arches.

‘John –’ Sherlock says, and John moves one hand to rest a finger on Sherlock’s lips, mirroring what Sherlock did to him just the other week, though it feels like much longer ago than that. Even then, Sherlock was touching him, and John can’t believe that it took him this long to realise that, realise that it was all possible, everything that he and Sherlock want from each other will come with time.

John decides that he likes this, being free to move his hands wherever he likes while the tentacles extending from them reach out to explore elsewhere. So while his hand caresses Sherlock’s face, the tentacle reaches back towards the line and begins to rub at it. The other does the same on Sherlock’s other side, and as John watches both slits begin to open up.

He runs the tentacles very gently along the ridges around the sides of the emerging holes, and Sherlock’s legs kick into the mattress. He lets each tentacle poke in deeper, pressing into the little gaps, worming their way into the space and filling it up completely, then starting up a rhythm of pulling out and pushing back in again.

Sherlock’s head has twisted to the side and is pressing into the pillow, his stream of muffled noises just audible. John pulls his fingers through Sherlock’s hair, and brings his other hand down to stroke the back of his neck. He’s going to stimulate Sherlock everywhere, overwhelm him
John leaves him to it and does as Sherlock wants, heading upstairs before deleting the handchip app and watching the tentacles slide back into his palm. He gets dressed again, and then decides to
occupy his time by taking care of a couple of basic household tasks that he still hasn’t got around to in all the hectic brilliance of life with Sherlock. He starts off by connecting a few more of the kitchen appliances to his handchip, to enable making one or two basic meals remotely. Then he sets up an automated online order system so they won’t need to go shopping – the flat came with a certain number of supplies which have lasted them till now, particularly as they’ve been eating out quite a bit while on cases, but they’re almost out. He’ll have to take Sherlock shopping at least once to show him what it’s like, a task he is very much not looking forward to, but for their last two weeks they can rely on deliveries.

_Last two weeks._ John frowns, decides not to think about it, and moves onto his next task. This involves going round his room and tagging any belongings he has a tendency to lose with his handchip, so that if he does mislay them the handchip can locate them for him. He’s about three quarters of the way through when Sherlock yells from downstairs, ‘John, my distraction levels are getting too low, come down.’

John giggles slightly to himself, rolls his eyes, and makes his way downstairs. Sherlock is ridiculous. _John_ is ridiculous for liking him and his ridiculousness quite so much.

When John gets downstairs, the big display screen is showing a conversation between Sherlock and Jim. John takes a moment to read it, ignoring Sherlock’s folded arms and radiating air of conviction that John should be paying attention to _him_. Ignoring Sherlock is particularly difficult, since Sherlock is still naked, but John feels it’s good for him to be ignored occasionally.

_SHERLOCK_: _Hi Jim, do you mind if we have a quick chat? I’d like to ask a few more questions._

_JIM_: _No problem at all._

_SHERLOCK_: _Good. First of all, then, what’s your view on gender?_

_JIM_: _What about it?_

_SHERLOCK_: _Do you feel you understand it?_

_JIM_: _I guess?_

_SHERLOCK_: _I ask because most new afloats, myself included, don’t arrive with an understanding of_
the concept. We usually know two types of pronoun, and use them randomly. But you appeared able to use them correctly from the beginning.

JIM: That’s really weird. I guess the memory loss makes people forget how gender works or something? I mean, it’s strange that that should always be one of the things to go, but...I dunno. I can’t think what else it could be.

SHERLOCK: Hm. All right. Next, about your bosses and their plan. Surely they sent one or two people back first, before sending hundreds, to make sure that it was safe and that the travellers would return?

JIM: Of course they did. We had five trials involving ten people each. They reappeared without a problem, but none of them had managed to find out what caused the lack of records. They said everything seemed normal. So we went ahead with the plan, and then...

SHERLOCK: Yes, the lack of records. There’s nothing at all for this period? No surviving artwork, no architecture, sculptures, documents – anything?

JIM: It’s hard for me to answer that without explaining more than you should really know about the future. Art and architecture isn’t...we wouldn’t expect...we lost a lot in the war.

SHERLOCK: The Gliesans invaded?

JIM: I can’t talk about this.

SHERLOCK: From what John’s said about Gliesan methods and motives, if they’d invaded and won they’d have wiped out the human race. If they let it survive and chose to rule it, I doubt a mission like yours would be allowed to go ahead; there’d be too much risk of your using the time travel to try and change history and rewrite the invasion. So that’s not it. Let’s see... earth is gradually moving in the direction of being uninhabitable for humans. That’s what this war’s about, yes? There’s only one habitable planet within particle transit range, called Nova, and both sides want it for themselves to relocate to when they destroy their own planets. So – ah. Yes. That’s it, isn’t it? The afters are human, and we’re from the future, but we’re not exactly from earth’s future, are we? We won the war, and you’re from Nova. That’s why your records are so limited; you only had what you could bring with you.

JIM: I’m really sorry but I can’t say –
SHERLOCK: You don’t need to. It’s all fairly obvious. So, you were in the future, on Nova, with missing records, and didn’t know why the records of those particular years had failed to be brought along. Surely there was something more efficient you could do than randomly scattering people throughout the undocumented years?

JIM: There were a thousand discussions about it. I’m not important or anything, it’s not like I was in any of those meetings. I don’t know why they decided on this plan in the end, but...yeah.

SHERLOCK: What about sex?

JIM: Er –

SHERLOCK: Please don’t waste my time with embarrassment. You know perfectly well what I’m referring to. Why are our focus points for sexual stimulation entirely different from befores’?

JIM: Oh, that. Look, you know way too much already, and I’m really really not supposed to tell you about the future, they’ll kill me.

SHERLOCK: They’re not going to do anything to you ever again, good or bad, if you don’t get back. And I’m your best chance at working out how – if you give me the information I need to do so.

JIM: I don’t know...

SHERLOCK: I’ll be able to work it out anyway. Your telling me will simply save time. And why continue to mindlessly follow a plan that’s obviously gone entirely to pieces?

JIM: I...I suppose. OK. Um. Yeah, I’d forgotten, but I guess this time period's still pre genetic reconfiguration. Over the last hundred years or so we’ve been rewriting our bodies to make sex without reproduction the norm. ‘Afters’, as you’re calling us, can’t get pregnant by accident; I dunno if you’ve had sex since you lost your memory, but I imagine you won’t have produced any, um, you know...stuff. You’ll have produced liquid, of course, but that’s just...well, I’m not a scientist, I don’t really know what it is, but it’s some sort of side effect. It’s not genetic material. If you want to produce, um, that, then you have to go to a doctor and have them do something to your insides, I dunno what really, but it sort of...switches you on. It’s the same for egg production.. And you can get it all turned off again afterwards.
SHERLOCK: I see. And do you know what accounts for our difficulties in touching people, particularly their faces, but any touch that’s considered ‘inappropriate’? The first people to appear didn’t have it, only the later ones. Our language skills also improved over time.

JIM: No, I...I have no idea, I’m sorry. The only thing I can think is that people have been going...somewhere else, first, before they get here. I don’t know where. But somewhere and stuff happens to them there and then there memories get wiped. I don’t know, maybe that doesn’t make sense, but I just have no idea what else...anyway, I’m sorry, I haven’t been very helpful.

SHERLOCK: Goodbye.

‘Sherlock!’ John says. ‘You should have thanked him.’

‘John,’ Sherlock says, and John finally turns to look at him and is greeted with a searing glare.

John gives Sherlock his sweetest smile. ‘Can I help you?’ he says.

‘You’re supposed to be touching me,’ Sherlock says.

‘You could just have a wank, you know,’ John points out.

‘That would hardly be the same,’ Sherlock says. It occurs to John that here’s another very good reason for E.L.I.s not to have sex with their students: he’s entirely spoiled Sherlock for solo sex by introducing him to alternatives so early on.

‘Oh, not the guilt again,’ Sherlock says, reading John’s expression effortlessly. ‘For – fine, if you’re so worried.’ And without any more warning than that, he brings his hand down to his body and begins to stroke the now closed-up line on his left.

John stares as Sherlock rubs harder, then drags his thumb nail over it and gasps as he does. John can feel himself starting, very slowly, to get hard again in response to what he’s seeing. ‘Keep going,’ he says.
‘Ah, you like this,’ Sherlock says, not his best deduction ever, but then it’s perhaps understandable that he’s a bit distracted when his little finger’s now slipping inside him. ‘I – ah – so do I, although still rather it was you.’ He’s breathing very heavily now as he works two more fingers into the still narrow opening, stretching it. It widens a little further as he does.

‘You must be desperate,’ John marvels. ‘You’ve been waiting all this time. You must be gagging for it.’

Sherlock doesn’t answer, just works harder at the hole. It’s fully open now, and Sherlock manages to force his last finger into it, and then the tip of his thumb, stretching it in a way John never dared to try. Sherlock appears to be enjoying it, though, from the way he’s flushed and staring, his body trying, apparently of its own accord, to twist and get the fingers deeper.

John comes to kneel at his other side. ‘You should come this time,’ he says. ‘You need to sleep, and it’ll help.’

Sherlock manages a nod as he pushes his fingers slightly deeper into himself and then twists them, his lips parting as he does. And John chooses that moment to lean forward and lick firmly across the line on Sherlock’s right.

Sherlock makes a sound almost like a wail, though lower-pitched, and tips his head back even further, working his fingers faster, pulling them out and thrusting them back in with a slight twisting motion each time. The right hand slit is opening rapidly, and John pushes his tongue into it and licks deep inside, strange and filthy and entirely lacking in finesse, but he doesn’t think finesse is what Sherlock needs right now.

Sherlock produces a garbled syllable that might be John’s name, and John reaches for Sherlock’s free hand and grips it tight. The right hand slit is tightening slightly around John’s tongue, a sign he now recognises as meaning Sherlock’s close. But then Sherlock makes that almost-wailing sound again, and John feels the hand enclosed in his curl into a tight fist. A moment later, Sherlock’s other hand stills, and he pulls it from the left slit.

Later, John will think about how this was interesting, remember how the right hand slit seemed almost on the verge of finishing and appeared almost to wait for the left hand slit to close up first. Now, though, he thinks of nothing but fucking Sherlock with his tongue, pushing in and out and watching him tremble, already wrung out but still desperate.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says, very softly, and with that John’s mouth is suddenly full of warmth. In the spirit of experiment, he swallows. But the liquid is completely smooth and tasteless, and in any
case most of it is probably smeared around his lips.

‘What colour this time?’ he asks. Sherlock tries to form words, but can’t manage it, so John looks for himself: it’s a sort of pinkish-brown. He wonders what the colour changes signify, and whether Sherlock has any theories. Perhaps Jim knows.

Sherlock makes another attempt at communicating, but the words come out hopelessly slurred. ‘Let’s get you to bed,’ John says.

‘You,’ Sherlock says, gesturing vaguely at John’s crotch, where his now entirely hard again cock is very visibly straining at his trousers.

John smiles, realising that Sherlock’s actually concerned and oddly touched by that fact. ‘I was thinking of lying beside you and finishing myself off,’ he says. ‘Believe me, it won’t take long.’

‘I could – something,’ Sherlock offers, voice still blurry and drifting.

‘Just having you there will be enough,’ John assures him. ‘Come on.’

*

‘John, wake up, Lestrade’s got us access to the morgue.’

Not necessarily what John wants to hear when he’s half-asleep at six in the morning. But he drags himself out of bed and dresses with slightly sluggish movements, as Sherlock fidgets by the door and says, ‘Hurry up, they want us there before opening hours.’

When they get to the morgue, John exchanges a tired smile with the man who greets them there, who looks just as generally unhappy to be up and about as John feels. ‘You’re here to examine Lucy Parr?’ he says, glancing at his handchip.

‘And ask a few questions,’ Sherlock says, striding into the next room without waiting for the mortuary assistant to show them in. The man hurries after him, with the slightly concerned and off-kilter look that John’s come to recognise as the standard response to Sherlock, and John follows.
Parr’s body is on an examination table, Sherlock standing over her and using a handchip magnifier app to look over her closely. ‘How did she die?’ John asks the mortuary assistant. ‘Someone told us food poisoning?’

The assistant nods. ‘Most likely,’ he says. ‘Specifically, the cause of death was botulism, which is to say the botulinum toxin, but odds are it was foodborne.’

‘Clostridium botulinum,’ Sherlock murmurs.

‘Er, yeah,’ the assistant says, as Sherlock peers down Parr’s throat. ‘We don’t know it was foodborne, wounds can get infected with it too, but food that’s been preserved badly is usually what does it.’

John frowns. ‘But people don’t usually die from botulism,’ he says. ‘There’s a single-injection cure, and people normally only die if they don’t make it to hospital, which she did...she wasn’t an after, was she?’ It’s the only thing he can think of: there aren’t as many doctors qualified to treat afters, so diseases that affect them differently from befores can be particularly dangerous for them.

‘No, she was a before,’ the assistant says. ‘But the cure isn’t a hundred per cent effective. It’s rare for it not to take, but it does happen.’

Sherlock’s looking over Parr’s skin now, moving his handchip over a mole on her neck, a small scar on her shoulder, a paper cut on her right index finger, a bruise on her left knee. ‘Has anyone checked her work bag or flat for substances that could have caused it? She was taken ill at work, but I don’t yet know whether she bought lunch nearby or brought it from home.’

‘When someone dies of botulism likely things do normally get tested for the toxin,’ the assistant says. ‘I don’t know if anyone has yet, but the hospital will have logged it and some government scientist’ll get sent out today probably, if they haven’t been already. She was treated at the hospital here. I can find out for you if you want.’

‘Now, preferably,’ Sherlock says. ‘I can see by the upper third of your lab coat that your department head is already in.’

‘How –’ the assistant says.
Sherlock cuts him off. ‘Please, no, it’s evident that dullness comprises about eighty per cent of your being so I suppose you can’t help it, but don’t subject me to it now. Just get the information.’

The man scurries out. John mentally reviews his reasons I really should not be shagging my student list, and adds: when having brilliant sex with him it’s way too easy to forget the fact that he’s a complete and utter dick. ‘Was that actually necessary?’ he says. ‘I’d have thought you’d like showing off, telling him how you worked it out.’

‘He drinks coffee,’ Sherlock says. John blinks. Sherlock frowns, and elaborates, ‘Look around. He’s got a kettle down here, doesn’t always have time for a tea break, except in his case it’s always a coffee break, jar of coffee and no tea. But the stain on the coat is tea.’

‘You can’t possibly tell the di-’

‘I can, and if I couldn’t tell from the sight I could tell from the smell, fact that I could smell it at all means it’s recent, it happened this morning. He doesn’t drink tea, so it was someone else’s, and from the location of the stain the person who spilt it was standing over him when they did. So someone came in here earlier, stood over him while he sat at his desk in the corner, and accidentally spilled tea over his lab coat. He’s got cleaning mist here, but he didn’t clean up the stain even though it would have taken seconds. Why? Well, his chest pocket provides a clue as to that, or rather the business card sticking out of it does. Specifically it’s a data chip business card with information which brings up the company website when touched to a handchip. Only the top of the card was visible, but I could see the end of two lines of writing and they were different colours, indicating that he’s already used one of the links so that it changed colour. There was no tea on the card, so he put it in there after it was spilled. The letters I could see in the first line said *ital*, which considering the context means the word was almost certainly hospital. Then there’s his nametag, which listed his name and his role as Probationary mortuary assistant. There’s the printed file I can see over there with three errors on the first page. And there’s the printed out, scrunched up but still legible letter next to it asking that employees be careful with their lab coats as the hospital doesn’t have an unlimited supply. With all of that, surely it’s obvious what I was trying to do. I thought if anything you’d be pleased.’

‘I...it’s not obvious,’ John says.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says. ‘Well – all right, to summarise: his department head came in to tell him he’d failed his probation, probably said he’d still be on for the rest of the week but then that would be it. Te handed him a selection of business cards for other hospitals and wished him luck. In a particularly petty sort of retaliation, he jogged tem so that te spilled their tea. He probably knew it was lukewarm enough not to hurt him after being carried through the no doubt large number of corridors between the department head’s office and here, and he wanted to pointedly flout a recent
reminder about lab coat care which annoyed him so much he felt the need to scrunch it up.’

‘But you said it yourself, that’ll take them seconds to clean up,’ John says.

‘Yes, of course, he’s an idiot,’ Sherlock says. ‘And I don’t know why I bothered to follow your silly rules and spare his feelings when he’s only losing his job because of his own incompetence. He makes errors all the time, although as far as I can tell he’s been accurate this morning.’

‘Spare his feelings,’ John repeats. ‘What do you-‘

‘Though spite was his initial reaction to failing his probation, the fact that he swallowed his pride enough to actually use one of the business cards suggests he really needs a job. I could have said everything I just told you to him and reminded him of his situation, but I didn’t. I was being nice.’ Sherlock looks sulky. ‘You ought to be impressed.’

‘You told him he was boring and then sent him to talk to the department head who just fired him. To be nice.’

‘He didn’t technically fire him,’ Sherlock says.

‘Not really the –‘

“You like it when I call people boring, particularly if I do so in a way you consider witty, and often those people are boring you as well but you’re too polite to say so, so I provide you with a way out. You also enjoy the fact that I find you less dull than them. In this case, I was also doing it so he’d go away and not ask about my observations of him and get upset, so you should have had amusement and slightly guilty enjoyment and been impressed with my adherence to pointless behavioural rules.”

‘I don’t mean to come across as inconsistent –‘ John starts.

Sherlock waves that away. ‘No, no, it’s my fault, I obviously just missed something. Doesn’t matter, it’s all useful data to have.’
'He was very helpful,’ John points out, ‘and if you’re right he had no reason to be. Calling him boring wasn’t fair. And seeing him as data –’

‘It got rid of him much faster and with much less fuss than anything politer would have,’ Sherlock says. ‘And I don’t see him as data, but I do see everything he does and thinks and says that way. It would be more accurate to say that I regard him as a source of data – mostly uninteresting and irrelevant, but significant inasmuch as he’s provided us with useful information about the case and inadvertently caused a conversation which has suggested some new ideas about you and how you think.’

As happens so often with Sherlock, John is left entirely at a loss. He’s supposed to be trained for this, for explaining human interaction and politeness and all the rest of it, but somehow Sherlock scrambles his thought processes entirely. He wants to make a joke, to say don’t try the nice thing again, you’re rubbish at it, but Sherlock would probably take him at his word, and then John would officially be the worst E.L.I. in history. So he just says, ‘Well, OK, well done for at least thinking about it, and we can work on execution.’

‘Can we,’ Sherlock mutters darkly, and goes back to examining the body.

* 

As it turns out, the government scientist has already been to Parr’s flat and to zcX – unusually fast, normally the bureaucracy takes longer than that – and couldn’t find anything containing clostridium botulinum, its spores or toxins. That doesn’t mean much though, as she could easily have eaten her lunch and then thrown the bag containing it into recycling. Sherlock says he hadn’t expected a lead there, but still looks vaguely put out. ‘How do I know this government worker didn’t bungle it?’ he complains.

‘They said they’d let us look around her flat ourselves,’ John says.

‘Yes, but if the person they sent was an idiot – and the odds seem high – they might easily have unwittingly destroyed useful evidence.’

‘Nothing we can do now,’ John says, and Sherlock sighs, and heads off for the tubes so they can make their way to Assemblance Studios. At least, John assumes that’s where he’s going; as always he doesn’t explain, and doesn’t look back, presumably either assuming John will follow or forgetting his existence entirely.
John prefers to believe the former, though as he limps along after Sherlock it feels slightly difficult to give him the benefit of the doubt. At least until he steps outside, and Sherlock, some paces ahead, suddenly whirls round and says, ‘Your leg. We’re starting now.’

John freezes in place. ‘We’ve got a case to solve,’ he says. ‘Later.’

‘The first bit is the hardest,’ Sherlock says, ignoring him. ‘You need to find the channel. You try and ignore the feeling, don’t you? Push it away. But don’t do that, accept it, feel it, try and work out exactly how it’s affecting your brain. If you can figure out exactly what part of your mind the psychebullet’s affecting, where it’s getting in, you’ll be able to counter it.’

John can imagine few less appealing prospects than this one, but he can’t ignore the possibility that this might actually work. Because Sherlock is so often right about so many things. So he hands Sherlock his cane, and even that has his leg feeling weak and shaky under his weight. Then he looks straight ahead, and he takes a step, and for the first time in months he makes himself focus on the feeling in his leg as he does.

When he first tried out his leg after getting out of hospital, he did this, monitored it closely to see how bad the damage was. Once he knew, he stopped paying the pain any attention, determined to push past it as far as he possibly could. His therapist approved of the plan, explaining that since its effects were neurological, brain activity would make a huge difference to its effects.

And she wasn’t wrong: as John focuses, the pain seems to get several times worse. He doesn’t think any sign of it shows on his face, but the idea of taking another step becomes even less appealing. He takes it anyway. The pain isn’t the worst of it, really, it’s the feeling of weakness, the way his leg has started to shake as though it might at any moment give up on the idea of holding him altogether. But he does as Sherlock suggested and tries to focus on exactly what the feeling is, where it’s slotting into everything else he’s feeling.

The process goes on for what feels like hours. Sherlock makes him describe out loud every sensation he’s experiencing, the feeling of the ground beneath his feet and the air on his face, the movement of his shirt against his skin as he takes each step, and, yes, the feelings of pain and weakness in his leg, radiating out from the fragments of psychebullet in the upper half. By the end, John is crouched on the ground, outside in the street and burning with shame, unable to get up. It’s never hurt this badly, he’s never immersed himself in the pain for this long.

And yet – beneath the humiliation and the shaking and the now fairly agonising shots of pain rushing through him, there’s a glimmer of something else. Because Sherlock may have had a point: like this, burying himself in it all, John can feel exactly how the psychebullet is achieving its effects. Can feel it pushing at him. And maybe, knowing that, there might be a chance to push back.
Sherlock reaches down and grabs his arm to help him up, and then hands him his cane. John is torn then, because he wants to feel nothing but joy at the way Sherlock’s pushing past his barriers, but he can’t help but hate himself a bit when Sherlock’s done it in a matter of weeks and John’s been failing to push past his own for months. And he’s also uncomfortably aware that the joy he does have about Sherlock’s progress is at least partly to do with the fact that Sherlock’s worked so hard at this because of John, for John. He’d be much less happy, he suspects, in the sight of Sherlock’s hands on anyone else’s body.

All he says, though, is: ‘Thank you, that was – I see what you mean.’

‘You think it could work?’ Sherlock says, and he looks so hopeful all of a sudden.

‘Maybe,’ John says, cautiously. ‘I think there’s at least a chance.’ His leg is still throbbing, and his body feels heavy against the cane. But he reaches, mentally, for the place in his brain where the feeling’s worming its way in, and tries an experimental push. The pain twists, becomes sharper and more erratic. John honestly isn’t sure whether it’s better or worse, but it’s different, and with that expression on Sherlock’s face he’s prepared to regard that as a good sign.

‘Good,’ Sherlock says. ‘Assemblance Studios?’

‘Yeah,’ John says, gripping tighter onto his cane. ‘Right, yeah, let’s go.’
Georgia Burnwell, C.E.O. of Assemblance Studios, turns out to be expecting John and Sherlock – John makes a mental note to thank Lestrade for smoothing their way yet again – and invites them into her office as soon as they arrive.

John isn’t quite sure what to expect from her. When they spoke to Holder and Stevenson, they did so to get information, but Burnwell must suspect that her most likely role in the case is as a murder suspect. She doesn’t, however, mention this fact, or raise any objection. She remains polite and detached, giving every impression of being as helpful as possible, and John can’t tell whether his feeling that she’s keeping something back is justified or not.

‘I never met her, but I knew of her,’ Burnwell says. ‘I’ve seen some of her work; she was brilliant at her job. Given half the chance I’d have headhunted her away, but she never would’ve come. I asked a couple of people whose business it is to know this sort of thing, and everyone agreed that she was happy at zcX, and loyal, and wouldn’t be particularly swayed by promises of more money. Fewer hours definitely wouldn’t have done it; she liked her work better than anything, supposedly. But, as I say, that’s all hearsay. I didn’t actually know her. I’m not entirely sure what use I can be to you.’ And she looks hard at them, as if daring them to admit why they’re really here.

‘Shortly before Parr died, she became convinced that she’d developed a new holographic art and animation technique,’ Sherlock says. ‘Sent it off to the patent office, but her request for a patent was rejected.’

‘I see,’ Burnwell says. Her eyes remain fixed on Sherlock, her entire face still and giving nothing away. ‘Always sad, of course, that’s happened to us once before.’

‘Us?’ John asks.

‘Mm. We have a policy at Assemblance that if our animators or anyone else working for us want to patent a new idea, we get the patent for the company, not the individual. I’ve actually been talking to the board of directors for well over a year now about changing that, I think it discourages innovation. Artists can be quite possessive and they aren’t going to go out of their way to make something new if they don’t get to call it theirs.’
'Parr wasn’t sad about her patent being rejected,’ Sherlock says, studying Burnwell’s face.

‘Surprises me –’ Burnwell starts.

‘She was furious,’ Sherlock interrupts. ‘She thought her files had been tampered with.’

Burnwell merely gently raises her eyebrows. ‘Why on earth should anybody have done that?’ she says.

‘That very much depends on the nature of her work,’ Sherlock says, ‘something which I intend to find out much more about. Let’s say, though, that her new ideas really were as innovative as she claimed. Let’s say they were innovative in a way with definite financial potential. A rival company might be very disinclined to let a zcX staff member snatch up the patent for something that might make all the difference in which games customers chose to play for the foreseeable future. Particularly if the rival company’s C.E.O. already knew that the staff member in question was loyal and difficult to manipulate and that recruiting them away from zcX would be impossible.’

Burnwell folds her arms. ‘If you’d like to accuse me of something, by all means do so,’ she says. ‘Otherwise leave.’

They haven’t got any evidence yet, so whatever the truth is, John reckons their investigation will be better served by placating her for now. Besides which one particularly frosty officer during the earliest days of his army training left him with a definite aversion to that particular tone of coolly furious authority. ‘We’re not accusing you. Sherlock has to look into every possibility.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, ‘I do, and –’

‘Sherlock,’ John says. ‘She’s been very helpful, and –’

‘Te,’ Burnwell says.

John frowns. ‘Sorry, what do you - ?’
'You said she. I assume you were attempting to refer to me?'

The realisation hits John. ‘Oh. Oh, God, I’m so sorry, um –‘

‘You can stop flailing,’ she – te – says. ‘You’re not the first person in the world to make an ill- thought-out assumption. You’re not the hundredth.’

John winces. ‘Sorry,’ he says again.

Sherlock looks interested. ‘John read you as female based on your presentation, as he does, and as he’s insisted I do too,’ he says. ‘Holographic panels on your shoulders, earrings, velvet leggings, and of course the name Georgia.’

‘Gender and afters. God save me,’ Burnwell says. Te glances at John. ‘You’re his E.L.I.?’

‘I was going to get on to presentation and identity and everything,’ John says, knowing how defensive he sounds. ‘But I mean...in most people those things do match, and it’s so complicated for afters...’

‘And for some befores, evidently,’ Burnwell says. ‘Never mind. Was there anything else you wanted?’

‘Not for now,’ Sherlock says, unfolding from his chair. And then, in a way that’s clearly deliberately ominous: ‘See you soon.’

*

Next stop is back to zcX, where they visit the very basic office canteen and a whole series of local shops in a vain attempt to try and find out whether Parr bought lunch at work, bought it nearby, or brought it in with her. Eventually, at the point where Sherlock looks like he may be about to murder someone himself, one of the animators pipes up that Parr always brought in her own lunch. He can’t, however, remember what she had.

‘Usually a sandwich, I think,’ Stevenson says. ‘What’s going on? You don’t think she was...I
mean, she can’t have been...surely this isn’t about poison or something, is it? I mean, I know that’s ridiculous, but it’s just you said you were investigating her death and – yeah.’

‘Why shouldn’t she have been poisoned?’ Sherlock asks.

‘But I thought it was...food poisoning, er, botulism? Something like that.’

‘It was, but there’s no reason to assume it came about by happenstance. Someone could have introduced the toxin into her food. Ingenious, actually – no one would be able to tell that it hadn’t been produced naturally. Very clever murderer.’

Stevenson looks horrified – whether at the idea of Parr being murdered or at Sherlock’s glee John isn’t sure. ‘Why would anyone do that?’ he says.

‘A new animation technique sufficiently different to deserve a patent,’ Sherlock says. ‘How significant would that have been?’

‘Oh, hugely,’ Stevenson says. ‘Companies live and die on how well their technology keeps up. People want something new, they want cutting edge artwork, they’re only going to go to the ludus for the games that feel more real than any of the others. But...if you mean Lucy, then...she didn’t get a patent for her work.’

‘Exactly,’ Sherlock says, and performs another dramatic exit, with John as usual just trying to keep up.

*

Lucy Parr’s flat is a few tube segments away from zcX. It’s big and full of holographic panelling and intricately patterned fittings and cushion covers which John’s sure Parr designed herself and made using the 3D printer that sits in her kitchen.

Somehow, this feels even weirder than visiting Catherine’s flat after she died, perhaps because John never saw this flat while Parr was alive, and so is just faced with the place as she left it, frozen at the last moment she was alive there. Or perhaps it’s because Parr was clearly an exceptionally neat person, everything carefully ordered and filed. There’s very little lying around or cluttering the surfaces, none of the debris you’d expect someone to leave behind.
In theory they’re here to look for substances that might have contained the botulinum toxin, but Sherlock whirls through the house examining anything and everything, things that to John seem entirely unconnected, though he trusts that Sherlock’s seeing more. He sniffs Parr’s shampoo, peers behind the blinds in her bedroom, throws himself bodily onto the floor to look at the dust under her bed with his magnifier app, picks up a hair from her pillow with tweezers produced magically from his pocket and examines it minutely. John follows him from room to room, fascinated and bewildered, vaguely turned on and feeling slightly guilty about that fact.

They do also search the fridge, the freezer, the bins and the cupboards, and pack up a half open tin of tomatoes (carefully resealed), a packed of smoked fish, and some cold meat to take away for testing. Some of the meat, John notices with a slight rush of shock, is marked with the heart logo that indicates it came from an actual animal, as opposed to being grown in a lab. While John’s aware that some people claim that the taste is superior, he’s only ever met one or two people that were actually willing to go as far as to eat dead animals. Having personally killed beings as fully complex and intelligent as humans, John doesn’t think he can really judge, though the Gliesans were shooting right back at him, and the thought of killing something defenceless is one he shies away from.

He mentions all this to Sherlock, just in case Parr’s animal-eating tendencies are relevant – it seems pretty unlikely, but it’s maybe just about possible that someone she knew was violently opposed to the idea and killed her for it. The chances of that seem pretty slight, though. And there’s a much more likely idea that John’s been worrying about since they saw the body. ‘Sherlock,’ he says, ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you...we’re assuming this is murder, but all we actually know is that a bomber sent you a picture of a hummingbird.’

‘I told you, I solve crimes, the chances are high that the puzzle our friend sent me is a crime, and when someone’s died, murder is the obvious crime to look for. I’m not ruling out other options, but this seems a sensible one to start with.’

‘Right,’ John presses. ‘But maybe there isn’t a puzzle at all. Maybe they’re just fucking with you.’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘The hummingbird, John. Stevenson was startled when he saw it, you could see that, couldn’t you? It was much more remarkable work than he’d expected, and yet he’d seen the samples Parr got back from the patent office. Something definitely happened there, and our bomber knows about it, which means they were probably involved in whatever funny business took place from the start.’

‘So you think...what? Someone planned a crime and then...decided to message a detective about it?’
‘I think our bomber planned the crime, but on somebody else’s behalf, for a fee. Only a theory at this stage, have to keep an open mind.’

‘But that still doesn’t explain why they’d deliberately get you involved.’

‘Boredom,’ Sherlock says. ‘You cannot imagine what it’s like, how repetitive all the minds around you get if you’re brilliant – which the bomber is, I have no doubt. Just an exhausting stream of utterly uninteresting information coming in from every side. And then you see a chance to engage with a mind as swift and polished as your own...’

‘Oh,’ John says. Sherlock looks at him, and must read the expression on John’s face, but doesn’t offer any reassurance. John tries to stop thinking about how Sherlock might see him and his repetitive little mind, and pushes his face back into motionlessness. ‘Where now?’ he asks.

Sherlock doesn’t answer him. He’s staring straight past John, and when John turns to follow his gaze, he appears to be looking at a small silver ball resting on the desk in the corner. ‘Do you know what that is?’ he asks John.

‘Probably a map key,’ John says. ‘Handchips can beam a map out that’s visible only to you and lay it over your surroundings, and give you directions, but map keys go a step further. You can use them to effectively...zoom out from the world around you and turn it into a map. It’s hard to explain. I’ve only used them a couple of times, you just drop them on the ground in front of you and they do it. You see people on the street looking really spaced out sometimes, and it’s quite often because they’re using one. I can see how they’re helpful, but I find them too weird, personally. Is it...related to the case somehow?’

‘Probably not,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s just interesting that she left it lying out on the desk when she kept almost everything else away out of sight.’ He walks over and picks it up.

‘It won’t work for us,’ John says. ‘At least, usually there’s a code you have to enter, and if you don’t it just shows you the map from the last time it was used.’

‘Ah,’ Sherlock says. ‘So we’ll find out the last time she went somewhere unfamiliar. That could be useful.’ He picks up the sphere, and drops it on the ground.

Using map keys normally makes John a bit dizzy, almost queasy, the sensation of rushing backwards from your surroundings, seeing them whoosh past you and shrink. He braces himself in
case he’s wrong about the code and that happens, but no: a box appears in the air asking them to write in the code. Sherlock traces something across it with his finger, but after three tries not getting it, he gives up. ‘More help to us locked anyway, I suspect,’ he says, and they let the box sit there for a minute or so till the last map Parr brought up flicks on and surrounds them, blocking out the room entirely.

There’s directions marked on the map – from zeX to a street in Kingston called Clevedon Road. Sherlock presses his finger to the destination and swirls it slowly.

‘What are you doing?’ John asks.

‘Answering your question from earlier,’ Sherlock says. ‘That’s where we’re going now.’

*

The address turns out to be a highly luxurious looking block of flats. Sherlock turns to the buzzer plate, and says, ‘Ah.’

‘What is it?’ John asks.

Sherlock points to the name attached to the buzzer for the top two floors, the penthouse flat, and John reads: Alexander Holder.

‘She went to his flat,’ John says, surprised. ‘Huh.’

Sherlock smiles. ‘Let’s see what he has to say, shall we?’ he says, and presses the buzzer.

*

‘Come in, come in,’ Holder says, looking slightly flustered. ‘Er – I’m sorry, I’m not in the office today, I have Fridays off. Was there something you needed?’

Sherlock walks straight past him and into the flat. John stands outside the flat feeling slightly
awkward.

‘Nice place,’ they hear Sherlock say from inside, voiced laced with something John can’t quite identify. ‘zcX must be doing well. Important for you to stay on top of the competition, I imagine. New art techniques and so on. And of course, for you to stay in your position, your reputation would have to be spotless. People must be fighting for your job. Must be a battle to keep it.’

‘Uh, well, I think I do it well, personally,’ Holder says, with a small laugh, stepping into the flat. John follows.

Sherlock’s sitting on one of the large sofas in the entrance hall, legs stretched out, reclining comfortably. ‘Smells nice,’ he says. ‘Are you partnered, Mr. Holder? No, don’t bother to answer that, your lack of partnership ring and the size of the pots and pans I can see hanging up in your kitchen – helpful, having everything in one big room like this, though I expect Parr thought it all a bit 21st century, when she was here. She was here, wasn’t she? I can still smell the women’s shampoo, the exact same scent as the one she used, and here –’ He picks up a hair from the arm of the sofa between his fingers. ‘This is hardly yours is it? Identical to hers. Must have been a couple of days ago that she came, but you’ve been here so little since that the evidence has lingered. Obliging of you. But I suppose you were rather busy, weren’t you?’

‘Mr. Holmes –’ Holder says.

‘No, hold on, I’m just getting started,’ Sherlock says, springing up from the sofa. He starts moving rapidly through the flat, motions fluid. ‘In she came,’ he says, touching the door handle. ‘She was angry, shoved the door open with her hand and, yes, look –’ He reaches down and picks up a brightly coloured object. John peers closer, and sees some sort of complicated pattern on what looks like it might be a – ‘broken nail tip, and an elaborately painted one. Very few people would be capable of that kind of work, and it’s just like the artwork in her house.’

‘You can’t know –’ Holder says.

‘I understand aesthetics, believe me, I will happily send you every study I’ve found on afters and aesthetic sense, now, where was I – yes, in came Lucy Parr, in a towering rage, slammed the door behind her –’ Sherlock glances in the direction of the nearest wall; John follows his gaze and sees a picture lying on the floor beneath a hook. ‘She strode in, sat down on the sofa. Folded her arms too I expect, but that really is conjecture. Unlike the rest which, unfortunately for you, Mr. Holder, is fact.’

‘It’s unfortunate for me that Lucy came to my flat?’ Holder says. ‘Listen –’
‘Oh, good, you admit it, that’ll save us some time. Don’t suppose you’d like to admit why she was so angry with you as well?’

‘I’m not admitting anything,’ Holder says. ‘Get out of my house.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Sherlock says. ‘Come on, John, we’ve got a bomber to contact.’

John hasn’t got a clue what’s going on, but he quite likes the idea of getting to join in with one of Sherlock’s dramatic exits for once. And this one turns out to be a particularly good one: Sherlock lets John go first, not limping at all, and then he turns and actually winks at Holder, with a large, fake, completely terrifying smile, before following John out, coat billowing in his wake, and shutting the door in Holder’s outraged face.

Once they're outside the block of flats, John says, 'Well, you certainly enjoyed yourself in there. Fancy telling me what's going on?'

‘He murdered Lucy Parr,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or paid someone else to do so, possibly. Remember what Burnwell said about their company? Assemblance gets all the patents for any idea invented by a staff member while they’re working there. Well, zcX doesn’t have any such policy. When Holder heard that Parr was going to apply for a patent – and by all accounts she bragged about doing so – he panicked. For such an innovative technique to belong to one person who would then be fought over by any number of rival companies? Disaster. So he looked for someone to help him and found them.’

‘The bomber.’

‘Bomber and consulting criminal. A person of many talents, evidently. They helped Holder replace Parr’s submission with superficially similar but less innovative animation. It was only a temporary measure – I broke into Holder’s office while you were talking to zcX staff about what Parr had for lunch and managed to get into his computer. He was in the middle of instituting a change in policy, bringing zcX’s stance on patents in line with Assemblance’s. Once the change came into effect, he’d have sympathised with Parr and encouraged her to resubmit. I also, incidentally, found evidence that zcX has had drops in sales recently; no wonder he was desperate enough to try forgery. But Parr figured out what had happened and came storming round accusing him. He’d have gone into criminal rehabilitation if she managed to prove it, and he’d never have worked in the industry again, let alone as a C.E.O. He panicked. And so, I imagine, he got in touch with the bomber again, and the bomber provided him with a petri dish and told him what to do with it.’
'Right,' John says. ‘But – I mean, have you got proof?’

‘It’s the only way it could have happened,’ Sherlock says, confidently. ‘There’s no other explanation that fits the facts.’

‘OK, I can believe that, but the police –’

‘Never mind them, we just need to tell the bomber we’ve solved their puzzle,’ Sherlock says. He’s tapping into his handchip as he talks, and a moment later he flips it onto public and John reads the new entry in his otherwise blank social profile off the back of his hand:

**Subject:** Puzzle solution

**Who:** Alexander Holder

**What:** Murder of Lucy Parr

**Why:** Forged patent submission cover up

He stands back and rocks on his heels, looking pleased with himself.

‘OK,’ John says, slowly. ‘Fine. But – you’re still going to keep looking for evidence, right? I mean…she deserves justice. And it’s not like you to leave a case half-unsolved.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Sherlock says, flapping a hand. ‘But I wanted to get the solution in first.’

‘Just in case the bomber loses patience and blows something else up?’ John asks.

‘I doubt they’d do that. It’s about the game for them. No, because there were three pips. I didn’t understand why, at first but there’s really only one likely explanation.’

‘Which is –’

‘It’s a *countdown,*’ Sherlock says.
'You mean – he’s going to do this again? Threaten explosions unless you solve a crime?’ John feels slightly sick.

‘Twice more, I should think, and then I expect the game will change,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or he might come up with a different threat next time. Keep things interesting.’ John looks at him. His eyes are bright, and there’s tension all through his body, the corners of his mouth slightly turned up in a far more genuine smile than the wide one he aimed at Holder.

‘You’re enjoying this,’ John says.

‘You already noted that, of course I am, decent cases are so rare and now they’re being delivered straight to me, what’s not to like?’

‘People could die,’ John says.

‘They won’t, not if I solve everything, which I will.’

The slightly sick feeling in John’s stomach intensifies. He thinks of Harry at nineteen, heels kicked up over the arm of the sofa in the glaring artificial sunlight of the underground flat, eyes blazing. He swallows, and says, ‘So you – you submitted your solution for this case as fast as possible so that the bomber’ll send you the next one.’

‘Two cases at once,’ Sherlock says, starry-eyed. ‘Two complex murders committed by a genuinely brilliant mind. The stimulation will be like nothing I’ve had since I got here.’

Maybe Sherlock just hasn’t thought this through. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to focus on one at a time?’ John says. ‘I mean, For the people. The people who are depending on you to solve this so they don’t get blown up, wouldn’t it be better if you used the time the bomber gave you and devoted your full attention to solving one case before moving on?’

‘I don’t need to do that, why bore myself for no reason when I could be firing every synapse in my brain?’ Sherlock retorts. ‘I never get to do that, I feel the edges of it stagnating constantly. I had three days for this one, I didn’t need that, did I? I can keep my brain from rotting and save them.’
‘You can’t bet people’s lives on that.’

‘Why not? People bet each other’s lives all the time, in small ways. Every time they cook for each other, have sex with a stranger –’

‘Those risks are tiny.’

‘So’s this one. I will solve the cases, I always do.’

John can feel the anger coiling through him. He’s always aware of it sitting still at his core, but now it’s on the move, bubbling up through his body and this is the time when he’d normally leave, get some air, do anything other than let it out, but this callousness terrifies him, reminds him of all the things about Sherlock he doesn’t know, and he has to say something –

Sherlock’s handchip beeps, and they both look down at it.

Nice try, Sherlock. Without proof, all you’ve got is a theory, and that does not a puzzle solution make. Poor effort, 3/10, but I told you I was feeling generous, and I’m going to give you one more chance to do it properly. Going to have to cut your time for cheating, though. Since we’ve got this nice pattern of threes going, how about three hours? After that, well...I’m a day late for the 5th of November, but I’m sure I could manage a few belated fireworks, just for you.

John sucks in a breath, and looks at Sherlock. His face is blank and pale, and the tension in his limbs has ratcheted up another notch. He doesn’t move, and doesn’t speak, and John decides to take action. However angry he might feel, however alarming Sherlock’s lack of concern for the victims of his new playmate might be, their priorities right now are pretty clear. ‘You’ll figure it out in time,’ John promises him. ‘You must have some ideas about how to prove it. Something you’ve seen, some little detail. Let’s go back to Parr’s flat, or to zcX, and you’ll find it, whatever it is.’

Sherlock nods, but still doesn’t move in any other way. ‘There is something,’ he says, at last. ‘Something about Parr’s flat, I – I can’t –’

‘I could describe to you what I saw,’ John offers. ‘Maybe that would...jolt something in your mind?’
Sherlock says nothing, still staring into space, so John decides to give that a go. He lists furniture, objects, anything he can remember, and then Sherlock suddenly starts into life. ‘Yes, John,’ he says. ‘There was something – might not mean anything but it’s all I’ve got for now – let’s go back to the company headquarters. I want another look at Parr’s desk.’
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I’m so sorry about the long gap between updates!

On the way back to zcX, Sherlock somehow manages to get into the government security footage site. John is slightly shocked, but then he thinks *three hours* and *fireworks* and holds his peace.

‘What are you looking for?’ John asks.

‘Doubt Holder would have involved anyone else if he could help it,’ Sherlock says. ‘If something in Parr’s fridge or cupboard was poisoned – and we don’t have time to wait for the results of the testing anymore – then he must have gone to her flat to do it. Camera footage of him arriving at her house would be – not conclusive, but certainly useful.’

By the time they get to the company, though, Sherlock is fuming and scrolling increasingly rapidly. ‘Nothing,’ he says, sounding disgusted. ‘Could he have slipped it into her lunch when she was at work? Difficult to see how, but we’ll have to ask if he came by the animation offices at all that day.’

In Parr’s office, Sherlock scrutinises her desk closely. ‘What are you looking for?’ John asks.

‘You listed what you saw at Parr’s house,’ Sherlock says, ‘and it didn’t take you long. Partly because of your own rather average observation and memory, but also because there actually wasn’t much there to see. Everything was kept tidied away, in its proper place. Whereas here she left brushes spread out all over her desk.’

‘She might just have liked having them easily accessible when she was working,’ John offers.

‘Ye-es,’ Sherlock says, sounding unconvinced. ‘But I’d have expected her to put them away before she went home. I suppose she was ill, and perhaps rushed off with less than her usual attention to detail.’

John nods, heart sinking. That was what Sherlock rushed out here for? And now he’s standing,
staring at the desk, looking slightly at a loss. Then he starts poking around it, opening drawers and looking in them. John wonders what he’s looking for, if he’s really looking for anything, and, finding the sight depressing, turns to look over at the other animators. Some of them are using brushes, others their fingers; many have a brush in one hand and are using the fingers of their other hand to edit and reshape.

Stevenson’s at his desk, but is glancing over at them from time to time. ‘Did your boss come in here at all yesterday?’ John asks him.

‘Oh, yeah, he did,’ Stevenson says. ‘Had some new character concepts to show Lucy, and his handchip was glitching and refusing to send them so he printed them out.’

Sherlock’s gone very still. Then he looks up and whirls round on his heel. ‘Ah,’ he says.

‘He didn’t...put them in her bag for her or anything?’ John says to Stevenson. ‘Or – I mean, did she have her lunch out on the table?’

‘No,’ Stevenson says, looking slightly puzzled. ‘No, nothing like that. I mean, I guess I might not have seen, I was working, but not as far as I know.’

John stands back, defeated, and then glances over at Sherlock, who’s still got his eyes fixed on Stevenson, and is now smiling broadly. ‘He didn’t need to,’ he says. ‘I expect you were looking at your screen, but did you hear Parr make some sound of pain and Holder apologise?’

‘Yeah,’ Stevenson says. ‘How did you know that?’ He looks amazed, and John feels a little flush of slightly ridiculous pride. Perhaps he was too quick to doubt Sherlock.

Sherlock gestures at the tiny brownish mark on the desk, and at the brushes, still there. ‘Only way it makes sense,’ he says, sounding triumphant. ‘I expect he bought the paper specially. Handed it edge first, a bit too forcefully, sharp paper edge scratched her index finger. He apologised and went off, and, well – the rest was already in place.’ He turns back to John. ‘Parr didn’t leave her brushes like that. I already thought it unlikely, given the state of her home, but looking more closely at the desk just now has made things clearer. There’s brush holders in the top drawer. The material they’re made of is quite rough on the outside, but on the inside it’s completely smooth everywhere except right at the bottom. She pulled her brushes in and out so often she’s worn the surface down, so frequently she didn’t bother to push them right down to the bottom of the tube. So she didn’t keep them spread out when she was working.’
‘So why were they like that?’ John asks.

‘Look round at them all.’ Sherlock’s hand takes in the room and all the animators in an expansive gesture. ‘They alternate between using the brushes and using their fingers, don’t they? So Holder came in early that morning before anyone arrived, and replaced the brush Parr used most often with one infected with the toxin. When she started work, she used the brush on the screen and coated the whole screen with it. Then he cut her finger, and as soon as she used her hands on the screen – well. Botulism, *wound* botulism, not foodborne.’

It sounds horrifyingly devious, and entirely plausible, but –‘What’s that got to do with the brushes being disordered?’

‘Once I’d realised it wasn’t her that disordered them, I had to consider how it happened. The other animators found her intimidating, they wouldn’t have gone near her desk, and if they had borrowed a brush or got the brushes out for some reason they’d have been very sure to tidy them away afterwards. No, whoever disarranged her desk was either in a position of authority, or knew she wasn’t coming back – or both. So I considered the possibility that Holder came in at lunchtime, after Parr left, and got the brushes out of their containers. He wanted to do something with them, something he didn’t want anyone to see, so waited till everyone was out of the room, but was disturbed in his work and had to rush off, leaving them lying around. That theory was strengthened by a fleck of clear nail polish I found stuck to the desk. Parr wore very elaborate and colourful nail polish, whereas Holder wears expensive clear stuff of exactly the type on the brush. So then I was sure: he couldn’t risk anyone finding the contaminated brush, and he didn’t want anyone else to get infected. When everyone was out at lunch he came and switched them back, but in his hurry he knocked them over and didn’t have time to put them back before someone turned up.’

‘That’s – amazing, it is, Sherlock, but –’ John hesitates.

‘I still don’t have proof? I will, though. How does rubbish disposal work? I know people throw things into bins, but how are the contents disposed of – incineration?’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘I mean, normal people just empty their bins by hand, personally I think anything else is a bit stupid and takes way more effort to set up than it saves. But big flash companies like this normally have network incineration. So, bins are made of fireproof material and they all contain incineration devices that’re connected to a network. Every week the network sends out an automated command to incinerate their contents, then someone just comes by and drops a new incineration device into the bottom.’

‘Good,’ Sherlock says. ‘Once a week, and the bins are mostly about half full, so I doubt they’ve been emptied since yesterday.’ He strides for the door, and, outside, heads in the direction Holder’s office, without glancing back at the animators’ baffled faces.
‘Holder’s office?’ John asks.

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says, walking faster. ‘He wouldn’t have risked throwing the contaminated brush into the bin in the animation office, he’d have brought it back here to do it in private.’

So John follows him to Holder’s office, and, once there, Sherlock pulls off the bin lid with a dramatic flourish, drops it beside him and peers into it. ‘There,’ he says, pointing, and John peers in to see a highly corroded brush half buried amongst the rubbish.

‘He poured acid over it to neutralise the toxin,’ Sherlock says. ‘And I expect he’ll have deleted the camera footage that shows him tampering with the brushes. But his fingerprints will likely still be on the other brushes that he handled, and security here is very tight – no one but him would be able to delete CCTV footage. We can build up a reasonable case with all of that, and then – well, I don’t know. You understand people better than I do. The sort of person who’d panic sufficiently about being convicted of fraud to commit murder, and who’d pay someone to devise the method and get hold of the necessary supplies rather than planning it himself – likely to break down under questioning, once he knows how much circumstantial evidence there is?’

‘Yeah,’ John says, hope sparking. ‘We should call Lestrade now. We’re running out of time.’

*

Holder does break, thanks in no small part to Sherlock’s dramatics during questioning. (He strides about, raises his voice, and saves the more damming bits of evidence till the end before producing them with a flourish and a raised eyebrow. It’s remarkably effective, and also sort of hot, although John keeps that bit to himself.)

Sherlock posts the proof online, and within a few minutes his handchip beeps.

*I must say I’m very disappointed that you’ve set up these safeguards. Having messages come out of your body was much more fun. Spoilsport.*

*Anyway, despite your not playing along properly, I am impressed with how fast you managed to get that evidence. Funny what you can do when you’re motivated, isn’t it? And I did enjoy watching you rush about.*
Why don’t you have a little break before our next game? I’m sure there are things – and people – you’d like to do. And I don’t mind letting you indulge your weaknesses for a while. I know you’ll come running back to me as soon as I tell you to.

John, reading Sherlock’s palm over his shoulder, frowns at this. For one thing, apparently Sherlock was right, and the bomber is planning another horrible game with him. And for another – ‘People you’d like to do,’ he reads aloud. ‘Do you think that whoever it is – knows? Um. About us.’

‘Probably,’ Sherlock says, sounding so unconcerned John wants to shake him.

‘That doesn’t worry you?’ John says, going back to his own seat in the tube car. ‘If headquarters finds out we’ll be separated, and I’ll be fired.’

An expression John can’t quite place flits across Sherlock’s face. There’s a strange pause, and then Sherlock says, ‘Yes, I suppose so. I hadn’t – yes. Perhaps there’s some cause for concern. But on the whole I still find this message encouraging. Te’s underestimating me.’

‘How?’ John asks.

‘Giving me this break. Assuming that I’ll be upset, or tired, that I’ll use the time to rest, and not to try and find tem.’

‘Ah,’ John says, smiling. ‘Yeah, that was stupid of them. Apparently they don’t know you as well as they think.’ A choice of wording that makes him want to wince a little, because he’s spent some of today thinking that he doesn’t know Sherlock as well as he’d started to hope he did.

His own handchip beeps before Sherlock can reply, and he looks down. It’s from Mary:

*Are you guys all right? Would like to know what’s going on! No pressure though if you’re busy, but otherwise could I maybe come over for a bit at some point?*

Yeah, John messages back. *It’s been...full on. Kind of hard to believe. We’re on our way home now, come over any time this evening.*
Sherlock probably won’t like it, would likely prefer John to be at his beck and call while he researches the mystery bomber and tries to get a lead on their identity. But John could really do with spending a bit of time with someone who isn’t Sherlock. He’s feeling increasingly disturbed and isn’t entirely sure why, Sherlock’s callousness earlier can only account for part of it. There’s so much he doesn’t know, that Sherlock doesn’t know, and trying to figure it out while stopping people from being killed isn’t ideal. This isn’t the sort of danger he’s used to dealing with, and he’s starting to feel pretty out of his depth.

*

“Full on” really didn’t cover it, you know,’ Mary says.

‘In fairness,’ John points out, ‘I’m not sure there really is a standard English expression for describing a day involving a deadly battle of wits with a lunatic bomber.’

‘Christ,’ Mary says. ‘Fucking hell.’

John grins at her, and she grins back, though still looks slightly stunned. It’s a relief to talk to someone who’s prepared to stop and gape at how bizarre all this is, and who’s as afraid for the possible victims as John is. They talk about it for a while, going over the details repeatedly, while Sherlock sits curled in the corner of the sofa jabbing at his handchip and muttering to himself, presumably trying to track the bomber.

‘This stuff is amazing,’ Mary says. ‘I mean, awful, but wow. One hell of a story. You should write it up on your social profile. Not just this, but everything you told me the other day, all the cases you’ve been solving. The maintenance worker’s thumb, and the blue lichen, and Beryl the Coronet...’

‘Don’t encourage him to do that,’ Sherlock says, looking up and making a face. ‘He’ll never be able to stay focused on the proper scientific methods of deduction, he’ll romanticise it all dreadfully.’

‘Oh, yeah, you’d better,’ Mary says to John. ‘I want swooning, and treasure maps with riddles, and tragically torn apart lovers.’

‘I don’t know what sort of awful cultural legacy you’re referencing, and please don’t tell me,’
Sherlock says, and turns his attention back to his handchip.

John snorts, and changes the subject. ‘Are you really learning Gliesan?’ he asks Mary. ‘Sherlock mentioned it when he, um, deduced you, but I haven’t had a chance to ask about it. That’s kind of amazing.’

‘Well, don’t be too amazed, it’s going slowly as fuck,’ Mary says. ‘Like, the whole first month was just learning what’s available to learn, and how you go about doing it – because no one’s ever been to Gliese 581g, right, so we don’t actually know how normal people use language there, just how the ambassadors do. And what *they* do is dip their paintbrush fingers in pots of ink they carry around with them and write on paper, then hand it to our translators. Our ambassadors have asked them lots of questions about how language works and they’ve taught each other a fair bit, but I imagine the lessons a bit strained when they all go on in some grand meeting room that’s nevertheless in the truce zone surrounded on all sides by raging battlespace.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Yeah, I can see that would be...tricky. But you’ve got onto the actual language now?’

‘Yep,’ Mary says, ‘though like I said, I’m not making that much progress. The symbols are all right – understanding that you refer to the Chamber of Laws by sketching the city of laws in silhouette, or that the majority religion of the biggest commune is referred to by depicting a half-erased multicoloured wave, that’s fine. But then the colours and patterns used in that wave tell you what the person thinks of the religion, and a lot of things change completely depending on who’s doing the drawing. For a lot of physical objects they literally just sketch the thing, but the way they do it, the darkness of the colour and the thickness of the line, all changes the meaning. Some of it’s straightforward-ish – the darker the colour the more important the person thinks the thing is, for example – but some of it really isn’t. I guess it’s not that different to tone of voice here, but it matters way more, and the gap between thought and written language just doesn’t operate the same way for them as for us. I am completely in awe of translators now, on both sides.’

‘It does take them years to learn,’ John points out. ‘Our lot, anyway, I guess we don’t know how long it takes the Gliesans. But you must be learning a fair bit about them.’

‘Yeah,’ Mary says. ‘It’s not making me like them any more, I can tell you that. You know they only outlawed slavery planet-wide a hundred years ago? And until about a hundred and fifty years ago they used to use *live insects* as currency. I mean, I’m not saying that’s in the same league as slavery, obviously, but it is...creepy. People used to carry jars of them around instead of wallets, and feed them through holes in the top; they lost most of their value if they died. Dead insects were basically the Gliesan equivalent of pennies.’

‘Seriously?’ John says. ‘What’s that about?’
‘Gonna end up drastically simplifying it, ‘cause of course it’s a whole planet – a lot smaller than earth, but still. So it’s not like they have one overarching philosophy that everyone holds in the same way. But basically their logic is that life is the most precious thing in the world and therefore living things have the most value. Insects are small enough to carry around and easy to look after, but they’re alive, so valuable, so they became standard currency like gold was for us once. That’s why there was such a fuss when the central government of the communes wanted to issue a slavery ban, there was campaigning and fighting about it for like two hundred years or something. Because people had the most value of all, it was like wiping out half the economy. I find it all really disturbing, to be honest; it’s such a...value focused society, I think. You can’t buy people there anymore, but I think people there still grow up knowing how much money they’re worth. It seems pretty fucked up to me.’

‘Well,’ John says, ‘I guess you’re not supposed to like the Gliesans, really, since you have to shoot them sometimes, and basically the aim is to kill enough of them that they can’t try to kill us anymore. It’d be tough to be part of that if you liked them. But understanding them better definitely can’t do any harm. It was easier when I just thought of them as backstabbing traitors, when I thought we found Nova first and they’re just trying to steal it from us. Thinking of them as just...people who are deadly scared about the future, like us, that...was difficult. I don’t know. I still slip into hating them on autopilot sometimes. And it does sound like the way they think about things is, um, different.’

‘Yeah,’ Mary says. ‘It’s fascinating, at any rate. Makes you wonder how they see us.’

Sherlock’s handchip beeps. A moment later, Sherlock says, ‘Ah,’ in a tone of voice that makes John look up. Before he can ask what’s wrong, Sherlock flicks his handchip onto public, and John reads:

*Naughty naughty, Sherlock! I told you to have a rest. All work and no play will make you dull, and then you’ll be no use to me and I’ll have to dispose of you, which would be a terrible waste. And did you really think you could go looking for me without my noticing? Clearly I’m going to have to give you something to do.*

There’s another beep, and two images of pips appear. Sherlock taps one, and it flowers into a picture. John draws in a sharp breath.

The image is a screenshot of the front page of a website: a modern, well-designed one offering an online personal shopping service. Visible in the picture is part of the menu bar and a brief bit of introductory text. Just offscreen, John knows, is the doorway into the virtual tour of the site and its services. He knows this for the same reason he knows the exact fonts used and can probably remember the names of the shades featured in the elegant, understated colour scheme: he saw it
designed, from beginning to end. It’s changed a number of times since then, of course, but the basic formatting remains the same.

‘What is it?’ Mary says, leaning forward. ‘Oh – John – is that Harry’s site?’

‘Yeah,’ John says.

Sherlock looks at him for a moment, then says, ‘I see. Your sister’s profession. I almost had it worked out – it was either this or something in the fashion industry.’

John smiles vaguely at Sherlock’s almost-omniscience, but it’s a feeble attempt, marred by his worry. He says, ‘Harry left school to do a two year business course when she was sixteen. She dropped out of that after a year and went to university to study programming instead. Then two years in she dropped out of that, too, and moved in with me. I was living in this grotty underground flat at the time, about all I could afford on my teaching salary, and she’d sleep on my sofa and drink during the day and in the middle of the night she’d suddenly get up, shake me awake and start babbling about some amazing business idea she’d had. I never took much notice, but after about a year of that she finally set something up. And that screenshot...that’s definitely her website.’

Sherlock touches the second pip, and again the flowering animation occurs. The picture that appears this time is of an open suitcase, in which sits a heap of what look to be data chips.

‘Message Harry,’ Sherlock says. ‘Let her know we’re coming to see her.’

‘Now?’ John says.

The handchip beeps once more, and a message appears:

You have six hours.

‘Now,’ Sherlock says.

*
Harry doesn’t reply to John’s message, or pick up when he calls, neither of which is a good sign. They have little choice but to head over to hers anyway and hope she can at least drag herself off the sofa to let them in. Mary decides to come too, on the offchance that she might be able to help.

John is pleasantly surprised when Harry answers the door and is clearly sober. Admittedly, all that means is that she was ignoring him not because she was already drunk, but because she was just about to start drinking and didn’t want to be disturbed. Still, at least she’ll be able to help them with the case. He stifles a strange pang at the thought of what’s likely to happen as soon as they leave.

‘There’s nothing strange going on with the shop,’ Harry insists. ‘I don’t know why some psycho bomber would’ve sent you a screenshot of it, but everything’s normal.’

Sherlock visibly restrains himself from an acerbic comment; John smiles at him, though he’s undoubtedly more concerned about the risk of her refusing to talk to them if she’s irritated than about her feelings. Instead, he says, ‘Tell me about the shop. What’s the setup?’

‘We sell a whole load of things,’ Harry says. ‘Books, clothes, games and films...what distinguishes it is the personal shopping service. It’s one of the most thorough and extensive ones available,’ she adds, slipping into sales-talk. ‘We have personal shoppers who are trained in their areas of specialism and we offer people who speak sixteen different languages. We have a virtual reality section where you can have your avatar try on clothes for you and then change the viewpoint settings so you can look at yourself. Or, some people don’t think virtual reality’s the same, so the other options are to have a model with roughly your proportions try them on for you, or of course you can just order the things and send them back if they don’t fit. With books we encourage people to send in a form explaining what they – or the person they’re buying a present for – likes or doesn’t like, any triggers they have, that sort of thing, and then we have experts who pick out –‘

‘All right, enough,’ Sherlock interrupts. ‘And it’s successful?’

‘Very,’ John mutters, and then immediately regrets it. Sherlock shoots him an interested glance.

‘Not that you’re bitter, or anything,’ Harry says, smiling at him, but the joke falls flat. This is something else John had thought, or hoped, he’d got over by now. Somehow it’s never seemed quite fair that unhappy, unstable Harry, who should surely never have been able to keep up the kind of constant engagement and reliability needed to run a business, should be vastly wealthier than John. He looks around her flat, which is as subdued and tasteful as her website, quietly but unquestionably expensive, and has to push away a stab of bitterness. He’s not proud of feeling like this, and he really did think he’d sorted through it and moved on.
Nothing unusual recently?’ Sherlock says to Harry. ‘No financial mysteries, no employees behaving irrationally, no strange customers?’

And there. A slight shift in Harry’s expression, possibly the beginnings of a blush. ‘No,’ she says, but she draws the word out just a tiny bit. She adds, hurriedly, ‘I mean, we’ve had some of the usual problems – some stock’s gone missing, and one of our senior staff members is ill, has been for ages, so that’s causing some issues. But, uh, nothing else.’

Sherlock studies her, and John knows this sort of thing is not the area he’s most comfortable in, but he’s learning to read people at a terrifying rate. A couple of days ago, he wouldn’t have picked up on that kind of minute change in facial expression and tone of voice. Now, he tilts his head slightly to the side, and says, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Nothing strange,’ Harry insists.

‘The word you’re picking up on is the word I used to refer to customers,’ Sherlock muses. ‘So no strange customers, but something a little different from the norm related to them?’

She’s definitely blushing now. John groans. ‘Harry, no, not again,’ he says.

‘Shut up,’ she says.

Mary, who’s been sitting quietly beside John on the sofa watching Sherlock and Harry talk, says, ‘Is this a Clara situation?’

Harry gives John a slightly outraged look. ‘Seriously?’ she says. ‘You guys used to sit in your spaceship and gossip about me while you were killing aliens? I’d have thought you’d have had better things to do.’

‘Sorry,’ Mary says, smiling ruefully at her. ‘There was always loads of hanging around while everyone got their suits on and stuff. And John and I were pretty quick, so yeah, we would pretty much just sit and gossip about everyone we knew while we waited for the others.’

‘It’s fine,’ Harry says, still looking slightly put out but also slightly amused. ‘I’m just surprised I
was interesting enough to be worth talking about with all the way more exciting shit that must’ve been going on. Anyway –‘ she turns back to Sherlock – ‘from what John’s said, you’ve probably got this already, but Clara’s my ex, she was a customer who came to the shop. I was online that day so I gave her a personal tour and – well – yeah. Things...went on from there.’

‘And now you’re dating another customer,’ John says, ‘aren’t you?’

Harry looks at the ceiling. ‘Maybe. Or – maybe not anymore. I don’t know.’

‘Hmm,’ Sherlock says. ‘Well, that may or may not be relevant. Tell me about it while I have a look through your website.’
Chapter 22

‘Her name’s Angel,’ Harry says, blushing more furiously than ever and staring determinedly at the ceiling. ‘Angel Hosmer. She started shopping with us about a month ago, and she asked for me in person, offered to pay extra. Said she’d heard from a friend I was brilliant at it. So, um, that was nice, and then...she was pretty, and we talked while I was showing her round and she was so funny and sharp and confident.’

‘When did you first meet in the fleshworld?’ John asks.

Harry’s face falls. ‘A week ago,’ she says, looking despondent. ‘And I haven’t heard from her since. But I think – it was all very weird. I’m still not completely sure what happened.’

Sherlock’s flicking through the website on his handchip, ignoring the chat box where someone’s asking him if he’s sure he doesn’t want any assistance. As he moves into the books section, he says, ‘Go on.’

‘Well, we’d met up in some online bars and things, though only ever for short periods of time. I kept asking to meet in the fleshworld but it was tricky because she works nights, she’s a late-night bartender in an all-night e-bar. And I work all day, except at the weekend and those are her busiest nights so she sleeps the whole day. But eventually she said she could do one Saturday morning, really early, right after she got off work, just for an hour or two. So we met up at a café near where she lives.’

‘Ah, here she is,’ Sherlock asks.

Harry sits forward to peer at his handchip, and then jumps. ‘What – how – are you in my customer database?’

‘You should really improve your security system,’ Sherlock says. ‘Keep talking while I look at Hosmer’s profile.’

John leans forward too. The profile is detailed, showing Hosmer’s order history, chat log, and a screenshot of her avatar. John studies the latter carefully, though with little hope of picking up a fraction of what Sherlock’ll have seen in one glance.
Angel Hosmer is tall, with short, choppy bright red hair and glasses. The avatar is frozen in place holding an engaging slightly lopsided smile, her eyes just starting to shut as if she’s about to break into a laugh. She’s wearing a dark red polymis dress that clashes unapologetically with her hair, and has a large clock app glittering against her wrist. She’s definitely Harry’s type.

‘I got to the address at the time she said, and she was waiting for me,’ Harry continues, after a moment where she’s clearly debating whether to yell at Sherlock for hacking into her database or to just get on with things so they’ll leave and she can start drinking. ‘But it turned out the cafe had closed down just a couple of days before. She was very apologetic about it. But then...that was when things started going – not right. I tried to kiss her, said it was about time we kissed in the flesh, and she stepped back and wouldn’t. Which was fine, I guess, but she wouldn’t say why she didn’t want to, and she wouldn’t let me touch her at all.’

Sherlock makes a sort of *hm* noise, but John can’t tell if it’s in response to what Harry’s saying or to something he’s seen on the profile page.

Harry goes on, ‘Then – she looked very serious, and she told me that she really liked me and she wanted to keep seeing me. And then she said, if anything ever happened to her, she wanted me to remember her and to keep checking the public bit of her customer profile on the site for a message. And I asked her what she was on about, but she just put a finger to her lips and shook her head. Then she giggled and said screw it, we should just go into the cafe even though it’d shut down, and I was laughing and going oh no we can’t, and she just pushed opened the door, winked at me and shut it behind her.’

‘And let me guess,’ Sherlock says, without looking up from his handchip. ‘You opened the door to follow her and she was nowhere to be seen.’

‘Yes,’ Harry says, staring at him. ‘Yeah, that’s – I searched the whole cafe and I wandered around the streets and I kept messaging her. I thought at first it was meant to be some kind of joke. But she wasn’t anywhere. And since then – nothing. She hasn’t been on the site. All I can think is that something must have happened – she was so strange, and what she said made it sound like she was afraid of something. But I don’t understand...’

‘You really don’t, do you?’ Sherlock says, looking first at Harry, then at John and then Mary. ‘None of you. And yet it’s so absurdly simple.’

Harry bristles but says nothing; John rolls his eyes. Mary folds her arms and sits back, half-suppressing a smile and looking expectant.
'Look at Hosmer’s fingers,’ Sherlock says, impatiently, gesturing at the avatar screenshot. ‘Look at her hair. And then there’s the bomber’s clue – the suitcase filled with data chips. Te shouldn’t have sent me that. It’s made things far too easy.’ And he scowls, as if making a puzzle too easy to solve is the worst crime imaginable.

John looks at Hosmer’s picture again, but his blank incomprehension must show on his face, because Sherlock huffs, and then starts talking: ‘In order to create an avatar, a handchip scans its owner and reproduces a 3D image of them. It’s possible to create an avatar from scratch – not based on a real person – but it’s extremely difficult. The giveaway areas tend to be the hands and the hair, which are very intricate. If you look closely at the strands of hair near Hosmer’s parting and the pad of her thumb in particular, you’ll see it lacks total realism.’

‘You mean –’ Mary says.

‘I mean that “Angel Hosmer” never existed. She was a scam. Harry, you didn’t suspect anything when she took you to a cafe that turned out to be closed? Even though she might be expected either to know her own area or to have checked online first. Your first date in the fleshworld after all; you’d expect some nervousness, some carefulness, some desire to impress, at least that’s my understanding of typical human behaviour. But having other people around would have interfered with her conjuring trick. She was a projection – that’s why she wouldn’t let you touch her, of course – and after you saw her go through the door, her creator, monitoring the whole thing comfortably from their own home, simply turned the projection off.’

Harry stares at him. Her fingers curl into her palms, and her arms move slightly nearer to her body. ‘Why?’ she says.

‘You said she told you to remember her,’ Sherlock says. ‘And, more pertinent, to keep checking her public customer profile as she’d try and get a message to you that way. Have you been doing that?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry says. ‘Three or four times a day at least.’ Knowing Harry’s slightly obsessive nature, John suspects it’s actually been a lot more times than that, but doesn’t comment.

‘Well, there you go,’ Sherlock says, as if everything is now clear, and when Harry continues to frown at him, he says, ‘I imagine your site is well protected against viruses and hacking. But when you’re on a particular page on your handchip, that’s when the site’s at its most vulnerable, because if someone were to see what page you were on they could set up an electronic signal that interfered with the website through that page, via the signals going through your body. They could make use of your access privileges through you, and send signals encouraging, for instance, stock to be sent out to a particular address. The person could then collect it and sell it on and make a nice haul for themselves. But they wouldn’t be able to do it unless they knew exactly which page you were on.'
They’d need your address too, to be able to properly direct the signals. You wouldn’t give your address out to someone unless they were close to you, so getting close was the first task. Then leaving you with a reason to frequently visit the same page on your site while logged in...and there you go. You said stock’s been going missing?’

‘Oh,’ Harry says, shakily. ‘Yes, that all makes – it makes sense. Yeah.’

‘I just wish the bomber hadn’t sent me a picture of a case of identities,’ Sherlock mutters. ‘It would have been much more interesting trying to work it out if I hadn’t already had the clue that it involved a false identity. “Angel Hosmer”’s obviously pulled this trick a number of times, has a whole stash of identities to appeal to different people. And I would have got there almost as quickly without the help, I’m certain of that. Why would te make things easier for me?’

‘Yeah, because that’s really the point,’ Mary says, looking unimpressed. ‘Harry, would it be weird for me to hug you? You look like you could do with one, but obviously I don’t know you that well and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’m way better at hugs than John, though. Just so you know.’

‘All right,’ Harry says in a small voice, and Mary moves over to give her a hug.

‘Before we go,’ Sherlock says, ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you something. You talk to a lot of people through your job, Harry, you might have a wider understanding of certain things than John does. You have here a system for dividing people into groups which you call genders. These groups are defined in fairly vague terms but seem to involve clothing, physical appearance, particularly those elements of physical appearance which are easiest to change, and verbal declarations of mental and emotional leanings.’

‘Um,’ Harry says. ‘Yeah, I guess?’

‘The other day,’ Sherlock continues, ‘John referred to someone as female, based on their name, clothing, and other such surface clues, when in fact te was non-binary. The person in question te was non-binary. The person in question seemed annoyed.’

‘Well, yeah, te would be,’ Harry says. ‘Some non-binary people present consistently in a way that’s more associated with one of the binary genders, though it’s rare. What’s much more common though is for them to vary their presentation – male one day, female the next, queered another. And yeah, sometimes if people see them presenting one way they’ll just be like, oh that’s a woman, or whatever. It’s stupid, but what can you do?’
‘It’s not that stupid,’ John protests. ‘I mean, you have to make an assumption one way or the other—’

‘Or you could just ask,’ Harry says.

‘Yeah, OK,’ John admits. ‘But a lot of people don’t like being asked.’

‘Because they’re sick of stupid questions and people thinking things are their business that **really** aren’t. Sherlock, you probably don’t know about this, I can’t imagine John’ll have seen it as crucial to your education, so I may as well tell you. We used to only have two officially recognised genders; over the last fifty years or so the government’s been introducing stuff for birth certificates and official terminology and all the rest of it. Kind of like what they’ve done for afters really. And a lot of people are really happy about that, but some people...like, there are people who’d rather be called genderqueer than non-binary, and people who’d prefer to be referred to as **ze or they** than **te**. But because there’s guidelines and stuff now it’s...better in most ways, but I think in some ways it’s difficult for people who don’t fit neatly into those guidelines. I dunno. I’m not saying it’s easy, but I think it’s easier than some people make it out to be. You just listen to people.’

John almost says something about how Harry runs a shop and for her listening to people and respecting them is really just about good customer service and therefore about making money, but he hears the words in his head and winces internally. He’s not going there. And he’s been fighting with Harry for enough years to recognise that the fact he wants to go there may mean he’s losing this argument. So he pushes back the rising anger and says, ‘Yeah, OK, maybe you have a point. I don’t know. I’ll think about it. And Sherlock, maybe you should look up what people have said about this, I dunno if either me or Harry knows that much really.’

‘I know more than you do,’ Harry says, not quite ready to give up the fight.

‘Maybe,’ John says calmly, knowing perfectly well that nothing pisses Harry off more than when he pretends to be calmer than he is, his rage obvious to her but inaccessible. Because apparently part of him still wants to keep picking a fight.

But she only rolls her eyes and says, ‘Whatever. Yeah, look it up. Can you guys leave, now? It’s been kind of a rough day and I’d like some time to come to terms with it all.’

This time the comment, **yeah, that’s why you want us gone**, almost makes it out of John’s mouth, but he turns sharply away, and says goodbye as he walks towards the door, not quite trusting
himself to turn around.

*

‘So is she still...’ Mary says, as they settle into the tube car.

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘She stops sometimes, even for a few months, but I’ve kind of given up hoping she’ll ever stop for good.’

That’s as much as he’s prepared to say on the subject of Harry’s drinking, but Mary, who can be tactful occasionally, doesn’t ask anything more. Instead she says, ‘Well, that’s another pip –’ but is interrupted by Sherlock’s handchip beeping.

‘I do hope this one is more challenging,’ Sherlock says, opening the message.

‘“Oh, Sherlock’, he reads aloud, voice flat. ‘You’re losing your touch. You must learn to pay more attention. I suggest having another look at my last message. And then perhaps turning on the news. In about ten minutes there should be an interesting little item about an event in Cambridge. In a countryside pocket that might be familiar to you.”’

Silently, Sherlock opens the previous message again and sets his handchip to broadcast, so that the message isn’t just displayed on the back of his hand but is projected in large letters in front of him on the tube car wall so that John and Mary can easily reread it too. John gives Sherlock an encouraging smile at this sign of considering other people, but Sherlock’s too preoccupied to notice, staring at the message.

*You have six hours.*

‘Maybe they mean their last proper message,’ Mary suggests. ‘The one before this one.’

‘They said their last message,’ Sherlock says. ‘They’d be precise. If they meant a previous one –’ and then his face goes blank, and he touches his palm and selects an option to view the source code of the message. It flashes up in front of them, and John and Mary draw in breaths simultaneously.
Sherlock is deathly pale. ‘A comment in the code,’ he says. ‘And I didn’t think to check even though I knew he loves games – stupid, stupid –’

‘You couldn’t have solved it in six minutes anyway,’ John says, quietly.

‘It’s just to mess with you,’ Mary agrees. ‘You shouldn’t beat yourself up, whatever happens you couldn’t have –’

‘I could have solved it,’ Sherlock says, his fingers twisting together and apart again. ‘If I’d thought – I could have worked things out from the pictures, I knew it was too easy –‘ he cuts himself off, shaking his head, and switches to a video newsblog.

The reporter talks about property prices, then about flooding, and then the column at the side flashes to indicate an incoming update, and the reporter announces that an explosion in a countryside pocket in Cambridge has taken place and is believed to have resulted in one death and several injuries.

Sherlock switches off his handchip, but makes no further movement. John wants to say it’s not your fault, but he thinks it would seem too much of a platitude to help Sherlock right now. So he says nothing, and continues to say nothing all the way home.

*

Walking up the stairs to 221b, John’s leg begins to trouble him, and he decides that this time he’s going to try combating the feeling. Sherlock mentioned something about remembering a time it didn’t hurt, and trying to bring up that scene with as much sensory detail as possible. Then he has to find the mental channel again, and imagine pouring the memory into it. It sounds ridiculous, but he makes himself try, and is silently, furiously elated when he makes it all the way up the stairs without limping.

Though he keeps that feeling to himself. He and Mary are used to being surrounded by death, losing people who, had events gone just a little differently, might not have been lost. It doesn’t mean they’re callous about it, that they feel nothing or don’t care, but they both know how to deal with it. Sherlock is newer to this, and is besides still convinced he’s to blame. Admittedly, his
conviction that it’s his fault seems to be preoccupying him much more than the deaths themselves. John hopes that some sort of regard for life comes into this, but it’s probably just Sherlock’s usual hatred of getting things wrong. John tries not to think too much about that.

The flat is quiet, the atmosphere strained. John and Mary converse in low voices; Sherlock faces away from them and draws heartsplitting music out of Clara’s violin.

John messages Lestrade to ask if there’s any progress on finding the bomber, but the reply is not encouraging. By the time darkness has settled entirely over the city outside, the room is completely silent except for the beautiful tortured notes coming from Sherlock’s corner of the room. Mary goes home, promising to come round some time the next day, and John’s left watching Sherlock and feeling the music tug at him in ways he can’t quite articulate, even inside his head.

He stands, meaning to go and turn the light on, but finds himself drawn inexorably towards Sherlock’s stiff figure, bowing away, ignoring John’s progress towards him though he must hear the footsteps.

‘Stop a moment,’ John says, keeping his voice soft, not really expecting any attention to be paid. But Sherlock stops immediately, lowering the violin, though he doesn’t turn around.

John runs his fingers through Sherlock’s hair. When Sherlock doesn’t make any move to stop him, John presses them in deeper, moving them against Sherlock’s scalp, and after a moment Sherlock tips his head back into the touch. Encouraged, John lets his movements become firmer and more rhythmic, and over long minutes Sherlock’s body begins to relax by a fractional amount.

After some time has passed, Sherlock places the violin and bow gently on a chair near where he’s standing, but continues to face away from John. John goes on massaging his head, and kisses his neck and shoulders as he does. Sherlock gradually lets himself go limper, and John steps forward to support him. After a moment, Sherlock lets his whole body sag against John’s chest, and John holds him there. It should be awkward, the height difference leaving Sherlock draped all over him, but John likes having him so close, likes holding him up, even if he is heavy. John’s leg sparks in sudden pain, and he tries the visualisation method again. It works even faster this time, and John shakes his head. Can it really be that easy? Surely the hospitals would have got people to try this before if it were really such a miracle cure.

Then again – the memories John’s drawing on are so bright and crisp and burning, running through streets with his body ablaze with risk and desire and endless surprise. When trials were held as to the possibility of dealing with a psychebullet psychologically – and trials must have been held – perhaps the participants were too depressed to manage anything this vivid. Even those delighted to be home would surely have, somewhere in them, felt the flatness of life on earth compared to surviving out there in the dark spaces between stars and ships and laser beams.
John wonders, too, whether as many clinical trials have been held as really should have been. Over the last fifty years or so medical progress has been so fast that the few remaining incurable conditions have a tendency to be treated with embarrassment and something approaching distaste. Progress on coming up with treatments has slackened, and funding for programs designed to help make the lives of sick and injured people smoother rather than cure them is almost impossible to get. John knows all this from his time studying medicine, and while he thought, at the time, that it was bad and a problem and something to worry about, he never really thought about it much again after that. Until –

For the first time in hours, Sherlock’s voice comes rumbling out over his shoulder. ‘You’ve stopped,’ he says, and John realises that his fingers have indeed stopped their progress through Sherlock’s hair.

‘Sorry,’ he says, starting again, and smiling at Sherlock’s low satisfied noise, ‘I was trying the leg thing again.’

‘I told you it would work,’ Sherlock says, but the bite of the I told you so is absent, his pleasure in the touch evident in his voice, and so John doesn’t mind.

‘Turn around,’ John says. ‘Come to bed.’ And Sherlock does both.

*

John spent too many years on the starline to feel guilty about fucking in the wake of a death, but he doesn’t necessarily expect Sherlock to share that viewpoint, or to have any particular desire for sex right now. On the other hand, it also seems possible that Sherlock might appreciate having his mind taken off things – or, if not quite that, since Sherlock’s mind can be in plenty of places at once, at least have some help in pushing the events of the day a little further from the surface. So he doesn’t undress, or suggest that Sherlock does; they both get into bed still clothed, which doesn’t feel as ridiculous as it should. John just wants Sherlock warm and safe and close and his – their – bed feels like the ideal place for that.

Once they’re in bed together, half facing each other, John draping an arm over Sherlock’s side, one of Sherlock’s legs sprawled over both of his, John takes things slowly. He resumes the hair stroking and neck kissing, knowing how much Sherlock likes that, and smiles in satisfaction when Sherlock seems prepared to relax into the mattress and let John do it.
After a while, John lets one hand drift from Sherlock’s hair down to his back, and stroke him there. Sherlock stretches out, exposing more of himself to John’s touch, and John begins to unbutton his shirt, very slowly, giving Sherlock time to stop him. But Sherlock helps instead, pulling off his trousers and pants and kicking them out of the bed. John takes advantage of the new expanses of Sherlock’s body available to him, stroking his arms and thighs and chest, running firm caressing hands everywhere and watching Sherlock soak up the pleasure.

After a while he lets a hand drift to Sherlock’s left side, and begins to stroke the line there with movements as steady as those he applied everywhere else. He keeps to just that one: this isn’t about frenzied stimulation or overwhelming Sherlock. He wants to create a little bubble of peace and stillness for Sherlock to sink into, away from everything else but the two of them.

When Sherlock comes – John has decided he’s just going to think of it as coming – it’s with barely a sound, just a slow exhale. His body relaxes even further, and John tucks his head into Sherlock’s shoulder and reaches down to touch himself. He isn’t at all prepared for his hand to bump into Sherlock’s arm, and a moment later he feels a palm pressing against his cock.

Breath leaves him in a short sharp gasp. His body is under the covers; he wants to throw them aside to see but doesn’t quite dare disturb what’s happening, and in any case the flat is freezing now. So he feels but doesn’t see Sherlock’s hand curl stiffly over his cock.

The position is awkward, as are Sherlock’s movements: tiny jerks of his hand up and down, as though he’s afraid that if he lets his fingers slip away he’ll never be able to drag them back again. But it doesn’t matter: John is right on the edge just from feeling him there, and when Sherlock’s fingers brush just slightly too hard over the head of his cock, John makes a deep guttural sound and comes.

He tilts his head up to whisper in Sherlock’s ear, ‘Fucking amazing,’ and Sherlock smiles and twists his own head to press his lips to John’s forehead, and then twists further to kiss him properly.

John fumbles for the cleaning mist in the bedside table and sprays vaguely around the bed. He thinks he’s got most of it, enough to make it comfortable to sleep, and he can clean up properly tomorrow. Then he curls deeper against Sherlock, and closes his eyes, hoping that Sherlock will stay and get some sleep too.

‘There are things I could be doing,’ Sherlock says. ‘The messages –’

‘Sleep’ll help you concentrate,’ John promises.
'I don’t need it,’ Sherlock says, but he stays, and when John glances over to check a moment later, his eyes are closed. John smiles, and lets his own eyes fall shut again too. In the end, though, they both sleep badly; John wakes several times to feel Sherlock tossing and turning beside him, and suspects that he too is waiting for his handchip to beep. John still thinks it’s better than Sherlock not sleeping at all.

By the early hours of the morning, Sherlock seems to have lapsed properly into sleep, though his fidgeting suggests it may be troubled. John is lying awake again, watching Sherlock’s hand twisting against the duvet, still no beep emerging, and feels a clear sense of certainty begin to form in his mind. He’s not one to walk away from a fight, to give in, and watching Sherlock’s exhilaration at these puzzles has been disconcerting but also hard not to be entranced by. But it’s become apparent that they are facing someone vicious and unpredictable, and that they cannot stop whoever it is from hurting more people by engaging with their game. This has got to stop.

Feeling more secure for having reached a decision, John is finally able to get some sleep. Tomorrow, he knows, he will have the job of trying to persuade Sherlock to agree.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Apologies once again for the delay in posting. There are two notes below, the long, rambly second one concerns posting schedules, if anyone's interested.

1) Pretty obvious to anyone who's been following, but just to note that this story of course isn't series 3 compliant. Mostly it's too AU for that to matter very much, but the main thing to note is that my versions of Mary Morstan and Sebastian Moran aren't based on the show.

2) After I posted the last chapter, I realised I'd reached the point in the story where my outline got a bit...woollier. All the main plot points were there, but some of the detail wasn't. (There was, for instance, a place where I'd just written 'epic showdown'. Thank you past self, very helpful.) I wanted to make sure I got the pacing right, that I got in all the clues I wanted to, that any plot twists that there might or might not be had enough foreshadowing but not too much, and I didn't want to risk needing to go back and change things.

So I decided I was going to stop posting as I wrote and write all the rest before I resumed putting it up. But when I'd written the next five chapters I started flagging a bit, getting unmotivated, and really wanting a comment or two to help push me through it. And the first of the five chapters I'd written I was pretty confident wouldn't need changing based on anything that happened later. The trouble is that the chapter after it very well might, and this chapter ends pretty abruptly and in the middle of a fairly dramatic bit.

So, yeah. Basically, just a warning: I've decided to post this now mostly for selfish reasons (and also because I feel a bit guilty about leaving it so long) but it could be ages before the next chapter as I probably will try to finish the fic before posting that. (Unless I crack again, which is extremely possible.) And this chapter ends in such a way as to make that fact maybe a bit annoying.

Morning comes, and Sherlock is there in bed when John wakes up, watching him, hand placed with evident care in the middle of John’s chest. As John slips into wakefulness, he watches the hand begin to make small, stiff movements, which as time passes become smoother and more expansive, ranging over John’s body with increasing confidence.

‘You could have got up if you wanted,’ John mumbles. ‘Worked.’

‘Too busy,’ Sherlock says, and manages to place his other hand in John’s hair. John smiles at him, and feels fingers ruffling his hair, pressing cautiously into his scalp, makes appropriately appreciative noises in response.
When Sherlock’s so unusually peaceful, and so intently focused on John, it seems a shame to disturb things, so John decides to leave the conversation about the bomber until it looks like Sherlock is about to start work on trying to discover their identity again. Unless, of course, another pip turns up first.

When they finally pull away from each other, though, Sherlock announces his intention to spend some time researching the afters phenomenon this morning instead, and John wonders whether maybe Sherlock’s actually reached the same conclusion he did already. After all, desperate for a challenge though Sherlock might be, someone as intelligent as he is can surely see the problems with continuing to play the bomber’s game.

Sherlock apparently wants to investigate the question of time travel, to look through the interviews with the earliest afters for something that might start to confirm the theory. After all, even if they were coached to within an inch of their lives to only mention technology appropriate to the time period they were travelling to, it still seems pretty likely that someone would have slipped up. And it’s unlikely to have been noticed, since if one of them referred to some piece of technology that didn’t actually exist it would probably have gone straight over the heads of the people testing them. So Sherlock wants to go through the files and look for anything in that line.

John thanks Sherlock for actually telling him what he’s doing instead of just ignoring him and getting straight down to work, and Sherlock just rolls his eyes and says, ‘If being patronising is your way of encouraging the sorts of behaviour you want, you might consider rethinking your strategy.’

John says, ‘Jesus, my next student is going to be a picnic after you.’ Sherlock’s smile in response seems a little stiff, but John doesn’t have time to think about it because there’s a handchip beep and they both freeze.

‘It’s yours,’ Sherlock says after a moment, and John breathes. Not another pip, not yet, though he really should talk to Sherlock about what they’re going to do when there is one. Because whatever the bomber’s got planned for the grand finale of his game, John knows it’s likely to be spectacular and horrible and calculated to appeal perfectly to Sherlock.

‘Don’t worry, John,’ Sherlock says, reading his thoughts as ever. ‘He’s proven we can’t trust him, and his last puzzle was hopeless anyway. I won’t be responding to the next pip; the police can deal with it.’

‘Thank you,’ John says, deeply relieved. ‘I know that...can’t have been an easy decision for you.’
Sherlock shrugs, then says, ‘That message will have been from Mary, suggesting we go out for some activity instead of her coming here. I’ve got work to do, but you should go. She’ll be leaving soon, you ought to spend time with her while you have the chance.’

Warmth suffuses John; Sherlock is really learning, paying attention to other people’s needs and making decisions that are both sensible and selfless. He glances down at his palm, and sure enough, the message is from Mary and reads *Do you guys fancy an agpool trip?*

‘Sure you don’t want to come?’ John says. ‘She wants to go to an antigravity pool. They’re good fun. I mean, in Mary’s case wanting to go to one just means she’s missing space travel already, and to be honest that was always why I liked them too, but normal people without messed up army life cravings seem to enjoy them as well.’

‘Are you calling me a normal person?’ Sherlock says indignantly.

‘Never,’ John promises. ‘So, coming?’

‘Another time,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’d like to make progress on the time travel issue before we next see Jim, so I know what sort of further questions to ask him.’

‘Fair enough,’ John says. ‘I’ll see you later, then.’ He grabs Sherlock for a quick goodbye kiss that becomes lingering and eventually threatens to keep John from leaving at all, but Sherlock finally pulls back, saying John’ll keep Mary waiting, and retreats back towards his room, grinning cheekily at John as he does.

*

John doesn’t recognise the address Mary texts him as a pool he’s been to before, and when he gets there he realises why: the building in front of him is clearly brand new. It’s also evidently expensive, thirty storeys tall and made of tough translucent material that catches the light in such a way to send rainbows spinning through the inside of the building. The pool is apparently on the roof, surrounded by an invisible forcefield that keeps the antigrav contained. Squinting upwards, John can see a couple of people swimming through the air up there.

The view from the roof, once he gets up there, is spectacular. He stares out over London, then turns to watch the swimmers laughing and twirling each other within the forcefield. The lift exit is just
outside the forcefield, and tall railings lead the way from the lift doors to the pool entrance. The
forcefield area, on the other hand, is not surrounded by railings, since it’s impossible to pass
through it anywhere except the entrance; John watches as someone floats towards the edge and
bounces harmlessly back in. Still, when you’re up there, the forcefield invisible, it must feel like
you could drift over the edge and away. Both terrifying and exhilarating. Not, of course, anything
like the feeling of sitting in a scouting craft surrounded by the distant light of stars and the
significantly closer light of laser fire. But less unlike that, perhaps, than most other things. John
hasn’t been to an outdoor agpool before, and he’s looking forward to trying it.

He hears the lift doors open behind him, and then: ‘No Sherlock?’

He turns to smile at Mary. ‘Nah, he’s working.’

She bites her lip. ‘Mad bomber research?’

‘No,’ John says. ‘He’s giving up on that. I think he’s come to realise that engaging with it will only
make things worse. Whatever obsession this person’s got with Sherlock I don’t think we should be
feeding into it. However hard it is, I reckon we’ve just got to leave it to the police.’

‘Yeah, you’re not wrong,’ Mary says. ‘Just surprised you got him to agree to that. But you know
him better than I do.’

‘I’ve only known him a couple of weeks,’ John reminds her, reminds himself. ‘And it surprised me
too. But I guess even Sherlock can be sensible sometimes.’

‘Apparently so,’ Mary says. ‘Anyway, how are you? I mean, I can guess, you’re half occupied
with being newly besotted and half worried about stuff going boom and you’ve been fucking all
over your flat and not getting any sleep. But tell me anyway. Actually I’ll tell you how I am first
since that’s boring, and then you can tell me.’

John grins at her. ‘Go ahead.’

Mary launches into speech. She always talks even faster than usual when she’s talking about
herself, like she’s trying to get the information out as quickly as possible. As though her life were a
mission and filling John in on it a field report, delivered under pressured and urgent circumstances
and needing to be got out of the way as quickly as possible in order to move on to more important
things. ‘So, I called my mother yesterday night for the second time since I got back, which was
nice, I mean, a fair bit of “by the way your sister’s doing great in her job which doesn’t involve anyone slicing her arms off on a daily basis isn’t that lovely”, but, you know, I can deal with that. And I guess it’s fair enough that she worries.’

‘You do get your arms sliced off a lot,’ John points out.

‘Whose side are you on?’ Mary demands, then continues, ‘Umm, what else – nothing, really, except I didn’t get any sleep either, but not for such fun reasons as I’m theorising for you. I pretty much just can’t sleep here, which I always forget when I come back for leave. You’d think it would be easier. But apparently there’s something about being in a bunk that’s too narrow to turn on, surrounded by people snoring and shagging, on a tiny barren rock surrounded by enemy ships, that’s just really relaxing.’

John snorts. He wants to say that he found it hard to sleep too when he first got home, but then he’d be perilously close to telling her how he managed it, and he’d rather not go there. So he says instead, ‘But I see you’ve skipped yawning or drooping and gone straight into sleep-deprived hyper.’

‘As usual,’ Mary agrees. ‘I expect I’ll crash later.’

‘I am not carrying you home, just so you know,’ John says.

‘I’ll pretend to faint, and then you’ll have to,’ Mary says, and that makes John think of Sherlock’s appalling fake-passing-out act, and thinking of it now apparently makes him feel less angry or hurt than amused by Sherlock’s absurd Sherlock-ness, and possibly that should worry him a little.

He tells Mary the story as they start strolling towards the pool entrance, and she reacts with the same mixture of concern and amusement as John feels. ‘It’s obvious that he does care about you,’ she says, ‘and OK, that’s kind of amazing, that he actually thought of that and pulled it off. But...it is kind of a dick thing to do.’

‘Well, yeah,’ John says. ‘He is a dick. I mean, that’s not really news. But he’s – he’s a lot of other things, too.’

‘Of course,’ Mary says. ‘I can completely see why you’re so dazzled. But I’m your friend, it’s my job to occasionally peer in at you through all the bright sparkly Sherlock lights and check that you’re doing OK and not letting things pass when you shouldn’t.’
‘I did tell him off for the fake collapsing thing, and he apologised,’ John says, uncomfortably aware of the fact that Sherlock didn’t exactly apologise. But he did seem contrite. And it hasn’t happened again.

‘Oh, well, in that case, I wouldn’t worry,’ Mary says. ‘He’s an after, he’s not going to get that certain things aren’t OK till you tell him.’

‘Yeah, that’s – ’ John starts, and then pain shoots through his leg and he stumbles. He draws on the visualisation technique again, but this time, though it helps considerably and he finds himself able to stand upright again and walk forward with only the trace of a limp, a distracting low level pain continues.

‘Are you using Sherlock’s technique, or whatever it was?’ Mary asks, then adds, ‘I mean, don’t talk about it if you’d rather not.’

‘It’s fine,’ John says, because he really ought to be able to talk about it by now. ‘Yeah, I’m using it. It’s worked perfectly before, but this time it wasn’t quite as...’

‘It’ll take practice, though, surely,’ Mary says. ‘I mean, it’s not gonna work perfectly every time right from the start. Isn’t the fact that it’s working so well already a pretty good sign?’

‘Yeah, I guess it is,’ John says. ‘Yeah. I’m being stupid, sorry.’

Mary rolls her eyes. ‘Now you are,’ she says, elbowing him. The fact that she elbows him twice as gently as she normally would makes him want to kick out hard at the ground, want to do it with the bad leg so that it screams and burns. Then she seems to realise what she’s done, half winces, and moves as if she’s going to elbow him again harder, then thinks better of it, and looks awkwardly away from him. Perhaps this, John thinks, is why Sherlock’s empathy lapses don’t bother him as much as they probably should. Mary’s caring, her sympathy, feels at the moment like something they both have to learn to navigate, something difficult. Which is massively unfair of him, especially since at other times it’s been practically the only thing keeping him going, but –

Mary opens her mouth, and John hopes desperately that she isn’t going to apologise or make him talk about it. He has to restrain himself from physically wincing when she says, ‘Sorry.’

‘Let’s not –’ he says.
She grins at him suddenly, bright and quick. ‘All right,’ she says. ‘All right, we won’t. Just one last thing, which – you’ll hate me a bit for asking, but just – it’s not a suggestion, I’m honestly just interested in – did you ever think about talking to other people in the same position? Online groups, or just reading blog posts or whatever.’

‘Other uncured?’ John says, making a face. ‘I dunno. When I got back my therapist said something about doing that, but I just figured everyone’d be really whiny and...’ He trails off.

‘You’re not,’ Mary points out. ‘Anyway, I’m shutting up now, I just had to ask. Let’s get off the ground.’

This sounds like an excellent plan, and they’re at the pool entrance now. They bought tickets downstairs, so they just hold up their handchips to the scanner and it reads the codes from them. The doors slide apart, and they go in.

It’s been a while since John’s been to an agpool, but he remembers the basics: you’re supposed to stay in the marked area by the door until you get to the top, because there’s air currents there that ensure you rise slowly and don’t whoosh straight up faster than is comfortable.

He also remembers that he always ignored that instruction and propelled himself out of that area straight away. He grins at Mary as they start to slowly rise, and she grins back and starts swimming away from the gate.

He’s a little slower than she is, and so he sees the moment when her head and torso push out of the marked area and she’s rapidly dragged out and goes spinning head over heels up into the air. He tries to roll out all in one go, aligning himself side-on to the marked line, but he doesn’t quite manage it and ends up spinning too, tumbling all over the place as he rises. He bumps into Mary as she slows at the top of the pool, but manages to push himself away from her. Then they just hover, beaming at each other.

‘God, yes,’ Mary murmurs, mostly to herself, and twirls. They’re quiet for a while after that, chasing each other through the air, grabbing at each other to push and pull, make each other spin in all directions. John’s chest feels oddly light, as though the antigrav field could have somehow made its way inside his body. A loneliness he’s held onto tightly for a long time beginning to ease. Sherlock already blasted much of it away, of course, filling all John’s unhappy hollows with operatic volleys of gunfire and violin, genius and danger. But there were places that Sherlock’s explosive fascination and unexpected pools of tenderness couldn’t touch. Moments when the intensity all around John left him feeling strangely alone. Swooping here in the freezing air with one of the few friends he’s managed to keep, all those darkened places seem to be opening up.
John catches at Mary’s hands, pulls her back towards him. ‘I really did miss you,’ he says.

‘You already told me that, you sentimental twat,’ Mary says, smiling at him. She pulls one hand free and uses the other to spin him round rapidly, leaving him dizzy and almost-giggling. ‘And I told you too, so don’t think you’re going to get me to say it again.’ But she squeezes his hand tightly before she lets go, and she doesn’t stop smiling for a long time.

As they pass the time in the agpool the weather takes a colder turn, and one by one the other small groups around them begin to leave. John and Mary, though, are not remotely bothered by the biting air, their constant movement keeping them warm enough, and they delight in having the place to themselves, making extravagant passes across the sky and laughing at each other’s antics.

John doesn’t know how much time passes like that – he begins to lose track of it. The minutes tumble through the sky and through him and away, and he thinks about nothing but Mary’s laugh ringing out through the forcefield and the air on his skin and the space all around him. For some glorious unknown amount of time, he doesn’t worry about secrets and lies or mad bombers.

And then he hears Mary call his name, in a tone of voice so instantly familiar that he curls into a kind of airborne crouch before he knows why he’s doing it.

‘John!’ she calls again, and her voice this time is a little less familiar – still carrying a great deal of the scout shouting an incoming fire warning to her medic, but with a note of almost-panic in it he’s never heard from her before. He straightens a little from his instinctive duck, and looks around him. He sees nothing, until he looks down at his own body.

There’s a small circle of light on his chest. Innocuous enough, to anyone who didn’t recognise it. Who wasn’t aware that certain laser guns came equipped with sophisticated targeting equipment that could lock onto a target and ensure the laser, when fired, had no chance of missing.

John looks around again, trying to find out where it’s coming from, and as he’s looking his eyes move over Mary and he sees a circle suddenly appear over her, too, just in the hollow of her neck.

‘What’s going on?’ she asks, her voice steady again. ‘Something to do with the bomber?’

‘Good guess,’ says a voice from below, and they both spin to look. John spins too far, too fast, and wheels through the air; he hears mocking laughter drift up from below at that, and when he finally
rights himself, he sees a figure standing there, alone, hands in pockets.

John quietly, stealthily, bends one finger of his hand and begins to input the sequence to open the stealth military mode of his handchip.

‘You,’ Mary says, in tones of utter surprise. ‘You – you’re that guy from the other day.’ Her eyesight is better than his, and she’s had years of training and practice in picking out far off details. To John the figure is vaguely familiar but too indistinct for recognition.

He can’t see the figure smile, but he hears it in their voice. ‘Jim Moriarty. Hi!’

Jim. Molly’s Jim. The new after, the one Sherlock’s been talking to, depending on for answers – John’s head is reeling. ‘Why?’ he yells down. Jim has somehow managed to keep his voice full of tone, singsong and menacing, even though he’s yelling from a long way below them, but John’s voice comes out hoarse and strange as he tries to make it reach the ground.

‘There’s no need for the yelling,’ Jim says, his tone vaguely admonishing. ‘There’s speakers. I’ve set it all up for you. Or, not actually for you, in fact. But I wouldn’t want Sherlock to say I hadn’t taken any trouble over his trap.’

‘He won’t come,’ Mary says.

In answer, Jim turns his head, slowly, tilting it a little to one side as he does, looking towards the lift. And the doors open.

‘Sherlock, get out, it’s a trap!’ John yells at once, almost before he even has time to register that it is actually Sherlock stepping out of the lift.

‘I think he knows that, Johnny, it was his idea,’ Jim says, then looks back towards the lift. ‘Sherlock! So glad you could make it.’

‘Hello, Jim,’ Sherlock says, his voice dry and measured. He looks up to where John and Mary are floating, still, looking about them in the hope of finding some sort of way out. John begins to slowly propel himself towards the ground, hoping Jim doesn’t notice, and Mary follows suit.
‘He said he wanted to meet me,’ Jim says, looking up at John. ‘To meet the bomber, I mean, he had no idea that his opponent was the same man who’d been supplying him with the resolution to all his soul searching. Starting to doubt those lovely neat solutions I gave you a little now, hm?’

John hesitates, finger on the trigger of his laser. Then he looks at Sherlock, and then at Mary, at the light dancing on her neck, and he stops hesitating.

Nothing happens.

‘Really, as if I wouldn’t have taken care of that,’ Jim says. ‘Simple virus. It’ll be disabled for twelve hours. Sherlock’s protections really weren’t as good as he thought. Don’t bother trying to call for help, either, I’ve switched all the communications off too.’

John tries, anyway, but Jim’s apparently telling the truth. John curls his hand into a fist, helpless.

‘Anyway, where was I?’ Jim goes on. ‘Oh yes, Sherlock wanting to meet me. I suppose he told you he’d given up flirting with me and was planning to stay home like a good boy and got you out of the way without any trouble. Then he messaged me and asked to meet me alone somewhere. But I thought that was mean. Seemed unfair to leave you two out, when the three of you have been getting on so well. So I decided I’d come and join you, and once I let Sherlock know, well, he came right along. So obliging.’

‘I do my best,’ Sherlock says, in the same strange, almost toneless voice as before.

‘You do, don’t you?’ Jim says. ‘Hasn’t been quite enough lately though, has it? Rather got one over on you in our last round. But who knows, perhaps you’ll beat me this time. Though honestly I doubt it. You have so many more weaknesses than I do.’

‘What exactly do you want?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Mayhem, death, the pleasure of seeing other people do as you tell them? No, it’s not any of that, is it? You’re bored. You got here and you found the people here slow, no match for you, and you decided to play with them. And then you found me.’

‘And you were special,’ Jim says, the smile back in his voice. ‘Extraordinary. How could I resist? All those silly ordinary people wanting crimes arranged for them. Alexander Holder, who wanted to save his dull little career. The many-named fraudster who wanted help covering their tracks. And more. Those two were the best, so those were the ones I gave you, but I’ve been very busy.’
'Consulting criminal,’ Sherlock says. ‘Novel.’

John inches himself a little further towards the ground.

‘No,’ Jim says, quietly, without venom. For a moment John thinks he’s talking to Sherlock. And then suddenly the wind is howling around him, rushing through his clothes, and he’s buffeted backwards before he can even make sense of what’s happening.

‘John!’ Sherlock shouts, and Jim Moriarty laughs delightedly.

‘You should have just stayed where you were,’ Jim says, sorrowfully. ‘Stayed and fretted about those lights on your chests, which, I’m delighted to tell you, really are just lights. I did think about hiring some snipers but, well, I’m not much of a team player, I’ve got to admit. And since you conveniently decided to position yourselves floating forty metres or so above a hundred metre tall building, nothing else seemed necessary.’

‘What did you do?’ John hears Sherlock yell over the wind pounding about his ears, and the panic in Sherlock’s voice is the thing that makes him truly frightened.

‘Just turned off the forcefield,’ Jim says. ‘Or rather, part of it. I kept the element which stops the antigrav leaking out, but not the bit that stops people going that way. They can float wherever they like now, free as birds. But unlike birds, they can’t actually fly, and if they slip outside the forcefield area...’ He shrugs. ‘If they’re lucky, they’ll fall above the gap between the edge of the forcefield and the edge of the building, and then they might survive. If they’re not lucky, the wind’ll whip them right past the edge and they’ll fall a hundred and forty metres, and then, weeeell...I don’t suppose you’ll feel so sentimental about him when he’s a flattened pile of blood and bone.’

John shudders, and fights the wind harder, fights his own rising panic. He glances over at Mary, but rapid movement is Mary’s skill, not stillness, and though she’s outdancing the wind with every bit of vicious grace she can muster, she’s still drifting away from the centre. He tries to reach for her, but she shakes her head, and he knows she’s right: together they’ll have even less control over their movements.

‘I’m not sentimental,’ Sherlock says. ‘He doesn’t matter, neither of them matters, just let them go and we can talk.’
John holds himself still, pulls himself together, feels himself at the centre of the cold tugs of wind pushing and pulling at him. He stares down at Jim, fixes his position firmly in mind.

‘I thought you’d be better at this,’ Jim says sorrowfully. ‘You’re heartbreakingly obvious. In fact, you’re one of them. You’re ordinary. I’m more disappointed than I can say.’

‘Just –’ Sherlock starts, and then he’s cut off by his body tearing itself from the ground and whirling upwards.

‘You’re one of them,’ Jim repeats. ‘You should be with them. There you go, I’m a romantic at heart, I’ve extended the field so you can all be together. And now – well, it hardly seems worth keeping you alive, to be honest.’

And John dives. Not thinking, barely breathing, the only thing he’s aware of is that dark-suited figure on the ground below. He kicks hard at the air, propelling himself down and trying not to propel himself to the left; he knows he’s perilously close to the edge of the forcefield.

And then suddenly his knees hit the ground and he tumbles out of the forcefield and cannons into Jim. They roll for a moment over the ground and for a dizzying moment John has no idea where they are. The edge of the building approaches; John digs his heels and elbows into the ground and feels it tear at them. He doesn’t know, can’t tell if he’s done it in time, for a moment it seems he hasn’t, as the edge just keeps coming, and he shuts his eyes and asks anything that might be listening to make sure Sherlock and Mary get out of this safe.

And then, with a jolt, he’s still, a couple of joints feebly spitting blood, and Jim pinned beneath him.

‘Yeeah,’ Jim says, under him. ‘This is very sweet. But I think you should get up now.’

John pins him harder, brings one hand to Jim’s neck. He doesn’t quite know what he’s going to do or how to threaten him; it’s just fear and rage propelling him forward. He’s too angry and afraid and exhausted to speak. His hands are still but everything else is shaking.

And then he hears a very familiar sound, a sound he doesn’t know how to describe but knows as well as the sound of his own breathing. And he looks up in time to see a laser cut across the sky, shooting straight past Sherlock, on his left. Another cuts past him to the right, within millimetres of his arm. A third appears directly in front of him, another behind, another below. A cage of lasers in
‘When I said I was lying about the snipers before,’ Jim says, ‘I was lying. Up, please.’

The trembling subsiding, John gets to his feet. Jim does the same, brushing at his suit.

‘Oh, you two,’ Jim says, with a parody of fondness. ‘Walking knowingly into a trap or risking throwing yourself off a building...you really can’t hide anything, can you?’ He looks up at Sherlock, suspended and fighting the wind which threatens to blow him straight into a laser. Stillness is not his strong point either, and John is furious with himself. He should have stayed up there, tried to reach Sherlock, not thrown himself out of the field. But he doesn’t dare move now. All he can do is watch, helplessly, as Sherlock fights to remain in one place.

‘Well, what now?’ Sherlock says, voice as remarkably uninflected as it was when he first arrived. ‘You’re not going to kill me. Think of how bored you’d be again.’

And Jim laughs. Not the quick, coolly amused laughs from earlier, but a full-body laugh that seems to go on for minutes. John stands frozen, the laugh chilling his blood. He doesn’t know what’s happening, and he can’t think of a single way out of this. He glances up at Mary, who’s staring down at them, looking desperate, still fighting to keep herself away from the edge, then at Sherlock, who’s already slipped in his own struggle and had the laser brush momentarily against one arm, leaving a thin burn through his sleeve. Probably just touched his skin, too. Eventually he’ll grow tired and begin slipping more. And John has no idea what to do.

‘You just believe everything I tell you, don’t you?’ Jim says, finally. ‘Extraordinary. The number of times I’ve lied to you, and yet...you just go right on lapping it up. If you’re typical of the people who live round here, things are going to go very well for me indeed. The truth is, Sherlock, that while I’ve certainly enjoyed our game, you really must stop thinking that everything’s all about you.’

‘Then what was all this?’ Sherlock says. ‘The puzzles. Making me dance.’

‘You were poking your nose where it didn’t belong,’ Jim says, with an exaggerated shrug. ‘I’d got everything nicely sorted out, and then you started asking questions. Had to keep you away from the important stuff somehow.’

‘Why not just kill me?’ Sherlock demands. ‘You said there was no point keeping me alive, just
now. So why not do it before?’

‘That was another bluff, my God you’re not on form today, are you? Doesn’t take much, apparently. Good to know. I could kill you, but – what’s your sibling calling himself here? Oh, yes, Mycroft. Mycroft Holmes. He’s already suspicious of me, of course, and by the end of the day at the latest he’ll have me down as an enemy. But if I killed you he’d lose all sense of perspective, all sense of his duty as a government official, and devote every one of his not inconsiderable resources to destroying me. Which would be immensely inconvenient. So as far as it goes, you were right, before. I’d much rather not kill you – not because I’d be bored if I did, believe me, there’s no chance of that, but because it might get in the way of things that matter more than you do. But that certainly doesn’t mean I won’t, if I have to.’

Sibling? John thinks. What on earth –

‘Sibling?’ Mary says, echoing his thoughts, the first words she’s spoken for some time. He can’t see her face from here, but he hears the slight waver in her voice. Whatever’s going on here, Jim has no reason not to kill her or John.

‘You mean you don’t know?’ Jim says, still looking at Sherlock. ‘I’d have a word with “Mycroft” about that if I were you. I’d be interested to know what he has to say for himself.’
Sherlock ignores this, ignores the whole issue, perhaps saving it up for processing later. If he survives that long. John doesn’t trust Jim’s insistence that he’s bluffing for one second. ‘So instead of having me killed, you distracted me. Kept me occupied with puzzles so I wouldn’t investigate your identity,’ Sherlock says.

‘Indeed,’ Jim says, with a smile. ‘It wasn’t difficult. Can’t resist a good mystery, can you? But now my plans have reached a stage where it’s not very convenient for me to be shut up in a government flat with little Molly Hooper. Time to disappear. But I don’t want you following me, and I’ve so enjoyed playing with you, I thought I’d give you one last mystery before I go.’

‘And what makes you think I’m going to pay any attention to it now that I know it’s merely a sideshow to a far more intriguing puzzle? Namely that of who you are, and what you’re up to – and why you were so keen to stop my investigations into the afters.’

‘You won’t have any choice,’ Moriarty says, smiling even wider. ‘They like to call afters robots, don’t they, suggest that we’re heartless? I expect people say it to you all the time. I wonder if even you know how painfully wrong they all are. You’re about to find out, anyway.’

‘I despise riddles,’ Sherlock says.

‘That’s a pity, because you’re about to spend weeks solving one. And here it is: where do the lost ones go, Sherlock?’

‘What you do you mean? What lost ones?’ Sherlock says, and John’s never heard him snap out questions in that way before – not as a stream of consciousness, asking himself, directing his own train of thought, but because he doesn’t know and is too unmoored from himself to consider how to find out.

John looks around again, trying to think of anything he could do to help. God knows he’s been in
tight situations before – but then he was the medic; it was his job to patch Mary up and to shoot their enemies; she was the one whose job it was to find the exit. And she always did, until the day he ended up in the pit – and even then she dropped the chance to bring down an entire Gliesan destroyer, something she’d always been borderline obsessed with having a go at, to find him and get him out. He was never as grateful to her as he should have been, wondered more often than he should if it wouldn’t have been better to die in there.

But he doesn’t want to die now. He’s burning up with the determination to get out of this, to get all three of them out –

– and up in the sky, Mary, now perilously close to the edge, is moving her arm in a strangely deliberate gesture. Moving her head and neck round in circles and – clapping her hands? And she’s twisted to face him, too, holding his gaze while she does it. He can’t see her expression clearly from down here, but even from this distance there’s something oddly intent about it. He stares back at her, wondering why on earth she’s doing a ridiculous dance at a time like this –

- and remembers. Remembers as clearly as if it happened minutes ago. He and Mary, their second proper patrol together after training. Her concentration slipping, complaining about a song stuck in her head, glancing at John and doing the same silly little dance she’s doing now.

And then lasers had come out of nowhere, a Gliesan stealth craft materialising in the gloom. Mary had frozen for a second, taking it in, then turned to John and said –

- said –

John shakes his head at her frantically. Mary nods; he keeps shaking his head and she keeps nodding. She folds her arms, and without them to steady her she’s blown even nearer the edge of the forcefield. She’s close to where he is, now, almost above him.

Jim, meanwhile, is bantering with Sherlock, clearly enjoying Sherlock’s attempts to solve the pointless riddle, asking questions and putting forward theories as to what Jim might mean. Jim’s laughing, saying that he hasn’t even given Sherlock his real motivation to solve it yet and just look at him, that Jim didn’t dare to hope it would be this easy. John wants to tell Sherlock to stop, that it’s a waste of time and Jim is just playing with him, but if John can’t stop Mary from trying what she wants to try then it’s best if Jim’s attention is on Sherlock and not them.

John shakes his head one last time. Mary unfolds her arms, and gives one sharp nod. And then there’s no more time left to argue; she’s repositioning her body, and Jim still hasn’t noticed, so John steadies himself, and –
Mary twists, her whole self moving exactly as she intends it to, fluid grace that reveals nothing of the wind shoving her this way and that. She moves sharply, quickly and with purpose, and she throws herself out of the forcefield.

She plummets at once. She’s still above the building, but barely, coming closer and closer to John at increasing speed. Jim has whirled round, looking almost shocked. John holds his arms tense, moves his legs further apart. He’ll have under a second to get this right, or he and Mary will end up crushed together against the ground.

And here she comes. Body angled perfectly for what they’re about to try. John readies himself –

– and catches her, but only for a moment. Trying to hold onto her would be fatal. Instead he uses the momentarily captured momentum from her fall to half spin, and throw her out into the air again, pointing slightly downwards but hopefully not so much that she won’t get where she needs to go.

For an awful, heartstopping moment he thinks she isn’t going to make it. The captured momentum is large, and she’s small and light, but for that moment the nearest building seems kilometres away. He refuses to shut his eyes. The second or two it takes seem to last forever.

And then she’s there, on the roof of the building next to theirs. She doesn’t hesitate, but scrambles to her feet and runs towards the maintenance trapdoor that leads down into the building. Her trousers are ripped at the knees, which must be scraped raw, and her hands too. It’s hard to tell how much she’s bleeding at this distance, but as she moves he sees far too many flashes of red against the brown of her skin. But she’s running, she’s alive, and though John hates the idea of her in pain as much as he ever has, he knows she’s had far worse a thousand times over. She’s going to be OK. She’s got out alive. Now John just has to hope that he and Sherlock can do the same.

He turns back to Jim triumphantly. ‘You should go,’ he says. ‘She’s going for help. The police could be here in minutes.’

‘Good,’ Jim says, his voice taking on yet another tone. ‘Very good. I didn’t see that coming, I must admit. What clever pets you’ve got, Sherlock. I suppose I’d better hurry up, then. This is what I wanted to show you.’

He turns his hand, and projects his handchip screen into the air. It’s showing a video. A room that looks very familiar to John. He can’t quite place it, until the bedclothes start moving, and a
woman’s head lifts momentarily before slumping back down, a hand tugging the covers over her.

It’s Harry. Drunk, disoriented, exhausted. John stares, tries not to give any visible reaction, but feels his blood running cold. What the hell could this lunatic want with Harry?

‘Watch carefully,’ Jim croons. ‘This is going to be good. And it happens so fast. Blink and you’ll – oh!’

And as he says you’ll, Harry disappears.

Just like that. No flash of light, no fade out, no whirling vortex. She’s gone, and someone else is sitting on her bed, staring directly at the camera and smiling.

‘No,’ John hears himself say. ‘No. It’s a trick. What the fuck? It’s a trick, stop it, I am – I am not falling for this.’

‘It’s altogether real, I assure you,’ Jim says, smiling warmly. ‘I’m off now. Once I’m safely out I’ll let Sherlock down and the two of you can run along and check.’ His smile grows wider. ‘Toodles,’ he says. ‘Enjoy investigating!’

He takes two steps back, and disappears over the edge of the roof. A moment later he’s visible again, giving John a mock salute from an avia that appears to be flying on autopilot.

It shoots into the sky, and John’s hands stretch after it, fists clenching, but there’s nothing he can do. When it’s only a dot in the distance, the lasers around Sherlock vanish, and he drifts slowly down to the roof. No sooner have his feet touched solid ground than he’s stumbling over to John, still disoriented from the gravity change.

‘Are you all right?’ he demands, and his hands are bumping clumsily against John’s face, flinching back in retreat as his conditioning takes over and then stretching out to touch again, as if checking for some kind of invisible injury.

‘Yeah,’ John says automatically, then: ‘I don’t know. I don’t – Harry. Look, never mind me, are you all right, the lasers –’
‘I’m fine,’ Sherlock says, his voice still a little faster, a little higher than it ought to be. ‘It’s minor.’

John doesn’t trust him on this, and lifts his arm to examine it for himself. The sleeve will need to be removed to look at it properly, though, and he can only get a very vague idea of how bad it might be – enough to know it’s probably not too serious, but must hurt like hell. They’ll definitely need a trip to hospital. John sighs, and brings a hand to his face. The people he cares about are getting torn at and hurt and what kind of medic is he if he can’t stop that?

‘It’s all right,’ Sherlock says, voice a little calmer. ‘It’s all right, John, it’ll be – we’ll go to her now. It may be a trick, like you said.’

‘May not be,’ John mumbles. ‘You – look, I should go alone, you’re just playing into Jim’s – into Moriarty’s hands if you put any effort into investigating this. Go after him instead.’

‘Mary will have got the police by now,’ Sherlock says. ‘They can chase him. I’m going with you to Harry’s.’ He pauses. ‘That thing you – that you tried – what you risked – never mind. Uh. Something else. You and Mary, how did you manage a plan requiring split-second coordination when you couldn’t talk to each other?’

‘Because we’d done it before,’ John explains, walking towards the lift, ignoring the pain in his knees with every movement and trying to keep his mind off Harry. ‘One of our first missions, we weren’t taking it as seriously as we should, and she was doing this stupid dance and we got attacked. And she – she’s a fucking nutter, seriously – she turns to me and she goes, I’m going to jump out, and you’re going to steer the craft underneath me before I fall and grab me, then spin with my momentum and chuck me at the stealth craft. So I naturally said what the fuck, and she said that the Gliesans wouldn’t be expecting that and she could shoot them in the back of the head and we’d be home free. I’d have argued with her but there was no time and they were already shooting at us. So I did what she said, and she was battered half to death, but only half. I took over the craft and flew her to the hospital, where we both got a bollocking we thoroughly deserved. And, well, we survived.’

‘Ah,’ Sherlock says. ‘So she did the stupid dance just now, I assume, and you worked out what she meant – either unusually high levels of deduction for you or, no, it’s not that, is it, it’s something more complicated than that.’

‘We know each other inside out,’ John says, shrugging, stepping into the lift. ‘We’ve come closer to literally knowing each other inside out than I care to think about. I normally know what she’s thinking.’
‘Ah,’ Sherlock says, and says nothing more till they get down into the tubes. But when John’s mind wanders miserably back to Harry, Sherlock puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes it hard, and John lays his own hand over it and keeps it there until he feels Sherlock begin to relax, to take its presence there for granted.

And as they sit in the tube car Sherlock says, tone stilted, with several awkward pauses: ‘It’ll be – OK, John. Even if she is gone, I’ll find her. I promise you.’

John nods, and feels just a little better. As long as he concentrates on that feeling – as long as he doesn’t think of the strange woman sitting on Harry’s bed. Of the person Sherlock replaced, and the people left mourning her. He can’t think it, not now: Sherlock will read it all on his face, and he knows it isn’t fair.

He rests his head on Sherlock’s shoulder, and looks at the wires and lights, and waits.

*

John rings the buzzer for Harry’s flat, forces himself to only do it once, and briefly, not to hold it or press it repeatedly until the door’s answered. It takes a moment, but then the door opens a crack, and a face peers round. A face belonging, recognisably, to the person from Moriarty’s video, the one who replaced Harry.

‘Hello,’ te says, disconcertingly calm. ‘Yes, I’m the woman from the video. Why don’t you come in?’

She opens the door wide and for a second John gapes, forgetting everything. She’s stark naked. He follows her through the door, looking awkwardly away from her, and hears Sherlock come in after him.

‘Feel free to search for your sister,’ she says, with a hand gesture that takes in the whole flat. ‘You won’t find her, of course, but you may as well satisfy yourself on that. And then come and sit down and we’ll have a little chat.’

In a sort of trance, John does as she says, going into each room and staring around numbly, before walking back to the entrance area and sitting, as the woman told him to, on a sofa. Sherlock remains standing, stiffly upright and suspicious. ‘You’re not disoriented,’ he says, ‘and you were expecting us. You’re naked but you’ve taken some time over your hair and makeup and nails. This
is – a performance? You’re working with Moriarty and you want something from us, you want –’

The woman smiles, rests her chin in her hands, and keeps her gaze fixed on Sherlock, waiting. After a moment she says, ‘Well? Go on. I’d hate to interrupt, I hear that’s considered rude around here.’

Sherlock says nothing. He stares back at her, taking her in, deducing. John wonders what he’s seeing.

‘Could it be that you don’t know?’ she asks, stretching out on the sofa, suddenly displaying her whole body again.

John, sitting opposite, stares determinedly at a sofa cushion and says, ‘Where’s my sister?’

‘Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?’ the woman says. ‘Where do they end up, the ones who vanish? Be honest, John Watson, you’ve never worried all that much about that before, have you? A passing thought, of course, a pang of sorrow for all those losers of loved ones. But that’s all. You should be glad this has happened. Grateful to Jim for giving you an education.’ Her voice is even smoother and more cultured than Sherlock’s.

He glances back at Sherlock. Sherlock is staring at the woman with an expression on his face that looks almost hungry. She is beautiful, it’s true, almost eerily perfect, except for the little white scars on her sides, same as Sherlock’s, and a few freckles around each shoulder that form a sort of line running along the edge of her arm. Come to think of it, Sherlock has a similar pattern. Perhaps that’s why he’s staring, some new theory, perhaps it isn’t what it looks like. Not that John would mind. It’d just be a bit of a surprise, when Sherlock’s never so much as mentioned having any sexual interest in anyone but him. Still, he was bound to fancy someone else sooner or later. And this woman has presence; that’s undeniable. But she replaced John’s sister, and she’s clearly involved with Moriarty somehow, and surely at least one of those things should be putting Sherlock off.

‘Where the hell is Harry?’ John repeats, looking straight at the woman this time, keeping his eyes on her face.

‘You’re not a very good boyfriend, John,’ the woman says, chidingly. ‘Trying to spoil Sherlock’s puzzle for him.’
'We’re leaving,’ Sherlock says, suddenly. ‘More important things to do.’

‘Suits me,’ the woman says. ‘I’ve got more important things to do too, as it happens. I wouldn’t assume you’ve seen the last of me, though.’

John gets up and follows Sherlock to the door. He glances back once at the woman as he goes. She’s still smiling, still looks utterly serene. John doesn’t understand anything that’s going on, and he’s uneasily conscious that nothing is as it should be. Moriarty – and this woman – appear to know who and what they are, and they have no apparent interest in telling anyone. John and Sherlock are going to have to go back over their information and sort what they know from the lies and the guesses. Harry is gone. And there was something else, wasn’t there –

‘Come on, John,’ Sherlock says as they close the door behind them. ‘We’re going to see Mycroft.’

Ah, yes, of course. What’s your sibling calling himself here? ‘Shouldn’t we go to hospital first?’ John asks. ‘You must be in a lot of pain.’

‘Later,’ Sherlock promises. ‘Answers are more important than stitches.’ He says it like it’s obvious. Admittedly, John probably should have known that would be Sherlock’s view.

Mycroft...Mycroft’s been there all along, at the edges of the mystery, behaving inexplicably. It’s possible that Moriarty’s hint could be some kind of solution. More likely, of course, that he was just messing with them again; John should know better than to pay any attention. And yet – he can’t quite help but think of the angle of Mycroft’s tilted head when considering John, of the uncanny brilliance so similar in type and different perhaps only in presentation to Sherlock’s. The resemblance is there. And though the missing children angle turned up nothing, it’s true they never finished investigating, distracted by the new puzzle of Sebastian Moran, and then by Moriarty. (And there’s another thought: was Moriarty replacing Moran just a coincidence? Or are they connected somehow? John’s head is heavy with the questions and grief comingling in it, flailing frantically against each other inside his brain.)

It isn’t impossible that Mycroft could have lost a brother, years and years ago, had someone replaced. Perhaps that could even have driven him to become the Afters Coordinator. John isn’t sure, though, what the chances are of them getting any answers out of confronting him on the subject. Mycroft might not know, and if he does, why hasn’t he told Sherlock already? Assuming any of this is true. Which it probably isn’t.

John grits his teeth, ignores the headache building up behind his eyes, and steps resolutely out of the building after Sherlock.
By the time they get to Mycroft’s office, John has let Mary know he and Sherlock are OK, and she lets him know that she’s been to hospital to get patched up and that the police have so far been unable to track Moriarty. John is deeply relieved that Mary’s all right and entirely unsurprised at Moriarty not having been found. Anthea shows them into Mycroft’s office, but when she moves to leave, Mycroft holds up a hand to stop her. ‘Stay,’ he says. ‘I think – I may need you.’

John stares at him at that. There’s a note in Mycroft’s voice he’s never heard before, a warmth, a wavering, as if he’s concealing some strong emotion. But Mycroft’s emotions are always far more perfectly concealed than that. And why would he need Anthea? What does he think Sherlock and John are going to say?

‘You know, I suppose, about John’s sister?’ Sherlock says. He sounds calm, but John can see through him much more easily than through Mycroft, and suspects he’s anything but.

‘Mm,’ Mycroft says. ‘Very sad. The woman who replaced her has been collected, by the way. She’s taken the name Irene Adler.’

‘I don’t care about her,’ Sherlock says. ‘I care about Harry, and Moriarty, and you. Let’s talk siblings, Mycroft.’

‘Yes,’ Mycroft says, sitting back in his chair. Behind him, Anthea takes one step in his direction, so that she’s standing right by his shoulder. ‘Yes, I suppose we’ll have to, now.’

‘Jim Moriarty’s a liar, of course,’ Sherlock says. ‘But he didn’t lie this time. Did he? I should have known as soon as you gave me your surname – why was that?’ he adds, suddenly, breaking off.

Mycroft says nothing to that. John waits, but several minutes pass in silence. Sherlock and Mycroft watch each other, and John is convinced they’re having a silent conversation, reading minute changes in each other’s facial expressions. He has no idea what conclusions they’re coming to, until finally:

‘I had...not seen you for a long time,’ Mycroft says, sounding, to John’s astonishment, audibly uncomfortable, ‘and then you didn’t remember. I wanted something to connect us. Sentiment,’ he adds, looking put out. ‘Not something I make a habit of indulging.’
Is he admitting to it? John thinks, astounded. It certainly sounds like it. There’s definitely not been a denial. Is Mycroft Holmes really saying that Sherlock is his brother, that he’s known all along, and that when they were reunited he ensured they shared a surname again out of sentiment? John doesn’t know if he can believe that. It seems drastically out of character. And yet how could anyone ever guess at what depth of feeling Mycroft might be hiding? He’d never give anything away.

‘Of course you don’t,’ Sherlock scoffs. ‘How do you explain her, then?’ And he nods in Anthea’s direction.

Mycroft inclines his head. ‘My two lapses,’ he says. ‘Perpetual, infuriating. And you, see, Sherlock, where sentiment has led me? You’ve found your own...helpmate, and he has those he cares about too – friends, family. And I find myself, for your sake, drawn to become involved in matters that should not concern me at all. Caring is a bigger disadvantage than I think you realise, even now. The only disadvantage in the world that cannot be overcome.’

‘So,’ John says, struggling to keep up with developments, ‘the afters are people who were taken as children after all? Sherlock disappeared, and –’

‘No,’ Sherlock says. ‘I still don’t know what we are. But I do know that Mycroft is one of us.’

‘But he’s not – he’s so –’ John breaks off. Mycroft definitely isn’t registered as an after and would never have been able to become Afters coordinator if he was. So is Sherlock saying –

‘An incredible trick he’s pulled off under the eyes of the government,’ Sherlock agrees. ‘Nicely done. But there’s no doubt about it. I should have realised before, but there were so many mysteries around him that I couldn’t separate them out. Without the mystery of his interest in me or his decision to change my name fogging the way, things are much clearer. And one thing in particular made it obvious, and that’s her.’ He nods at Anthea.

‘What about her?’ John says.

‘She’s capable of a perfect poker face at all times, that much is obvious,’ Sherlock says. ‘But she gave herself away. When she was talking about her age, joking about people thinking her an after. You asked her if she was, she said no. And it didn’t sound quite right, did it? It sounded like a lie.’
‘So –’ John says.

‘Except she’s a flawless liar. She wasn’t under pressure; it was an obvious question you asked, one she led the conversation to herself. No reason for her to slip up. So then the slip was deliberate. She wanted us to wonder whether she might be an after. And she’d never do that without Mycroft’s permission. Which leads us to the conclusion that Mycroft wanted the rumour spread that his assistant was an unregistered rep. But if she were really Melas Sinope – and either Melas Sinope or his E.L.I., Mina James, must have become government officials; no one else would have been able to remove all the photographs of them from every database – then that would clearly be idiotic, and whatever else he is Mycroft certainly isn’t that. So that leaves us with one possibility. Mycroft encourages the rumours to draw attention away from a bigger secret. Anthea isn’t Melas Sinope; she’s Mina James. Sebastian Moran isn’t Sinope either. Mycroft is.’

Mycroft places his hands on his desk, one on top of another. Anthea puts her hand on his shoulder for several seconds, then removes it; he gives no sign of having noticed.

‘I suppose you’re going to deny it all,’ Sherlock says. ‘In which case –’

‘You always were so impatient,’ Mycroft says, sighing. ‘Sherlock, since you arrived you’ve come to me several times. Name me one time you’ve made a definite claim that I’ve denied outright.’

Sherlock’s silent. Mycroft continues, ‘I’m not preventing you from finding answers. I will happily confirm anything you discover for yourself, but for a number of reasons I would prefer not to hand any solutions to you. Indeed, I am not going to hand any solutions to you. Yes, I am an after; yes, on arrival I took the name Melas Sinope. And then there were...tasks I needed to carry out, goals it was essential I accomplish. I could make little progress with them while under supervision, so I planned my escape. Mina –’ he turns to smile, with shocking gentleness, at Anthea – ‘helped me, and has been helping me since.’

‘But you remember Sherlock,’ John says, realising. ‘You remember him from before. So you – do you remember everything? Do you know who you are?’

Chapter End Notes

Note: this chapter definitely deserves a 'bad science' warning and also a 'do not try this at home' warning. Apologies to physicists/anyone who knows more about how momentum works than me (which, as is probably fairly obvious, includes practically everyone).
‘Of course he does,’ Sherlock says, scornfully. ‘But he’s enjoying playing with us, enjoying watching me try and solve problems he already has the solutions for. I bet I hated you, didn’t I?’ Then, suddenly, Sherlock’s flattening his hands against the slides of his head, and staring. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘Oh, I – you instructed me, didn’t you? You – the conditioning – you were the one that trained me.’

‘No,’ Mycroft says, shaking his head. ‘I taught you, unofficially, when you were little; I hoped that you were going to be a particularly valuable addition to the programme. You were only ten when I started, and you weren’t interested; I tried for two years and then...circumstances intervened. Apparently the official instructors had better luck training you. I don’t know whether to be flattered that apparently those early memories of our teaching sessions are the ones that left a lasting impression, and not the six years you must have had for official training.’

‘All I remember is a feeling of pure irritation,’ Sherlock says, looking surly. ‘And I can see why. You must have been an unbearable teacher. I suppose it would be too much to ask what exactly I was trained to do?’

‘Soon,’ Mycroft says, an almost entreating tone creeping into his voice that alarms John a great deal. ‘Not yet. It isn’t safe for you to know yet, but soon I promise you I will answer everything. Who we are, why we’re here. I have – a contact who has better access to the afters programme than I do. I’m waiting to hear from her. When I do, when I know that it’s safe to proceed, then I will require your help and I will not expect you to provide that without knowing everything. But please, Sherlock, not yet.’

‘So it is a government programme?’ John says.

There’s a short pause, and then Mycroft says, ‘Yes.’ John blinks. That seemed suspiciously easy, particularly considering Mycroft just said he wasn’t going to give them any answers yet.

‘I know this is of little use to you, Sherlock,’ Mycroft says, ‘but I am glad to see you, and I think you will help me, once you understand what I’ve been trying to do all these years. I never expected –’ another surprising pause, which in anyone else John might have read as trying to think of what to say, or struggling to overcome emotion, but which in Mycroft is incomprehensible – ‘to have this moment. You hated the training I tried to give you when you were a child so much that I assumed you would never enter the programme.’ Another pause, then Mycroft seems to regain something of his usual manner: ‘Anyway, there’s no reason why this should mean anything to you. You don’t remember me. Did you have any other questions?’
‘Where do they go?’ Sherlock says, putting his hands on Mycroft’s desk and leaning forward. He’s still standing, so that he leans almost over Mycroft, deliberately looming. ‘You know where we come from, so when befores disappear, where do they go?’

John doesn’t ever remember hearing him sound so coldly angry, so furiously intent.

‘Not yet,’ Mycroft says. ‘I am sorry, Sherlock. It won’t be long. I give you my word that no harm will come to Harriet Watson in the interim.’

John’s heart is suddenly racing. ‘You mean they survive,’ he says. ‘She’s not – not –’

‘She is alive,’ Mycroft says. ‘I am more or less certain that they all are.’

‘More or fucking less?’ John says. ‘More or fucking less?’

‘I’ll know soon,’ Mycroft says, sounding almost chiding, and how he has the nerve John has no idea. ‘My contact –‘

‘Who is this bloody contact?’ John demands. ‘Can you at least tell us that much?’

‘I suppose so,’ Mycroft says. ‘The girl I replaced – Anna Bests. She was only sixteen at the time, but she had – and continues to have – extraordinary nerve, ingenuity and determination. Due to the...unusual nature of my arrival and my consequent retention of my memories, I was able to engineer a brief communication with her. We’ve managed to find opportunities to communicate since then from time to time, though it hasn’t been easy. Another opportunity will arise tomorrow. I can tell you that last time we spoke, six months ago, all of the befores who had disappeared were still alive, and there was no sign that that was going to change. There is absolutely no reason to think that your sister is dead, John.’

He sounds so calm, as though he’s not disputing an assumption that the whole damn planet’s shared for decades. John wants to shake him, or punch him in the face, or punch someone in the face.

‘I won’t rest until I find Harriet Watson,’ Sherlock says, in the same tone as before. ‘I couldn’t care less whether it compromises your secret project –’ the words secret project he practically spits – ‘I will. Find. Her.’
‘So impatient,’ Mycroft murmurs, again, and yeah, John’s definitely going to punch him.

‘No,’ Anthea says, so quietly John barely hears her, and he looks towards her to see her shaking her head, with tiny movements, eyes fixed directly on him. Her arms are loosely at her sides; there’s nothing threatening in her posture at all, and yet John knows what he’s seeing, knows that if he were to take a step towards Mycroft right now he’d not get the chance to take a second one. He feels a grudging respect, in spite of himself.

‘I expect you’ll be hearing from us,’ Sherlock says. ‘Or if not, about us, and what we’ve found out.’

Mycroft inclines his head. ‘A hint might be in order, I suppose,’ he says. ‘Yes, I think I can do that much. A hint to help, not with the puzzle, or the game, but with the two of you.’

‘I don’t need your hint –’ Sherlock says, as John says, ‘What?’ Sherlock glares at him; John shrugs.

‘Just this,’ Mycroft says. ‘I advise you to think of trails of milk or scattered straw, of birds and dogs and the stories we make out of stars. Of ink spirals traced layer by layer against skin. Of the words and patterns we use to fit the incomprehensible into our tiny overflowing heads, and how the differences between them may not matter so much as the fact that all of us are trying –’

‘You were born this sententious, weren’t you?’ Sherlock interrupts. ‘I’m sure I remember it, you know. The pain of having to listen to you is piercing through whatever they did to my brain. That you, I suppose, gave your blessing to before you left me wherever we came from.’

‘I would never have allowed this, had I been able to prevent it,’ Mycroft says, quietly. ‘As for sententiousness...you never did like speeches, but I think you may find yourself in need of certain reminders before long. Both of you.’

‘Goodbye,’ Sherlock says, hand on the doorknob.

‘Goodbye, Sherlock Holmes,’ Mycroft says. He stands, turns to face the window, and doesn’t watch them walk out of the door.
John insists on taking Sherlock to the hospital to have his laser injury treated after that. When the doctors peel back his sleeve, John winces; of course it’s worse than Sherlock allowed him to see. Sherlock, though, insists that it doesn’t really hurt, and John rolls his eyes at him, and they bicker while he’s stitched up and while he’s waiting for the stitches to melt into his body and vanish. John’s relieved that the after specialists do seem to know what they’re doing; if this hospital had turned out useless it would have been a long journey to get to the next nearest one that can do afters. And he’s glad to see Sherlock safe and whole again. But there’s something about the bickering and banter between them that feels a little unreal, as though there are things simmering beneath the surface. They both have a lot on their minds, and there are too many things John’s trying not to say.

On the way home, they pass a big news screen just as the headline flashes up: Government officials’ ceremonial meeting with soldiers tomorrow. Figures to attend include the Foreign Secretary, the Afters Coordinator...

John nods at it. ‘Do you think that has something to do with the opportunity Mycroft says he’ll have to talk to Anna Bests?’ he asks. ‘I mean, it’s probably just a coincidence, he must have meetings all the time, though maybe not with soldiers…’

‘It would make a certain amount of sense if the programme, whatever it is, had something to do with the army,’ Sherlock says thoughtfully. ‘Could be.’

Then they meet Mary back at Baker Street. She’s fine, if perhaps slightly shaken. ‘So much for relaxing and getting our minds off things,’ she says, grimly, curled up in a corner of the sofa. ‘Next time we go out, we’re definitely sticking to solid ground.’

‘I’d have thought one mad criminal on a rooftop would be nothing, coming straight from the starline,’ John says jokily, trying not to sound even slightly wistful, because that would be a bit messed up.

‘I dunno,’ Mary says. ‘It wasn’t what happened, I don’t think, because you’re right, I was in no more danger there than...no, it was him. He frightened me.’

‘It’s not personal, I guess, with the Gliesans,’ John muses. ‘I mean, they’re just shooting us because we’re human, same way we’re shooting them because they’re not. Dunno about you, but it’s not like I hate them, I just...’
‘You do, a little bit,’ Mary insists. ‘For hurting us so much. Even if you know it’s not rational, that you’ve done the same to them...I’ve seen the way you look at their ships. Part of you loathes them. And I expect they feel the same.’

‘Yeah,’ John admits. ‘Maybe. But them in general, not any one of them in particular, it’s not...’

‘I know,’ Mary says. ‘Having someone like Moriarty take an interest is not...something I want, personally. Not that he was really interested in me. But I don’t much fancy being collateral damage either. I have every intention of dying at the controls of a scout ship. I’ve always said, haven’t I?’

‘And I always said I wouldn’t let you,’ John says, staring at the ground. ‘But then I got myself sent home. No one to stop you now.’

She says nothing, but reaches out to brush her hand against his for a moment. ‘Do you think everything Moriarty said about time travel was just made up?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. He’s hunched over in his armchair, fingers steepled. ‘It never fitted. The people who are coming here, our language skills, our ability to fit into this society got better as time passed, didn’t it? Which suggests gradual training on the other end, not lots of people being dispatched at once. No. His story never made sense. I just wanted answers, and I was almost prepared to ignore what didn’t fit. What happened today saved me from that, at least. I have to ensure I don’t make that mistake again...’

His voice fades out, and he looks away from them; within seconds it’s clear he’s deep in his head and not seeing the room at all. The sight gives John hope: Sherlock is thinking already, figuring things out. Mycroft said Harry was almost certainly alive and unharmed, and if they can just find her...

She was drunk, though, John remembers. When she vanished. Wherever she’s gone, will they have helped her with the withdrawal, or left her to shake her way through it? If that doesn’t kill her, which it could, it will at best be horrible, and admittedly she’s done it before, gone from drinking constantly to drinking nothing, but she’d ended up in hospital that time –

He feels Mary’s hand squeeze around his, and shakes himself out of it. ‘Mycroft said they were alive,’ he says. ‘All of them. Everyone who’s disappeared.’ He’s already told her, but he’s going to have to repeat it several times before it sinks in. Her face seemed to splinter in half when he first said it, before going abruptly back to normal and then splintering again, her eyes widening, mouth
opening and then shutting hard, teeth digging into it. She’d clenched and unclenched and clenched her fists. And John didn’t know what to say. He had no answers for the stream of questions that came from her after that, and eventually she nodded and went quiet and retreated to her current position on the sofa.

He can’t even imagine what it’s like for her. He heard they’re alive from Mycroft within a couple of hours of watching Harry vanish. He didn’t have time to accept the idea that he was never going to see her again, that she was unlikely to still be alive. Mary’s had years of coping with her father’s disappearance. And now...it would be one thing if they knew for certain. But John doesn’t know whether they can trust Mycroft – well, actually, he’s pretty damn sure that they can’t trust Mycroft in general, but John can’t imagine why he’d lie about this, but then he still doesn’t know what Mycroft’s up to. By his own account, he’s playing an incredibly long game, has been working on a single plan for years, but John doesn’t know how to begin to guess what that might be. Perhaps Sherlock’s getting somewhere. Solving puzzles is what he does, after all, what he puts first.

That thought makes John’s head buzz strangely, so he pushes it away and turns his attention back to Mary. ‘Are you OK?’ he asks. It doesn’t begin to cover what he wants to say, but they’ve never been overly wordy with each other, never needed to.

‘Course,’ she says. ‘I’m brilliant. I’m thrilled. I mean, of course I am, I just...you know. I don’t know what to think, to be honest.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘I know. Fuck, Mary, I’m sorry, I don’t think this leave can have gone the way you planned it.’

‘I hate it when things go the way I plan them,’ she says, and smiles at him. Then she gets to her feet. ‘I promised I’d call my mum,’ she says. ‘Though fuck knows what I’m going to say to her. I can’t tell her, obviously, not till we have some clue what the hell’s going on. But not telling her isn’t going to be easy. I’m not much of a liar, and right now I can’t even think about anything else.’

‘Good luck,’ John says, getting up to hug her before she leaves.

Once she goes, Sherlock slowly unfolds himself from his chair and looks at John for a long time. Then he says, ‘You aren’t behaving as though you resent me.’

‘For lying to me?’ John says, and suddenly everything he hasn’t been saying is right there, burning up through his throat. ‘For telling me you’d given up on chasing the bomber and then messaging him and almost getting us all killed? Yeah, I pretty much expect that sort of thing from you by now. But resentment implies some sort of settled cold feeling I’ve learned to accept, doesn’t it?’
Which is definitely not the case. I am fucking furious with you. If he’d killed you, Sherlock –‘

‘That’s what you’re angry about.’ Sherlock sounds – relieved? And a little breathless. Surely that’s not right. ‘That I lied, and put us in danger, and by the sound of it mainly that I put myself in danger. You still – that’s good. And I – am sorry. I am. Sorry.’

And, well, he should be, John thinks. It is entirely appropriate and really nothing worthy of congratulation that Sherlock’s sorry for the stunt he pulled today. But John, despite himself, is grateful to hear it. Though that, in turn, alarms him. He wonders, not for the first time, about what Sherlock’s doing to him.

‘Why did you lie, though?’ he asks.

‘We would have fought about it, otherwise,’ Sherlock says. ‘It would have been dull, and frankly upsetting, and I knew every possible path it could take. They all ended with me going to meet the bomber anyway; you never had any chance of convincing me not to. It seemed more expedient to skip to that. But I should have foreseen that he wouldn’t allow me to keep you out of danger, and that you’d be safer if you understood the plan. So I am sorry.’

John puts a hand over his eyes and rubs it across his face before letting it drop. He feels, suddenly, very tired. He doesn’t know how to begin to try and explain why Sherlock can’t do things like that, how the fact that he did it makes John feel, or...any of it. Nor does he know how to ask how much of this morning was real, how much of Sherlock’s affection was part of a plan to keep John sidetracked and unguessing. Sherlock hasn’t even apologised for lying, for making unilateral decisions and choosing manipulation over discussion, but only for being wrong, for lack of foresight. John wishes that it weren’t his job to explain, somehow he feels like maybe it would be easier if this were just a conversation between two people who were close, who cared about each other, and not also a teacher and student.

Something else occurs to him, and since it’s a welcome distraction he voices it. ‘Wait, then why did you think I’d resent you, if it wasn’t about that?’

Sherlock looks hard at a point somewhere over John’s shoulder. ‘When Mary spoke about her father, the day she came with us to see Molly and Jim, she said to you but you’ve never lost anyone, have you? And from your reaction I thought it quite likely that you’d feel differently about afters, if you had. You’re easily affected by irrational emotions, and I was concerned. That’s all.’

‘Oh,’ John says. ‘Well – I don’t know what to feel, after what Mycroft said. But it wouldn’t be your fault, either way. I’m not that irrational.’
‘You are, actually,’ Sherlock says.

John suddenly finds himself welling up with inexplicable giggles, and he moves forward, drops his head onto Sherlock’s shoulder and laughs himself almost to tears. Though when he thinks he might actually be about to cry, he stops himself, raises his head again, and says, ‘It’s been...kind of a long day. I think I’m going to go to bed.’

‘I’ll come,’ Sherlock says, getting up at once and beginning to shed clothes.

John hesitates. ‘I’m not really up for...’

Sherlock shakes his head. ‘I just want – can’t we – physical contact without sexual stimulation –’

‘Oh,’ John says. ‘Yes. Your handbook didn’t talk about that?’

‘It did, but it used the word cuddling, and I was trying to avoid that,’ Sherlock says, making an entirely charming revolted face. John presses his lips to it, strokes Sherlock’s cheek briefly with his mouth, feeling slightly ridiculous but also unable not to do it. The tiredness is still there, bone deep, but he doesn’t want to touch it right now. He would rather touch Sherlock, and not think at all.

‘Why are you stripping, though?’ he asks.

‘To increase the amount of my skin that’ll be in direct contact with yours,’ Sherlock says, like it’s obvious, and it becomes necessary to kiss him again, and a little easier to avoid thinking about anything that’s happened today.

John strips off too, since he’d hate to deprive Sherlock of access to his skin, and anyway, he can’t help but think that Sherlock has a point about increased closeness. Together like this, it’s not hard to see the appeal. With Sherlock’s hands resting determinedly on John’s shoulders, less hesitant than ever before, and Sherlock’s arms making a loose circle about him. John has just one arm draped over Sherlock’s stomach, and is holding himself much less stiffly than Sherlock is. Their legs are pressed together, supplying each other with warmth.

Tomorrow they’re going to rescue John’s sister, solve several different mysteries, and probably, the
way things have been going, almost get killed at least twice. But this is what they have for now. There are worse ways to face terror and chaos and loss, John thinks, pulling Sherlock in closer. And for now, being able to do that is what matters.

*

Mary returns so bright and early the next morning that Sherlock is, astonishingly, still asleep when the buzzer goes. John isn’t; he’s been lying awake for the past half hour, enjoying the rare experience of watching Sherlock sleep, brow smooth, John’s arms wrapped tightly around his back.

He thought of waking Sherlock, of course he did. The idea of lying in bed while Harry was God knew where seemed unacceptable, at first. But then he remembered Sherlock’s exhaustion the night before, and decided that he needed the rest, and that he would think better, have more of a shot at solving the unsolvable, if he slept in past six.

Sherlock stirs, and John unfolds from him to go and answer the door.

He and Mary sit talking in the living room while they wait for Sherlock to come downstairs. He takes his time; he’s most likely pacing the bedroom, hands in his hair, muttering to himself and running through options. So John chats to Mary, and by silent mutual consent they don’t talk about anything that happened the day before.

Until, inevitably, they do. Mary’s been edgy, weird, the way she gets when she’s avoiding talking about something. So finally John has to say: ‘Look, just tell me. What is it?’

Mary pushes her hands through her short hair, twines her fingers together and apart again in a familiar nervous gesture, and finally says, ‘OK, but don’t, you know...I mean, we really don’t have to. It’s not – it’s just a ridiculous...’

‘A ridiculous what?’

She sighs. ‘Something’s been worrying me. And it’s stupid, and I really don’t want to worry you with it too, so...’

‘Tell me,’ John insists. ‘One more thing to be stressed about can’t make any difference, surely.’
She refuses to meet his eyes, as she says, ‘Fine. It’s just – Moriarty clearly arrived with his memories, he didn’t lie about that at least...I mean, I suppose he could have arrived with no memories and instantly decided to make some up just to cause trouble, but it seems much more likely to me that he came here with a plan. I think he was communicating with Moran somehow before he arrived, that they were connected. There’s too many coincidences otherwise.’

‘Yeah, I agree,’ John says. ‘But none of that’s news to us, is it?’

‘No,’ Mary says. ‘It’s not that. It’s – Mycroft Holmes said he had his memories too, right? And from what you said it sounds like the woman...Irene Adler, like she did too. So either they’re lying, or there’s just something weird going on with the three of them, or...’

‘Or?’ John says.

‘Why would those three have their memories and no one else?’ Mary says. ‘It doesn’t...entirely make sense to me.’

‘There’s obviously things we don’t know about it,’ John says.

‘Yeah,’ Mary says. ‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

She still won’t look him in the eye. Slowly, John says, ‘What do you mean?’

‘You won’t want to hear this,’ she says. ‘But he’s lied to you before, you told me that yourself.’

‘Mycroft, or Moriarty?’ John says, puzzled.

‘Sherlock,’ Mary says, now finally looking up and resolutely meeting John’s gaze. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t say this. But you said Mycroft said the afters were a government programme, and I can’t stop thinking...what if it’s all some giant social experiment? What if they all know who they are and they’re just...’
‘Pretending,’ John says, dully. ‘Is that really what you think?’

‘No!’ Mary protests. ‘No, I don’t really, I just – the suspicion just came into my head, and I hate it, I know it sounds like some fucked up SPP conspiracy theory. But...like you said, there’s stuff we don’t know, and that makes me nervous.’

John wants to be angry with her, but he knows what she’s saying is fair, and he’s only angry because he doesn’t want to hear it. So he only says, ‘Yeah. Me too.’

‘I’ll change the subject,’ Mary says, smiling at him. ‘And, because I’m really tactful, I’ll change it to one you’ll hate just as much so it won’t even seem like I’m doing it.’

John snorts. ‘So smooth,’ he says.

‘Aren’t I just?’ Mary says. ‘So. Your leg. Have you had any more bad moments since the one I saw?’

‘No,’ John says. ‘The technique almost always works, actually...I panicked a bit when it didn’t on the roof, but it’s got a pretty remarkable success rate. I guess I probably will have a few more slip ups, but...I think it’s for real.’ He can’t quite believe it, even hearing himself say the words.

‘That’s amazing,’ Mary says. ‘So what next?’

‘Well,’ John says, slowly, ‘I suppose I’ll have to try and find out if there’s any grad students or anyone who could start up some research, if no one’s done it already. This could help other people, so...honestly it’s the last thing I want to do, draw attention to myself and probably have to be a lab rat, but it would be amazing if it worked for other people too.’

‘It would,’ Mary agrees. ‘But that’s not quite what I meant. I meant what’s next for you? As in...well. Would you think about...I mean, if you could convince the army medical examiners it was really gone for good – would you go back?’

John freezes. ‘Re-enlist?’ he says.
‘Yeah,’ Mary says, twining her fingers again. ‘I know you...you’ve missed it. And I’ve missed you, you know I have, it’s not the same out there without you, not that that should be a consideration, I mean God if you’re happy for fuck’s sake don’t worry about me, in fact forget I just said that, and I know you’ve got Sherlock here to think about, he wouldn’t want you to leave and I know you wouldn’t want to leave him and I’m sure you’ve got a whole life here now anyway, you’ve got your job and everything. I just wondered if it was something you’d – that you’d thought about. At all.’

He hasn’t. He shut off the dreams of going back to the starline within weeks of getting home, refusing to think about it. It was never going to happen and the daydreaming was torture; the dreams he couldn’t control, the ones that came at night, were bad enough. Bizarre though he supposes it is, he hasn’t even considered what Sherlock’s technique and John’s newly steadied leg might mean for his future. The present, after all, has contained more than enough to occupy him, lately.

But exciting and terrifying and wonderful as life with Sherlock has been, can it really compare to life out there? Here he’s still hemmed in between buildings stretching up to the sky. There’s nothing to fly in, nowhere to go but to more suffocated streets and the odd patch of countryside.

But, as Mary says, he’s got Sherlock. And that, John’s beginning to realise, is a pretty huge point in favour of staying on earth. Leaving Sherlock behind, seeing him twice a year at best on leave, is not a remotely attractive thought.

Though really, to say that he’s got Sherlock is absurd. He’s Sherlock’s E.L.I., and they’re also, he supposes, in a romantic and sexual relationship, though neither of them’s troubled to label it. But their cohabitation and teaching period is coming to an end very soon, and after that, John isn’t really sure what’s going to happen. Without the intensity of enforced close contact, Sherlock may very well lose interest. God knows there are more remarkable people in the world than John, and Sherlock, extraordinary as he is, is bound to find someone more suited to him before long. So it would be ridiculous to take Sherlock too much into account when making this decision. And yet...

‘You really hadn’t,’ Mary says, wonderingly, snapping John out of his reverie. ‘Sorry for just springing it on you, then. Don’t worry about answering. You’ll want time to think about it.’

Upstairs, John hears his bedroom door open, and from the top of the staircase Sherlock’s voice says, ‘Mary, how would you feel about discussing your father’s disappearance?’

‘Sherlock,’ John says, turning around.
‘What?’ Sherlock says, looking unusually confused. ‘I asked her how she’d feel. That was polite, wasn’t it?’

‘Why do you want me to talk about that?’ Mary asks.

‘I want to review all the information we’ve collected,’ Sherlock says. ‘Order it into fact, theory and probable lies. What do we actually know, what might I guess at, were I inclined to guessing, and what can I further deduce? Not just about the afters, though we’ll start there, but anything. I want you to throw information about your world at me and we’ll see what sticks.’

This sounds a disturbingly random way of progressing, and makes John concerned that Sherlock really isn’t getting anywhere. But it’s not like he has a better idea, so he says, ‘OK, but I’m sure we can start with something other than –’

‘It’s fine,’ Mary says. ‘I’d rather get it over with. It was 2133, I was seventeen, he vanished in front of me, it was shit. What more do you want to know?’

‘I want to know about the person who replaced him,’ Sherlock says.

‘Oh,’ Mary says. ‘Yeah, I can do that. She took the name Janine Small, and –’

‘No, not important,’ Sherlock decides. ‘Next, John, you tell me something.’

‘Uh –’ John says. ‘That was a bit abrupt, Sherlock, I don’t –’

‘Fine, I’ll start,’ Sherlock says, beginning to pace. ‘Let’s see. Catherine Oakshott. What do we know? She kept a hidden diary in which she talked about being approached by someone called Sebastian Moran. He called her, and told her something which she found shocking and upsetting, but which nevertheless “made sense”. He said that “things were done to her”, horrible things, but with her consent. Then he made her a proposition, which she agreed to, even though it would involve indirectly hurting people, because Moran promised that in exchange she would be able to “go home”. Moran claimed to be an employed agent, acting on behalf of someone else. All of this we can be fairly sure is true: it seems unlikely that Catherine would have bothered to write down lies in something she clearly never intended anyone to see until she realised she was dying. We can’t be certain, of course, but the balance of probability is in favour of the information from Catherine’s journal being accurate. Agreed?’
John and Mary nod. Sherlock says, ‘Then we come to Mycroft Holmes, my brother, who’s almost certainly spying on all afters in positions of responsibility, despite as it turns out being one himself. Those two facts – that he is my brother, and an after – I am fairly confident are true. He took some trouble to hide them, and in any case it’s really the only explanation for my reaction to him. I remember him, however distantly. He also admitted to having Catherine killed by an agent and claimed that this was justified by the way in which she was planning to use her government position to infiltrate other departments with more power and cause severe damage. He also said that she herself wasn’t aware of how great a threat she was. Now, of course we can’t trust anything he says. It’s clear he did have her killed, but we can’t take his word for it as to why. That said, she admitted herself in her journal that people were going to die because of the sabotage Moran had persuaded her to carry out, so it’s perfectly plausible that in this instance Mycroft told us the truth. John, do you have a random fact for me yet? Come on, you don’t think that slowly.’

‘Erm,’ John says. ‘What, like anything at all?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says impatiently. ‘I told you. For one thing, information stimulates the brain, anything that doesn’t matter I can delete later, and having some data input will help me think. And for another, I still don’t have a particularly comprehensive understanding of your world, your time, and who knows what could be important? The more knowledge I have, the more chance I’ll be able to put things together. So go on.’

‘Right,’ John says. ‘OK, uuummm...Nova is an almost-habitable unpopulated planet, with an ideal temperature for both humans and Gliesans, but there are issues with the atmosphere that make it unsuitable for much to survive there at the moment. Apparently though that’s relatively straightforward for us to fix. It’s also got a water supply which contains...ions or something that would be bad for us, but necessary for the Gliesans. If we win it we’ll have the water purified. Any good?’

‘Ions?’ Sherlock says. ‘You studied medicine, for – oh, never mind, keep going. Either of you. Anything you can think of.’

‘Limited military medicine,’ John protests. ‘And I just read that stuff on a newsblog, I didn’t really think about it.’

‘Sounds relaxing. Keep talking,’ Sherlock says. ‘Things you think I know, things I don’t, doesn’t matter. Anything.’

‘The number of people employed by the government has tripled in the last fifty years,’ John offers.
‘Scout ships are the smallest kind of ship that’s capable of leaving the atmosphere,’ Mary says.

‘Illegal tunnelling between underground flats means bits of London are in danger of collapsing within the next five years.’

‘The biggest criminal gang in London is called the Black Lotus.’

‘Stop, more information on that,’ Sherlock says.

‘Uh, well, it’s over seventy years old, the police have been trying to take it down for years, but they can’t get to the heart of it. You hear names – Shan, the Spider – but they’ve never been able to get to the leaders. Once apparently someone managed to steal half the contents of their biggest weapons cache, and they went quiet for a few years after that and then re-emerged. They put out that it was their main rival gang that did it, but the rumour was that it was a random teenage girl who –’

‘Move on, something else,’ Sherlock says.

‘The woman who owns the company that supplies the government with handchip parts has been involved in a court case against the local authorities for seven years trying to get permission to have a private avia,’ John says. It’s getting harder to think of things, though clearly he must know any number of facts, but somehow having to list them like this makes them go straight out of his head.

‘Gliesan bodies disintegrate within a couple of hours of them dying. The ambassadors admitted once that that wasn’t natural, that all Gliesans were treated before joining the army to make that happen to prevent us from dissecting them and finding better ways of killing them,’ Mary says.

‘Last year sales of ecohol – the stuff they sell in e-bars that sort of makes you feel drunk while you’re online – beat alcohol for the first time,’ John says.

‘Gliese 581g is such a small planet that they managed a couple of hundred years ago to introduce a planet-wide common language,’ Mary says. ‘Only about twenty per cent of it operates using specific symbols or signifiers to represent particular concepts, all the rest is weird and mutable and changes slightly every time it’s expressed.’
'More on that,' Sherlock directs.

‘Um, well, I haven’t been learning it that long, I don’t know much, but...Gliesans don’t have names, not like us, instead they paint very simplistic representations of their appearance, deliberately stylised. We have names for their ambassadors though, which they’ve learnt to recognise, and the Gliesans gave the human ambassadors conventional stylised images which they can recognise. The translators, too. And like I think I said the other day, then the Gliesans bring paper and pots of ink with them to the meetings and write out messages which they pass to the translators.’

‘When I got injured I think the Glisan who was injured in the pit with me was trying to talk to me,’ John says, feeling very strange to actually be speaking about this. ‘Moving its brush fingers over my face. They’ve got two sets of arms, the upper ones have normal fingers and the lower ones have things that sort of look like paintbrushes.’

‘Interesting,’ Sherlock says. ‘Now tell me something about the war. I’ll probably know it, but it might trigger a connection.’

‘The war effort’s split neatly into attack and defence because you’ve got to have a safe base planet to get people to using particle transit, somewhere stable. We’ve got several just outside our solar system and the Gliesans have one some distance away. Similarly, the Gliesans have a number of base planets for their defence ships to take off from, and we just have one base planet as near as we could get to the Gliese 581 solar system,’ John says.

Mary supplements: ‘There was an idea early on that we could send a bunch of people out to random floating rocks and moons and stuff around the Gliesan solar system, and then send other people out to near where they were and eventually form a huge ring, basically. But you can’t target particular people with particle transit, only particular places.’

‘The names starline and spectral fields are astronomy terms I think,’ John says, ‘but I don’t think the areas they refer to have much to do with the proper meanings of the terminology. Starline’s just the line of defence stretching all the way around our solar system, and the spectral fields are mostly called that because of how many people died there at the beginning. They’re not actual fields, obviously. These days the starline’s bloodier, though everyone still thinks of attack being the more dangerous division.’

‘Stop,’ Sherlock says. ‘That’s important, is that important? No, I don’t think so. But it must mean humanity is doing worse than before, if our defences are under more vicious assault.’
'Not necessarily,' Mary says. ‘Attack division’s just got more cautious. They’re pretty careful about where and when they attack now; they weren’t at the beginning. We in defence don’t get much of a choice.’

‘Ah,’ Sherlock says. ‘No, not important either. But something must be. All this drivel you carry about in your heads, somewhere in there there must be...keep going.’

So John gives him information about war and aliens and people, and Mary talks about surveillance and language and death, and then Sherlock directs them to focus more on things that are close to home, on the grounds that ‘these things are happening here, not out in space, so talk about your planet, your society’.

So then John tells him about the bridges and buildings and stations programmed to play carefully designed calming music at times of day recorded as being particularly high in crime, and no one thinks it works but everyone likes the music and times their journeys home around getting to walk past places playing it. About the anti-fleshworld brigade, who think that online interaction is purer, untainted by superficial impressions, and that all relationships and jobs should be conducted online as standard with ventures into the fleshworld only occurring when absolutely necessary. About the U.S. prison moons, widely condemned by the Earth Nations, and the very nearly successful escape planned by the inhabitants of one of them five years ago.

Mary says I barely know my own society any more I’ve been back so little, but Sherlock tells her to talk about herself, about her life before the army, and to John’s amazement – she’s never been comfortable talking about herself, and doesn’t do it much even with him – she does. She begins with the years between when she left school at seventeen and when she joined the army at twenty eight, working first as the assistant to a newsblog photographer, and then as a bounceradmin for an e-bar, and then as a video analyst for the London Crime Surveillance Unit. She talks about how the army had always been there as an idea at the back of her head, at least since she was ten or eleven, how it had begun to nag persistently at her, but she’d hated the idea of having to sign on for five years, of cutting off her own options, and she ignored the idea whenever it occurred until one day it refused to let her do so. She talks about the year she turned twenty and her mother moved back to India, about her own decision to stay in London, the way their relationship changed once it took place almost entirely online, and, strangely, became if anything even stronger. She talks about living in London on her own for the first time, relearning it, walking through the streets at midday as she worked on her handchip, alone and sometimes achingly sad but a little exhilarated, too, at her solitary freedom. Sometimes, she says, the hand working on her handchip would lift, absentmindedly find its way to her neck or wrist and feel her pulse, as if trying to trace the thread of loneliness running through her body back to its source.

It’s fascinating and moving to hear her talk so openly, but as far as the investigation goes John doesn’t really think they’re getting anywhere, though at least he’s finally got Sherlock to learn something about the world. Not a total failure as an E.L.I. after all.
That reminds him, suddenly, that his weekly report on Sherlock for the end of their second week together was due yesterday. Not surprising that he forgot it. He won’t bother interviewing Sherlock, he decides, he’ll just scribble something out. Just two more weeks to go now, and then...then another student, he supposes. It’ll be weird not to be living with Sherlock, in this flat. If they stay romantically involved, it’ll be strange, like doing things backwards – starting out with the intensity of cohabitation and then backing off. Sherlock’ll probably be relieved to have more space to himself, more rooms to fill with ridiculous experiments.

And if John decides not to take another student, and goes back out to the starline? How would Sherlock take that? John doesn’t feel he can begin to guess. It’s so hard to know for sure what Sherlock is ever really feeling.
‘Fine, stop there,’ Sherlock’s saying to Mary. ‘Let’s go over Sebastian Moran. Or rather the Sebastian Morans. The one who contacted Catherine, and the one who carefully and methodically beat someone to death and then was replaced by Jim Moriarty in the middle of his trial. In other words, we have a dangerous, shadowy bomber slash consulting criminal who says he doesn’t want me investigating the afters phenomenon, we have someone who approached at least one after asking her to carry out government sabotage and who claimed to be working for someone, and we have the first replaced by someone with the same name as the second. Coincidence?’

‘No way,’ Mary says.

‘Agreed,’ Sherlock says. ‘So what’s going on there?’ He steeple his fingers. ‘Why did Moran – the second Moran – commit his crime? Senseless, yet by all witness accounts terrifyingly composed. Generally, people commit crimes for gain, or for protection, or they do it in a rage, correct? This is the sort of crime that should have been committed during a bout of frenzied emotion, but apparently wasn’t. Was he acting, somehow, under Moriarty’s instructions, being issued from wherever Moriarty was? If so why did Moriarty want this man killed and why in a particularly obvious way that more or less guaranteed Moran getting arrested? We know Moriarty can orchestrate subtle crimes that no one but me would even guess were crimes at all, so why go for something so crude and so – oh. Oh.’

‘What?’ John asks.

‘He didn’t want the man killed,’ Sherlock says. ‘The murdered man was irrelevant. It could have been anyone. Moriarty wanted Moran to be arrested and put on trial.’

‘Why?’ Mary says.

‘You were the one that said it,’ Sherlock says. ‘Particle transit, Mary. Just a minute ago – you can’t target people, just places. That issue applies to replacement particle transit in a slightly different way; of course the whole point of that is that you can and do target people – but not specific individuals. That is to say, the way it works is that the device scans a selected area looking for humans, and then takes one human from within that area and replaces it with the person using the device. But you can’t get it to search for a particular individual human.’

‘OK,’ Mary says. ‘Right, so - ?’
‘So,’ Sherlock says. ‘Moriarty wanted Moran to be – wherever the people who disappear go. I think when Moriarty came here he needed someone to take his place, overseeing whatever plans he had there. If Mycroft was telling the truth and the afters are a government programme, then perhaps there’s a hidden government facility somewhere with an impassable security system; at any rate it’s clearly very difficult to get there without particle transit.’

‘So Moriarty wanted to get here, and wanted Moran to be there,’ John says slowly. ‘But he couldn’t use a particle transit device just to find Moran and replace him, because they can’t do that, so he had to get Moran to be in a particular place at a particular time, so that Moriarty could just select that place and find the one person there to replace.’

‘Which would have been difficult,’ Sherlock says. ‘Even if they could agree that Moran would be in a specific room at a specific time other people might be there too. But violent crimes are processed in a closely bureaucratically defined amount of time and tried in specific places depending on where the crime was committed. And the person on trial always stands in a particular place.’

‘But the location scanners aren’t anywhere near that precise,’ John protests. ‘You said they could basically count on the people who appeared being in the right country and that was it.’

‘Jim Moriarty is hardly an ordinary man,’ Sherlock says. ‘Is it really that hard to believe that he’s significantly advanced the technology and kept that fact to himself? Improving the precision of a tool is generally much easier than entirely changing its nature; perhaps he tried and failed to upgrade the machine with the ability to target individuals and switched focus to focusing on a more specific target area.’

‘But why not just agree that Moran would be in his own home at a specific time?’

‘From what Mycroft said – unless he was lying, which we certainly can’t discount, but it does make sense of things in a way little else does – not only is visiting the place people come from and go to difficult; even communicating with it presents problems, and can only be done intermittently. If Moran had had to move for some reason or something had happened he might not have been able to warn Moriarty. An established institution like a courtroom was much safer, more likely to stay the same. Besides, where would he have had space to himself? A block of flats would have been full of people, too hard to isolate vertically using even a 3D map. A house then? Could they afford that? It would certainly have drawn attention to Moran, and it’s not as though London’s full of empty houses, is it? They’d have needed someone willing to sell, and my understanding is that that happens rarely.’

‘Ah,’ John says. ‘Right. So if you’re right then Moriarty’s plans, whatever they are, involve things happening here and things happening...there. Does that get us anywhere?’
‘Mm,’ Sherlock mumbles, flopping into his chair and resting his head on his hands. He begins muttering to himself; John can make out the odd word here and there – ‘distance’, ‘communication’, ‘skin markings’, ‘stories’, ‘hands’. What any of it means, he has no idea, but he hopes Sherlock’s making progress of some kind.

‘You seem busy,’ says a silky voice behind them. ‘Maybe I should come back later.’

John and Mary have jumped to their feet and spun round before they’ve heard the third word, bodies tensed for combat. The woman from Harry’s flat – Irene Adler, was it? – is standing in the doorway of Sherlock’s bedroom, now dressed – immaculately so – and leaning against the doorframe, arms folded.

‘How did you get in here?’ John says. Mary is looking over Adler’s shoulder, evidently trying to work out the answer to the same question.

‘Did you think you were safe?’ she says. ‘You did, didn’t you? Listen, John, Moriarty can hijack your handchip and therefore your body any time he feels like it; Sherlock’s little safeguards really haven’t done much to change that. Me being able to get into your flat should really be the least of your worries.’

She steps away from the door and strolls towards them, straight past where John and Mary stand in front of the sofa and up to Sherlock.

‘Nice to see you again,’ she says, reaching out and clasping his hand with no sign of a flinch. ‘I should think we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other before long.’

Then she saunters over to the door, glances back at them, winks, slips through, and shuts it behind her. All the while, John thinks of going over to her, of grabbing her and refusing to let her go till she answers some questions about who she is and why she’s working with Moriarty and what they’re up to, but Sherlock catches his eye and shakes his head slightly. John is bewildered, and frustrated, but he stays where he is.

‘We could tell the police about her,’ Mary says. ‘You guys could say what you saw on the video, and the stuff she said to you, that she’s working with Moriarty.’

‘I did message Lestrade,’ John says. ‘But there’s not enough evidence to arrest her. She admitted to
knowing someone who in turn admitted to having blown up buildings and killed people; she didn’t admit to helping him do those things. We’re going to have to figure out who she is and where she comes into all this before we have any chance.’

‘Any ideas, Sherlock?’ Mary asks. Sherlock is staring at the door, his hand curled into a fist. Possibly their home being breached with such apparent ease is even more disturbing to him than it is to John. Danger is all well and good, desirable even, but for the enemy to start showing up in the middle of base camp is another matter. The Gliesans never got into the hospital back on the starline, John made that a point of pride; he doesn’t think he’d have handled it well if they’d managed to sneak in behind his back.

Sherlock doesn’t answer, because his handchip beeps and he looks down at it, his other hand still a tight ball. Then he makes an outraged sound.

‘What is it?’ John and Mary say at the same time.

‘Mycroft.’ Sherlock says, and reads aloud: ‘A matter has occurred with which your assistance would be appreciated. A meeting will be taking place at my online office in fifteen minutes to discuss the details.’ He shakes his head. ‘His utter – obnoxious – nerve. It shouldn’t surprise me by now. Does he really think I’m going to take his case after he refused to help us, after he –’ He breaks off, apparently too irritated to continue.

Mary, oddly, is smirking. ‘Yeah, probably,’ she says. ‘He knows you can’t resist a mystery. Aren’t you curious about what he wants?’

‘He wants to be insufferable, obviously,’ Sherlock says, and a giggle escapes John, entirely to his own surprise. He hadn’t even realised he found this funny, but it is funny, because for all the mystery and intrigue surrounding Mycroft, Sherlock right now is an entirely ordinary younger sibling.

The thought of siblings shuts the giggle up as quickly as it came.

‘We will go to the meeting in order to investigate him and keep ahead of his spy games,’ Sherlock announces, getting up to rummage for internet headsets in the cupboards. He scowls at Mary. ‘It doesn’t mean I’m going to work for him.’

‘Uh huh,’ Mary says.
'So glad you could make it, little brother,' Mycroft says. His avatar is sitting back in a large silk chair, his online office having turned out to be more modern but no less ostentatious than his fleshworld one.

‘Brother?’ Sherlock says, raising his eyebrows. ‘Aren’t you worried about disclosing your secret identity to Mary?’

‘Naturally you’ve told her,’ Mycroft says. ‘I’m under no illusions about that. May we proceed to the matter at hand?’

‘Which would be -?’ Sherlock says.

‘Irene Adler,’ Mycroft says, and rests his hands on the armrests of his chair.

‘Do you know her?’ John asks. ‘From the – programme?’

‘No,’ Mycroft says. ‘I knew Jim Moriarty, though it’s been a very long time since I’ve seen him, and I failed to realise his importance when I did know him. I reproach myself bitterly for that.’

‘Does he remember you?’ Mary asks.

‘Yes,’ Mycroft says grimly. ‘I should imagine he remembers me very well. I have made it my business to find out what I could about him since his arrival, though with very limited success. His associates I have never met; I have no idea who Sebastian Moran is. Either Moriarty or Irene Adler could just possibly have contacted Catherine Oakshott from where they were, using the alias Sebastian Moran. It would, however, have been difficult, and that doesn’t explain the other Sebastian Moran, whose replacement by Moriarty seems rather too coincidental to be dismissed.’

He smiles. ‘You see, I don’t really know so much more than you do. Adler herself is an entirely unknown quantity.’

‘What’s she been doing?’ John asks. ‘Why do you need our help?’
‘She’s been causing a great deal of trouble. I suspect that Moriarty wanted her here for precisely that purpose: to cause a significant enough disturbance that I would have no choice but to turn my attention to it, leaving him free to cause his own brand of trouble without impediment. That, Sherlock, is where you come in. If you are able to look at the Irene Adler problem, I will be able to keep my focus where it is needed.’

‘So you get the more interesting problem,’ Sherlock says. ‘I see.’

‘I “get” the problem which I am in a position to deal with. You don’t know who Moriarty is or what he’s capable of –’

‘No one’s stopping you from telling me –’

‘- you don’t have the resources or the sources of information I do; if you go after him alone you will fail, and almost certainly get yourself killed in the process. Adler, on the other hand, appears to be causing indiscriminate chaos, and to be working alone.’

‘But what’s she actually done?’ John says.

‘This,’ Mycroft says, and a gap opens in the office wall, with the misty blue-white edges that mark it as a hyperlink. Through it, John can see rich wine-coloured carpet disappearing into the distance, surrounded, not by walls, but by a glittering night sky.

‘What is that?’ Mary asks, voice slightly wondering, her avatar’s hand lifting and stretching momentarily towards the site Mycroft’s opened.

‘The Palace of Secrets,’ Mycroft says, lip curling with distaste at the dramatic name. ‘It’s a remarkable feat she’s achieved, setting it up within the space of a day. It’s a social network and a sex shop and a vault and a blackmail factory rolled into one. And its security is watertight. It ought to have taken months to put together, even if she was planning it before she arrived.’

Mycroft nods to the hole in the wall, and taps the desk. The link becomes dynamic, moving them through the site; corridors whoosh by with walls made of different kinds of sky, some heaving with thunder and rolling clouds, others showing distant comets and exploding stars, but all of them night-dark. Shadows pass through the corridors, without icons or usernames, but vaguely human shaped. Once, one seems to stumble, the shadow shifting, and John realises there’s an avatar
underneath. But there are many layers of moving shadow between it and the virtual world around it, and whoever it is pulls those layers tightly around them and hurries on.

‘A network, as I said,’ Mycroft says. ‘But with a difference. She’s taken the technology behind ecohol and used it to allow people the illusion of sex. She’s not the first, of course, it’s been done before, but not well, and without anything approaching this kind of glamour. She could have made an überporn site as so many others have, but she chose instead to make a hub, a meeting point, which only incidentally offers the chance to have sex with strangers without, supposedly, fleshworld consequences. Certainly there’s a certain atmosphere of bohemian abandon, but the sexual aspect is thrown in on the site description almost as an afterthought; primarily, it advertises itself as a confessional. Tuck your secrets away between the stars is a sample line. If you gaze into a spot in one of the walls for more than half a minute or so, you will feel a curious sensation, as though your mind is being sucked out through your eyes. Psychosomatic technology again, of course, but it’s a very compelling effect. People are encouraged to focus on particular secrets and have them sucked away into the sky, and so feel lighter without having had to suffer the repercussions of telling anyone.’

‘So why is this a problem?’ John asks.

‘It’s a hypnotic atmosphere, as I expect you can feel even from here. And it’s all designed with one express aim, openly admitted to in the site description: to blur the boundaries between mind and body. People in the Palace of Secrets lose track very quickly of what is happening to their bodies in the fleshworld, what is happening inside their heads, and what their avatars are doing on the site. The consequence is that as they mentally focus on their secrets, many of them don’t notice that their avatars are speaking them aloud, nor do they know that everything spoken in the Palace is automatically recorded and sent directly to Irene Adler’s handchip. The vast majority of the secrets, of course, are quite trivial, but some of them are not, and within twelve hours she’s already amassed an extraordinary collection of blackmail material. Three hours ago I called some of my colleagues whom I know to hold important confidential information to a meeting. They all denied any knowledge of the site, but thirty five minutes ago one of them came to me in desperation, admitting to having used the site both for confession of secrets and for virtual sex. He was sure that he was only thinking about an unimportant personal secret, but his mind must have wandered and he must, unwittingly, have spoken about something rather more serious. Adler has messaged him with details that clearly indicate she knows all about a particular sensitive matter concerning international relations.’

‘You’re just the Afters Coordinator, what have you got to do with international relations?’ John asks.

‘Oh, John,’ Mycroft says, and then continues: ‘She hasn’t made any demands, nor has she responded to queries as to what she wants in return for her silence. All attempts to remotely hack her handchip and recover or delete the data have failed; her security has defeated our most accomplished teams. So, Sherlock, what I want from you in the first instance is to talk to her. Find out what she’s after, whether it is, as I suspect, simply a desire to cause chaos that motivates her, or
whether she might be temporarily placated with money or concessions of some kind until I have
time to give the matter my full attention. If she refuses to deal, then your task will be to gain access
to her handchip and delete the Palace of Secrets files. Remove it from her hand if necessary, though
of course wiping it without resorting to violence would be preferable.’

‘Preferable,’ John says. ‘You can’t just remove someone’s handchip, that’s – you just – ‘

‘Thank you, John, elegantly put,’ Mycroft says. ‘She’s an after, remember, and a new one;
removing her handchip wouldn’t have the psychological significance for her that it would for you.
It would, however, be physically unpleasant, which is why I’d rather you treated that option as a
last resort.’

‘I see no reason at all why I should help,’ Sherlock says, haughtily.

‘As you wish,’ Mycroft says. ‘I don’t expect the wellbeing of the planet to mean anything to you, it
never did, but you might want to consider the potential effect on earth’s inhabitants of the kind of
disaster Moriarty wants to bring about. I know you aren’t indifferent to all of them.’

‘I’m not playing your games,’ Sherlock snaps.

‘Three,’ Mary whispers to John. He turns to look at her, puzzled, then smiles. Right. As if Sherlock
could resist a case like this – bizarre and melodramatic and challenging. ‘Two,’ she says, and then
opens her mouth to say One, when –

‘However, since Adler’s clearly connected to Moriarty, investigating her could help with that case.
If you’re foolish enough to dismiss her, I’m certainly not. I’ll look into it.’

Mary and John exchange glances, and smirk. Sherlock glowers at them, his avatar having a decent
go at reproducing the expression he’d be making in the fleshworld, and says, ‘So where do we find
her?’

* 

After Mycroft’s answered their remaining questions and they’ve removed their internet headsets,
Sherlock announces that he has work to do, and disappears to his room, leaving John and Mary to
talk. He reappears an hour later, looking triumphant, saying that ‘he’s done it’, and that ‘it’s
nowhere near as advanced as it could be but it should be enough for now.’

Then he says, ‘And now to break into Adler’s flat.’

‘We don’t need to do that,’ John says, heavily. ‘I’ve already talked to Molly.’

As it turns out, Jim’s dramatically public self-exposure as a criminal mastermind and bomber, followed by his disappearance, has left Molly unexpectedly student-less, and she gladly agreed to take on Irene Adler. So they’re living together, in a government flat in Belgravia. While Sherlock was busy with whatever he was up to, John, feeling like a complete dick, sent a message to Molly asking if she was OK and whether she’d like him and Sherlock and Mary to come and hang out and cheer her up a bit. When she happily agreed, he felt even worse, but Sherlock of course is delighted, praising John obliviously for his clever use of his contacts.

‘She’s not a contact, she’s a colleague, she’s a bloody friend,’ John says to that. Sherlock scoffs and says John never paid Molly any attention and is an acquaintance to her at best, and if Molly’s too stupid to wonder why John’s so interested in seeing her all of a sudden that’s her lookout.

Mary says, ‘C’mon, Sherlock, we met her, she’s clearly not stupid,’ but Sherlock just shrugs and asks if they’re going to get on with averting planetary crisis, isn’t that the sort of thing that John and Mary care about, why are they wasting time bickering with him?

‘So,’ Mary says, once they’re settled in the tube car. ‘What exactly is our plan? Or am I being over-optimistic in assuming we have one?’

‘Of course I have a plan,’ Sherlock says indignantly. ‘I always have a plan.’

Neither John nor Mary even bothers with an eye roll at that. Sherlock huffs anyway, and says, ‘My plan involves this,’ pulling a small, very thin square of metal out of his coat pocket.

‘And that is...?’ Mary says.

‘A prototype,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve been looking into Moriarty’s ability to hack our handchips, and I’ve made a limited amount of progress in understanding it. This is very basic; it can’t affect people’s bodies the way his technology can, but it will wipe all the data from a handchip. Unfortunately, I haven’t got it working at a distance yet; it requires physical contact. To wipe her
handchip, I’ll need to get near enough to press it against her hand. But I can’t imagine that will present too much difficulty.’

‘We were supposed to talk to her first,’ Mary reminds him.

‘And we will,’ Sherlock says. ‘But if she wanted to make a deal, she’d have done so already. We’re definitely going to need a second option, and this is it.’

*

The first hurdle in their plan becomes obvious shortly after they arrive at Molly and Irene’s flat. John chats to Molly, asks if she’s OK, while Sherlock stalks off without asking permission to peer into the other rooms. Within moments, he’s back, looking outraged. ‘She’s not here!’

‘Who? Irene?’ Molly asks. ‘She went out ages ago. If you’d said you wanted – I mean, sorry, I didn’t even know you’d met.’

‘Not your fault,’ John says reassuringly. ‘Sherlock just wants to discuss some stuff with her. Do you know where she is?’

Molly shakes her head at once, but Sherlock’s looking at her calculatingly. ‘Glitter,’ he says.

‘Excuse me?’ Molly says.

‘You’re wearing glitter. Holographic glitter, animated, projected over your skin. I’ve noticed it on people before. The idea, I believe, is to have a reasonably subtle play of light and movement over tactically selected areas of the body to draw attention to them and improve their appearance. John, how commonly is it used?’

‘I dunno, personally I only use it for special occasions because it’s a bit pricey,’ John says.

‘So,’ Sherlock says to Molly. ‘You’re careful with your money, your possessions tell that story very clearly, you wouldn’t be wearing something expensive for no reason. Could it be for us? Possibly, except the other times we’ve seen you you were dressed entirely unspectacularly. This is
only the second time you’ve met Mary, so it’s theoretically possible that you were attracted to her when you saw her last time and wanted to look better the next time you met. But John didn’t mention she was coming, did he? To use an expensive product merely on the offchance that she’d be here...the odds are against it.’

‘Maybe I just felt like being – um, you know, pretty,’ Molly says, and then draws herself up and looks vaguely indignant. ‘Just for myself. I do sometimes.’

‘Mm, maybe...’ Sherlock says. Then he smiles. ‘Why don’t you tell us about Irene?’

‘Um,’ Molly says, ‘Well. She’s learning very well. She’s very upset about having “replaced” someone, sorry, I wouldn’t normally say that but it’s what she says and I’m trying to help her deal with it. She hasn’t really been able to bring herself to talk about it yet.’

‘Do you know who it was?’ John asks.

‘No. I’m hoping she’ll open up a bit more soon,’ Molly says. ‘Why, has she told you? When did you meet her, anyway?’

‘You’ve got a copy of the E.L.I. handbook open on your handchip,’ Sherlock says. ‘Page 19, but the text other than the header isn’t visible because there’s another window over it, in an arrangement which makes both windows unreadable. So clearly the second window is there specifically to hide the first. Let’s see, what could possibly be on page 19 – judging by the immense amount of bureaucracy that’s been directed my way since arrival, the first part of a text like that will always be the behaviour rules. I wonder which rule you were looking at?’

John, as it happens, knows very well what’s on page 19, having spent a fair amount of time agonising over it himself. He looks at Molly, feeling a stab of sympathy, but she turns her head away, the glitter shimmering against her collarbone. ‘This is none of your business,’ she says.

‘It is if you’re hiding a blackmailer because you fancy her,’ Sherlock says, bluntly, sneering a little over the word fancy. ‘Where is she, Molly?’

‘She doesn’t have to tell me everywhere she goes,’ Molly says. ‘It’s important for them – um, for you to have time to explore, and –’
‘You do have bad luck, don’t you?’ Sherlock says, moving a little bit closer. ‘You liked Jim, you might even have been slightly attracted to him too, oh, dear, your face, you actually were, weren’t you? Nothing serious, not quite enough to necessitate stopping teaching him, but a bit. And then things turned out this way. Your employers could blame you, you know, for failing to teach him to be a good, caring member of society. Except at the moment I expect they think you tried your best. But are you really trying your best with Irene, or are you letting her manipulate you?’

Molly is looking slightly tearful now. ‘Shut up,’ she says. ‘Just shut up.’

‘Just tell us where she is,’ Sherlock says. ‘She’s stolen secrets from government agents; we’ve been tasked to recover them.’

‘We’re not trying to hurt her,’ John puts in. ‘We just have to stop what she’s doing. If you know anything about it –‘

‘She said they were threatening her,’ Molly says in a small voice. ‘She called the secrets her protection.’

‘I think she lied to you,’ Mary says, gently. She reaches out to touch Molly’s hand. ‘God, what a fucking shit couple of days you’ve had, huh.’ Molly lets out a slightly wet laugh at this, Mary smiles encouragingly at her. She’s always had a way of doing this: never tactful, she nevertheless attracts confidences, and throughout John’s time in the army he saw people experiencing small or large griefs find themselves drawn to her, wanting to sit down and tell her about it. Mary always found it slightly alarming, saying she had no idea what to do, but the people who came to her usually seemed to find her blunt reassurances helpful in some way.

‘Fine,’ Molly says, wiping her eyes and looking back at Sherlock. ‘Fine, she’s – she didn’t tell me where she was going, honestly, but I don’t know if...I have some stuff written down. There’s her handchip ID, and –‘

‘I can track her with that,’ Sherlock says. ‘Send it to me.’

Mary’s looking oddly pained; John glances curiously at her, and she bites hard on her lip, then says, ‘Molly, are you doing anything else today?’

‘Just hanging out here,’ Molly says. ‘Just – yeah. Passing time. I guess. I don’t think she’s coming back, to be honest. She – she took stuff. I should have stopped her, they’re not meant to run off,
they’ve got to have training, but I...I thought, or I hoped, that I was getting it wrong, and...’ She
looks at the floor.

‘Right, then, we’re going for coffee,’ Mary says. By her standards, she’s done a remarkable job of
covering up the longing in her voice, the regret at being left out of an adventure: John can hear it,
but he doubts the others can.

‘I – oh, that would be really nice actually,’ Molly says. ‘If you’re not busy, I mean, I know you’ve
got...you were going with them, weren’t you?’

‘They’ll do just fine without me,’ Mary says. ‘C’mon.’

Mary ushers Molly out, the latter uttering a token protest at leaving John and Sherlock in her flat,
but Mary convinces her it’ll be fine, and a moment later the door shuts behind them. ‘She’s a better
person than me,’ John comments. ‘I have to say that the idea of staying out of it to comfort Molly
didn’t even occur to me.’

Sherlock just shakes his head in apparent bewilderment at the behaviour of people in general, and
then starts searching the flat for any more useful information on Irene. When his handchip beeps
with the message from Molly containing Irene’s handchip ID, he begins to do something
complicated-looking involving a lot of numbers and letters without looking at the screen,
continuing to peer at seemingly random objects around the flat.

Nothing seems to turn up though, and within a few minutes he announces, ‘All right, I’ve tracked
her down. The address she’s at is – ‘ Sherlock frowns, and John peers over his shoulder.

He’s just in time to see a screen of rapidly cycling coordinates flicker and then vanish, replaced
with the message Not quite that easy, Sherlock. We meet on my territory. Palace of Secrets, two
minutes. The red chamber. Ask for directions.

Sherlock stares at the message, then springs into life, grabbing John’s hand and tapping at both that
and his own at once, navigating to the website.

‘Should we really just be going along with this?’ John asks. ‘She’ll be in control there, it’s her
ground, like she said...’
‘She’s not out to hurt us,’ Sherlock says. ‘I don’t think that would suit her purposes at all. And I’ve messaged Mary. She’s familiar with tracking, yes? While we distract Irene by talking to her on her terms, doing exactly what she wants, Mary’s going to find her fleshworld location. She can easily do that at the same time as coddling Molly if she likes.’

‘And then we leave?’

‘No, then you leave,’ Sherlock says. ‘Looks too suspicious otherwise, can’t let on what we’re up to. I’m calibrating my internet headset so that my avatar will shimmer slightly when I get a message. It’ll be subtle, so keep an eye out. When that happens start arguing with her, get really angry, and then disconnect in a rage. Then you can check my handchip, read Mary’s message, grab the device I made, and go and find Irene.’

‘And then -?’

‘I’ll keep her talking online; you wipe her handchip.’

‘Unless we manage to persuade her first,’ John reminds him.

‘Yes, yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘Come on, let’s get headsets on and head in.’
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Apologies again for the long wait. However, I've now finished writing this, so I should be able to be a bit more reliable now.

It takes John very little time to decide that he doesn’t like the Palace of Secrets at all. The floor looks perfectly smooth but is uneven in hidden places, and he stumbles frequently, collapsing against the walls. Each time he does, he feels them suck at his brain for a moment before pulling hurriedly back. It’s an unpleasant but strangely addictive feeling; he suspects that the longer he stayed the harder he’d find it to move away.

When they entered, they found themselves standing in a pool of shadow; when they stepped out of it it clung to their avatars and went with them, but Sherlock pulled his off impatiently and John was only too happy to follow suit. They’re the only ones not wearing it, though. Everywhere they go hidden faces swivel to look at them, and John can almost feel the anxiety radiating in their direction before the shadowed figures hurry away. Every now and then they pass someone pressed up against a wall, almost into it, muttering.

John strides along, keeping up with Sherlock’s confident pace. He’s worried, but here doesn’t seem like the time or place to say it. He should have said something before he put on his headset, but Sherlock seemed so sure of himself that John got sucked in as usual. He wonders, though, about this plan: how can they be sure that their handchips aren’t being monitored by Moriarty? True, Sherlock and Mycroft reckon that the whole point of what Irene’s doing is to give Moriarty the space to focus on…whatever his plan is, which in theory should mean he won’t be paying attention to what Sherlock and John are doing. But who’s to say that he didn’t pass his secrets onto Irene? Or that she didn’t figure them out herself – she appears to have a pretty incredible grasp of 22\textsuperscript{nd} century earth technology.

But whether or not she can observe them in the fleshworld, she can definitely observe them here, so John stays quiet and hopes for the best.

Despite Irene’s recommendation, Sherlock hasn’t asked for directions to the red chamber. John trusts that he somehow knows where he’s going, but when he asks after fifteen minutes, it turns out that Sherlock’s trying to deduce its location and has made exactly no progress so far.

‘For God’s sake,’ John mutters, and turns to tap the nearest figure to them on the shoulder. It flinches, and makes to run away.
‘Wait,’ John says. ‘Sorry, I don’t want to bother you, but we’re looking for the red chamber. Do you know where it is?’

Frightened head shaking; John removes his hand, and the figure rushes away.

‘That went well,’ Sherlock remarks.

‘Because your way was going so much better,’

Sherlock emits a long-suffering sigh, and turns to a nearby recess in the wall in which pools of shadow roll over each other – presumably there in case someone were to lose some of theirs somehow. He grabs it and pulls it over himself till he’s just another indistinct anonymous shape. Then he sidles – that’s the only word for it – up to a figure a little further down the corridor, and murmurs, ‘Don’t suppose you know where the red chamber is, do you?’

‘Down this corridor, then left,’ the figure says, just as furtively. ‘Then step into the gold pool there and let yourself sink.’

Sherlock nods in acknowledgement, and steps back towards John, looking smug. Once the figure’s out of sight he pulls all the shadow off again and says, ‘You’ve got to fit in with the...atmosphere of a place. Understand how people do things, and then copy them.’

‘And apparently here not acting suspicious is considered very suspicious,’ John says. ‘Right, got it. Not sure I like the sound of sinking into a gold pool, though.’

He doesn’t like it any better when it comes to actually doing it. The liquid is thick and unctuous and shimmering, and as soon as he touches it the shimmer spreads to his skin and covers his hand. Sherlock smirks at his discomfort, and John glares, squares himself, and steps straight into it.

Letting himself sink is alarming; clearly his avatar has no lungs and cannot suffocate, but allowing the gloop to close over his head is highly counterintuitive. But he remains still, and lets it happen. After a moment the liquid begins to swirl dizzyingly around him, and then it whirls away, leaving him standing on what looks like dusty red rock.
He notices the sky first, the same orangey red colour and with distant scarlet storms raging in the distance. Every now and then, there’s far-off claps of thunder and lightning, and closer at hand there are huge clouds of whirling dust.

Then he looks down and sees the ground ahead of him properly for the first time. And, more to the point, what’s on the ground. Or, rather, who.

Huge numbers of people, as far as the eye can see, lying on blankets of thick red sand, and, well – touching. Intimately. There’s no shadow cloaks here, they lie discarded at people’s sides, but no one is paying any attention to anyone else anyway, except those people on the same sand heap as they are, to whom they are paying a great deal of attention.

‘Do you see her anywhere?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Uhh,’ John says.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says. ‘You’ve got distracted.’

‘Yeah,’ John croaks, staring at his feet. ‘A bit.’

Sherlock snorts, and then suddenly looks thoughtful. ‘I wonder –‘ he says, and then suddenly his arm’s around John, hand running down John’s back while the other gropes him through his trousers.

John makes a strangled noise, because somehow, impossibly, he can feel it. Or at least he can feel something. It’s not quite the same as being touched in the fleshworld, there’s an odd...crackliness to it, a strange energy that makes his body suddenly restless. ‘What are you doing?’ he manages, with difficulty, to say, as Sherlock’s hand squeezes and caresses. ‘I – ungh – I – we’re in public.’

‘I think everyone here has things other than us to focus on,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s an experiment.’

‘An experi – God – ‘

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says, slipping his hand inside John’s trousers and stroking with just one finger.
John groans. ‘I wanted to see whether the touching conditioning would apply to online sex. Evidently not. It could be a good way to practice, so I can get more comfortable doing it in the fleshworld.’

‘Ye – es – yes, good, let’s – do that, oh fuck, but – not here.’

‘I wonder what virtual orgasm would feel like?’ Sherlock muses. ‘Do you think you could get there just from my doing this?’

‘If you – I don’t know – if you’re – you keep talking –’

‘Oh, good, I’m glad you’re enjoying yourselves.’

Sherlock’s hand pulls away rapidly. John opens his eyes and curses; how could he let her catch them off guard again?

What he sees, once his eyes are open, is not quite what he expects to see. It’s definitely her, her voice made that clear, and her face is the same. But even so, there are surprises.

Avatars are created by a handchip scanning the person’s body and producing a likeness. After that they can be edited, but the expected thing is to keep it looking like you – perhaps a bit more attractive, admittedly. Occasionally people use them to try out different hairstyles and colours and things like that, but dramatic changes are frowned upon, are considered dishonest.

It’s hard to tell under the tweed caped Ulster Irene’s wearing, but John’s pretty sure that her avatar doesn’t have breasts. Her hair is short and slicked back, her eyelashes thicker and fuller, her eyes, he thinks, a different colour. He wonders whether, under her clothes, the little white lines on her sides and the scars on her shoulders have gone too. She catches him looking, and says, ‘A real artist doesn’t create the same work twice.’

‘Interesting choice of meeting place,’ Sherlock says.

‘Yes, I like this room,’ Irene says, glancing around. ‘The vulnerability, the performance...people think they can let themselves go because it’s not real.’
‘Whereas you know better,’ Sherlock says.

‘Always,’ she agrees. ‘Loathsome, isn’t it? But I do generally manage to behave as though I don’t, which makes it nearly bearable. And so do you, though perhaps not quite in the same way.’

‘I’m here on behalf of the government,’ Sherlock says, and you’d never know his disdain for said government or the person who sent him from his voice. ‘I am tasked to recover some information which you stole –’

‘Hardly stole,’ Irene demurs. ‘It was freely given. They wanted to share it, somewhere in their brains, or they wouldn’t have spoken. I didn’t make them do anything. I just gave them somewhere to put it.’

‘And what are you planning to do with it?’

‘Enjoy it,’ Irene says. ‘What else should one do with anything?’

‘Is there anything the British government can offer you in exchange for proof that you have deleted the files?’ Sherlock asks.

‘No,’ Irene says. Beside John, Sherlock shimmers very slightly, just for the briefest moment, before going back to normal.

‘Nothing at all?’

‘They can beg,’ Irene says. ‘I’d like that. Not that it’ll do them any good.’

‘There’s no point negotiating with her, Sherlock,’ John says, keeping his voice as dull and heavy as he can. ‘She’s just a – a sadist.’ He tries to put some venom into that: it’s not hard, not with everything that’s happened, the memory of Irene naked in his sister’s flat.

‘Look at you all wound up,’ Irene says, turning to pay real attention to John for the first time. ‘Annoyed with me for interrupting your playtime? Because there’s no need to feel you have to stop on my account. I’m sure Sherlock can multitask.’
'You took my sister,' John says. 'Or you helped Moriarty do it. I have nothing to say to you.'

'Do you think you're the only person in the world to be separated from someone you care about?' Irene says, quietly. 'You don’t know why I’m here, John Watson. You don’t know anything about me.'

John doesn’t know what she means, but he has to focus. ‘They can have you killed,’ he says. ‘If you don’t give the files back, they can wipe out you and your handchip with one laser shot.’

'Are you suggesting the government takes out hits on people?' Irene asks. ‘That they skip due process and the courts and get rid of anyone they think is trouble? You should be careful; you’re edging towards slander, assuming you’re thinking of one individual in particular, which we both know you are. Though it wouldn’t be slander, of course, if there were proof he’d done it. Wouldn’t that be interesting?’

Her amused calm is infuriating, and makes his part very easy to play. ‘Fuck you,’ he snaps.

'I expect you’d like that,’ she says, reaching out and brushing the hair back from his forehead. ‘You like reps, don’t you?’

A wave of swooping dizziness passes through him at her touch. He hates this place, he decides, isn’t remotely equipped to handle it. ‘We should leave,’ John says angrily to Sherlock, pushing Irene’s hand away. ‘Look at her. Listen to her. There’s no point being here.’

‘Perhaps you should leave,’ Sherlock says. ‘You’re impeding our discussion, John; getting angry isn’t going to help anything.’

‘Fine,’ John says, furiously. ‘Fine. Good luck.’ He makes that last comment as biting as he can, and then taps his hand in the sequence to disconnect, glaring at Irene all the while.

A moment later, he’s sitting in Molly’s flat, Sherlock staring blankly into space beside him. John pulls off his internet headset and picks up Sherlock’s hand. There’s a message from Mary flashing on his palm, reading: Briony Lodge, Serpentine Avenue, St. John’s Wood. Can’t tell which floor sorry. Good luck with it let me know if you need anything.
John takes the device from Sherlock’s pocket, looks up the address on his handchip and sets off immediately, shooting one anxious glance back at where Sherlock remains motionless on the sofa.

*

Briony Lodge turns out to be an abandoned intensive farm. There’s a number of these around London: tall buildings created or converted for the purpose of growing crops in tight spaces in heavily climate controlled rooms. They proved very effective, but also ruinously expensive to run, and only a tiny percentage of those who invested in them managed to make a profit.

Clearing them out and converting them into residential or office buildings would, however, have been even more expensive, and finding buyers was generally difficult. So many of them were just left, the climate controls switched off and the buildings left to sit there and the crops die. Many did die, but those more naturally suited to the London climate survived on the light coming through the clouded glass walls and the moisture they sucked up through the increasingly common cracks in the floors.

Some of the buildings were then bought by enterprising people and marketed as an indoor jungle experience, but those mostly weren’t particularly successful either, since pushing through corridors lined floor to ceiling with mushrooms wasn’t most people’s idea of a day out.

It doesn’t look like that ever happened to this one. The just-visible leafy silhouettes against the dark glass and the odd branch starting to break through the roof at the top make it clear what the place is, but there’s no sign of a ticket point, abandoned or otherwise. He can’t imagine what Irene’s doing here, unless it’s just her penchant for the dramatic, something her website made very obvious.

The door is locked, but it’s half coming off its hinges anyway, and after a moment’s compunction he yanks it the rest of the way off and then props it up carefully by the doorframe. The corridor ahead has just about enough space to walk, in between the roots running down the walls and hanging from the ceiling, some potatoes and carrots visible amongst them. There are dead leaves and shrivelled, rotting vegetables littering the ground: it’s dark here, the plants on the outside blocking the light from reaching those nearer the centre, and the dead crops outnumber the living by a factor of dozens. John shudders, and pushes through the roots, looking for a way up.

In the end he finds a particularly thick root and climbs it. This floor turns out to be slightly more pleasant, with a carpet of barley growing near the walls and a little more space to breathe. No sign of Irene, though, and the roots hanging down from the cracks above look much thinner and more delicate.
John looks around, silently cursing Irene Adler and Jim Moriarty and their stupid melodrama, and he can’t help, too, being a little bit irritated with Sherlock for getting sucked in so easily. Because Sherlock is just as ready to make things into a game as they are, enjoys crime as an interactive work of art. When he finds out that Irene’s made herself some sort of plant lair he’ll undoubtedly be intrigued and delighted by the concept. And John adores him for that, he does, but God what he wouldn’t give for an enemy who’d just try to shoot them, and who John could shoot just a fraction of a second faster.

He begins to gather some of the trailing roots and knot them together, wistfully imagining while he does a criminal gang, perhaps organising armed robberies or something, imagines Sherlock cleverly putting together the clues to figure out their identities and then rushing off like an idiot to confront them and John tagging along and then a big, straightforward showdown with no unnecessary staginess, culminating in one of the robbers (the worst, the most obviously evil) getting shot and the others arrested, and John and Sherlock having laughing adrenaline-lit sex on the sofa at the flat and then John falling asleep against Sherlock’s shoulder to the sound of him complaining about the stupidity of people on TV.

It’s embarrassing, a childhood cops and robbers story with sex added, but bizarrely comforting for all that. What has he done to my brain? John wonders ruefully. I’m sure my fantasies never used to be this messed up.

By this point his makeshift root rope is about as sturdy as it’s ever going to get, so he grabs hold of it and pulls himself off the ground. When, after twenty seconds or so, the thing hasn’t come crashing to the ground under his weight, he starts to climb it, and finally reaches the ceiling and manages to squeeze through a crack.

His pulls himself up into the room and steps away towards a more secure bit of floor. When he looks around him, his first impulse is to roll his eyes. There’s dramatics, and then there’s this.

Irene is stretched out on the floor, eyes staring vacantly into space. He can’t see an internet headset, but he assumes she must have some tiny unobtrusive one that just fits into an ear or can be hidden under her hair. The walls are covered in the flowering parts of all the plants below, a mass of colour and spores. Irene looks like a sleeping princess in a bewitched glass castle. It’s absurd. More absurd is the fact that she pulls it off, that somehow it seems perfectly reasonable.

Curiously, he notices, tucked into the vines nearest Irene there’s a tiny photograph, a very old-fashioned physical one in a frame that definitely isn’t old-fashioned, swirling with inky blurred colour in patterns that resemble nothing he’s ever seen. The photograph is of a woman aged perhaps forty or fifty, and not someone John’s seen before. He thinks of Irene saying Do you think you’re the only person in the world, the cool amusement suddenly gone from her tone, and wonders who the woman in the photograph could be.
He also wonders what on earth Sherlock’s been saying to keep Irene talking this long. That, he thinks with grim satisfaction, is the problem with these people who want to make a story out of their crimes, who enjoy it all so damn much. They’re like Bond villains or something; they talk too much. And while she’s talking her internet headset remains on, and she’s completely oblivious to the fleshworld her body’s lying in.

John pulls the device out of his pocket. He hesitates for just a second before approaching her: what he’s about to do feels deeply wrong. He knows it’s ridiculous, that, as Mycroft pointed out, it takes time to develop a real attachment to your handchip and Irene hasn’t had time. But he imagines someone wiping his handchip and it’s a horrible thought; half his life is on there.

Still. She won’t feel the same way, and she brought this on herself, and there’s nothing else to be done.

He walks over to her, and lifts up her hand, bringing the device down towards it.

‘Oh, John, no,’ Irene says. Her eyes are suddenly fixed on him, not vacant in the slightest, and her hand is stroking across his forehead.

The room goes soft, then bright, then entirely dark.

*  

‘John.’

‘Urgh,’ John mumbles. The room’s coming back into focus, but his limbs feel heavy and unpleasant.

‘John, are you all right?’

He pushes his eyes properly open. Sherlock is beside him and peering over him, looking – anxious? John’s head is blurry, perhaps he’s getting that wrong. Though Sherlock does get anxious. Was anxious at the pool. But they’re not in danger now, are they? Where are they? Looking past Sherlock, he can see that he’s not in the abandoned farm building anymore. It looks,
in fact, like he’s back in Baker Street.

‘What happened?’ he asks, struggling into a more upright position. ‘What the hell did she do to me?’ And yes, this is Baker Street, he’s lying on the sofa, Sherlock kneeling by it, crowding into John’s space, anxious hands hovering around his head.

‘Psychosomatic technology,’ Sherlock says, dully. ‘Her speciality, manipulating mind and body alike. I should have guessed she’d try something like this, but I would have expected her to try it on me.’

‘How...’

‘She touched you,’ Sherlock says. ‘When we were online. She touched your avatar, and she must have used it to transmit a signal directly to your handchip which she could activate whenever she liked by touching you again, and knock you out.’

Still anxious, genuinely worried about him, but – there’s a note of admiration there John can’t ignore. ‘Impressive of her,’ he says bitterly.

Sherlock frowns at him. ‘I am furious with her for doing this to you, John,’ he says. ‘But it is impressive too, you can’t deny that. You notice, you admire intelligence, I’d have thought you’d understand.’

‘I am so – so fucking tired of people messing with my head,’ John says. His leg stings, and it’s too much, the last straw, Gliesans and psychebullets, Moriarty and pips in Sherlock skin, and now this, this. He pushes his hands roughly through his hair as a substitute for sinking his head in his hands and remaining that way for hours. Then he gets up, Sherlock stepping backwards to make room for him. The room doesn’t spin, and he doesn’t stumble, so that’s something. The feeling of having had his skull filled with a mixture of cotton wool and small spikes persists, however.

Don’t fight with him, let it go, John thinks, but his anger is slipping out of his grasp, taking unpredictable channels. There’s too much, he’s suddenly aware, he’s been sitting on it too long, he knows better than to do this but it’s too late now. All this mystery, so thrilling at first, is beginning to get to him: he’s too invested, in too deep, and there’s nothing to be done about it except stand in this room having a go at Sherlock.

Which is hardly a fair response. It isn’t Sherlock’s fault he doesn’t know who he is. It isn’t even
really his fault that he’s charming and manipulative and dishonest, and it definitely isn’t his fault that John’s brain and heart have decided to trust him anyway, and beat themselves up constantly for doing so. Nor can John really blame Sherlock for attracting the attention of someone violent and dangerous and prepared to suspend people over tall buildings and aim lasers at them, or his apparently equally psychopathic colleague.

Except that last bit he does blame him for a bit, actually, because Sherlock could have stopped, he could have walked away, he didn’t have to keep going and lie about it. Arrange to meet Moriarty in secret, almost get them all killed, then agree to go chasing after Irene too. ‘So fascinating, aren’t they,’ he hears himself say. ‘Gorgeous and criminal, how could I hope to compete. Because it’s all about the challenge with you, isn’t it, the puzzle, never mind what’s happening to anyone because of it. God, the way you were looking at her.’

‘John, listen –’ Sherlock says.

‘Yeah, I forgot, that’s what I’m here for,’ John says, and he doesn’t want to be saying any of this, so he breathes deeply, takes a step back from Sherlock, and says, ‘I’m sorry. I know you do care about me, and I know you do care about...people, in your own way. But your attraction to killers and blackmailers and people who don’t care how much damage they cause or who even enjoy it – it’s starting to wear me down a bit, to be honest. And you won’t talk to me about it, you just go right on ahead with whatever you want, and...’

‘So you hate her for what she’s doing,’ Sherlock says, quietly. ‘Not because she replaced your sister.’

‘Afters can’t help replacing people,’ John says automatically.

‘No,’ Sherlock says, coolly. ‘We can’t.’

That sets John off again. ‘Fine, yeah, OK, I’m angry about that, she’s my fucking sister, Sherlock, and I know our relationship’s a mess but if I never get to fix it – if I – and maybe Irene couldn’t help it but she certainly seemed to know exactly what she was doing and where she was, didn’t she? She’s not like you, she’s not just a standard after, she and Moriarty are – something else altogether. She’s dangerous.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘Yes, I’m well aware of that. John, please, listen.’
But then instead of giving John a chance to do that, or saying anything further for him to listen to, Sherlock steps rapidly forward, wraps his arms around John, and kisses him. Which makes him angrier, and he means to push Sherlock away, but refusing affection from Sherlock has never been his strong point, and Sherlock’s hands are rubbing and clutching at his back, and John clutches back and shuts his eyes, swearing to himself he’ll only let this go on a second before he finishes saying his piece.

*

That isn’t quite how things go. Within twenty breathless minutes, John finds himself sitting yet again in a tube car, smoothing down his hair.

He’s still angry with Sherlock. There are still things unresolved, still lies to break down. But – well. There will be time later, John thinks, to figure out exactly where they stand.

Sherlock has outlined his new plan to recover the handchip, and John just hopes he’s right in what he thinks about Irene. If he’s wrong, things are going to go very badly indeed.

‘All right,’ John says. ‘So, let’s go over this. When you talked in the Palace of Secrets, after I’d gone, she asked you...’

‘Lots of things,’ Sherlock says, grimacing. ‘If I’d had anyone but you since arriving here. If I’d thought about it. If I wasn’t afraid of limiting myself. Doesn’t seem like you, she said, and I said she didn’t know me, and she claimed she did.’

‘Could she know you?’ John asks. ‘Could you have been in the programme – whatever it is – together? Trained in the same class or something?’

‘No idea,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s possible, of course. Then again, it’s just as possible that she managed to get to wherever the government’s particle transit device is located, the place where all this is based and where we’re coming from. That she used it to make herself appear here, to seem like a normal after coming via the “programme”.’

‘Why would she want to do that?’ John asks.

‘Well, for one thing, Moriarty wanted your sister to disappear, and someone had to replace her.’
‘I guess, but –’

‘Just a possibility,’ Sherlock says. ‘There’s still a great deal we don’t know. Ready?’

John nods, and Sherlock taps a message into his handchip. Did any of the information you stole relate directly to Mycroft Holmes? – SH

A moment later, it beeps. Why, is he worried?

He’s refusing to give me information that I need, Sherlock messages back. I’m interested in acquiring some leverage. Now that I’ve gone to visit you and negotiate as he wished, his guard will be down. I can meet you safely in the fleshworld.

Beep. I’m sure you can. But can I meet you safely? I see little reason why I should trust you.

You choose the place. Search us on the way in. Do whatever you like.

Beep. No. We talk in the Palace or nowhere. I promise not to pick such a naughty room next time. Wouldn’t want to alarm you. And Sherlock – come alone. I don’t trust John to keep his mouth shut. If he shows up, I’ll knock him out again, for longer this time. I suspect you’re under the impression that I have to touch him to do it, but that’s not the case: I can do it whenever I like, from anywhere.

It won’t come to that. He’ll be reasonable. Which room, then?

Beep. Don’t worry. I’ll find you. Now?

*  

Refraining from entering a site using an internet headset doesn’t prevent someone from watching it on the handchip screen. It’s possible, from the fleshworld, to see everything that happens: Sherlock’s avatar striding down corridor after corridor, looking about him. Irene’s avatar, stepping
out of the shadows, a smile playing about her lips, which this time are full and red.

‘Welcome back,’ she says.

Sherlock’s avatar turns to face her. ‘Is there anywhere we can talk where our conversation won’t be recorded?’ he asks.

‘In here,’ Irene says, and pushes straight through the nearest wall. After a moment, the other avatar follows. The room they step into is empty, quiet, and full of slowly circling stars.

‘Now we can talk,’ she says.

‘I need everything you have on Mycroft,’ he says. ‘I think you and I would achieve much more working together than as enemies.’

‘Well, isn’t this a turn up,’ she says, clearly enjoying herself. ‘Tut tut, Sherlock, what would big brother say?’

‘I only have his word for it – and Moriarty’s, I suppose – that he’s my brother,’ he says. ‘I don’t remember him. I don’t owe him anything.’

‘I suppose not,’ she says. ‘Well –’ She breaks off as an expression of pain crosses her face; then she smirks. ‘Really, Sherlock? The same plan twice? Or, not quite the same plan, that’s right, he hasn’t brought your handchip wiping device this time, has he? He’s just going to cut my handchip out of me. I suppose you assumed that last time I had security systems set up to detect your device and so I knew when John arrived and could respond by activating his trigger, so you thought without the device you could take me by surprise. But actually it’s much simpler than that. I don’t use an internet headset; I don’t need any help in controlling my own perception. I can go between here and there at will, as long as both places are striking enough to be easily distinguished, and I know when someone’s in the room. Trying to cut the chip out of my hand isn’t going to go any better than wiping it. Sorry, John, time to go to sleep again.’

She clicks her fingers, then frowns. Clicks them again. Stares at Sherlock’s avatar.

‘You really should have bothered to set the trigger up for both of us,’ he says.
'Then you –'

'Yeah,' John says. 'Sorry. You’re not the only one who can change their avatar’s appearance, you know.'

Irene lets out a small cry of pain and her avatar disappears. John disconnects quickly and finds himself sitting against a wall by a tubes entrance. Mary is leaning over him. 'How’d it go?’ she asks.

'Don’t know, she disconnected. Just have to hope that Sherlock got the chip and got out before she started fighting back. He was watching us on his handchip, he’ll have seen the moment she realised and hurried up, hopefully.'

'So we just wait here?’ Mary says.

John nods. 'Thanks for tracking down her new location. Couldn’t have done it without you. How was Molly?’

'She’ll be OK,’ Mary says. ‘We got on really well, actually. Did you know she used to be a doctor? Specialised as a forensic pathologist. But then she said she felt like she was getting quieter and quieter and less and less good at talking to people and it was a bit depressing having 90% of the people she saw every day being dead, so she left to become an E.L.I. I think she misses it, though.’

'Ah,’ John says. 'Yeah, I can – Sherlock!’

Sherlock hurries across the road to join them and gestures towards the tubes entrance. ‘I’ve got it,’ he says. ‘And I knocked her out as she opened her eyes; I was hoping to avoid violence, but there was nothing for it; at any rate we should have a few minutes before she catches up with us. Even so, we’d better get home.’

‘And then what?’ John asks as they head down.

‘Then I scan this,’ Sherlock says, ‘Look through the information, you never know, there really might be something I can use as leverage. Certainly I intend to use the chip itself that way, refuse to
give it to Mycroft unless he answers some questions.’

‘I can’t believe that actually worked, you know,’ Mary says. ‘That Irene fell for it.’

‘Sherlock’s theory is that she’s lonely,’ John says, propping his chin up on his left hand. ‘That she ditched her E.L.I. and doesn’t have a connection to anyone except Moriarty, and that no matter how much fun she claims to be having she’s really been feeling isolated and tired. He thought she’d be so keen to jump at the chance of working with him that she’d ignore how suspicious it all was.’

‘Guess you were right,’ Mary says to Sherlock.

‘Moriarty isn’t going to be happy, though,’ John says, thoughtfully. ‘And Irene must hate Sherlock now. Hate all of us.’
After they get home, Mary stays with them for two hours while Sherlock goes through the information on the chip, and then becomes obviously restless; she’s always hated being in one place for too long. ‘Go,’ John tells her. ‘Go and see someone else, I’m sure your friends in London hate me for taking up all your leave time.’

She smiles and kisses him on the forehead. ‘Just – talk to me, yeah?’ she says. ‘Your life is ridiculous now, and I’m incredibly glad of that, because I don’t think you were happy when your life was sane, were you? But...don’t just stay in your head being ridiculous and worrying about things. I’m not expressing this well, I’m not good at this, but – no matter how many damn light-hours away I am, I’m your friend and I will find a way to talk to you if I have to drop messages into the bloody particle transit device, OK?’

‘You’re not leaving yet,’ John says.

‘No, I know, I’ve got a bit longer, but I get the impression we might not have much more time to sit quietly and chat. So I just wanted to say it. You’re going to need someone to talk to, someone who’s not involved but who’s seen it up close. Anyway. Like you said, I’m not leaving yet, so call me anytime. I’m always up for providing backup in near-death situations.’

He laughs, squeezes her hand, and flops back onto the sofa as she leaves. Then he glances over at Sherlock, who is sitting very still, his lips forming silent words.

‘Are you OK?’ John asks.

Sherlock nods, then shakes his head, then gets up, shoving Irene’s handchip into his pocket.

‘Are you going to see Mycroft?’ John asks.

Sherlock gives him an alarming blank smile, opens the door, steps out, and shuts it behind him.

After ten minutes, he hasn’t come back, and John can only assume he has gone to Mycroft’s office and just couldn’t be bothered to answer the question.
Maybe John should go out too. Time alone to think really isn’t what he needs right now.

No. Actually, it’s exactly what he needs, it’s just not what he wants. The good thing about life with Sherlock is that it leaves little time for worrying or planning ahead, except that it’s not really altogether a good thing, it’s just very appealing to John. But he really ought, really really ought to stop and think things through at some point.

He’s fucking a student. He’s dangerously far along the road to caring an awful lot about said student, who also happens to be a mad genius who’s willing to lie to John for little more reason than convenience. Yes, alright, there have been exceptions to that, but John doesn’t know if that’s a permanent change. There’s a man who almost killed them, has killed other people, and appears not to be a crazy bomber acting for the sheer love of chaos and destruction after all but to have a mysterious plan of some kind. There’s the Afters Coordinator who is apparently actually an after and Sherlock’s brother, and has his own mysterious plan which he claims to have been working on for years. There’s the change in John’s leg, and the question Mary planted which has rapidly taken root, impossible to ignore. There’s his vanished sister, and all the other people pronounced alive by a man John doesn’t trust at all. It hurts; all of it hurts, and it all matters too much to bear thinking about, too much not to think about it.

He sits, and he makes himself think about it, and it gets him nowhere at all.

John has no idea how much time has passed when the door opens. He looks up, immediately on edge, because he hopes it’s Sherlock but the number of people who might realistically be expected to materialise in their flat without warning and with unpleasant intentions has been on the up lately and –

It’s Sherlock. John moves his thumb away from where it’s begun to tap in the code against his left palm to access the military functions of his handchip. ‘Hi –’ he starts to say, and then stops. Sherlock hasn’t moved from the doorway, is just standing there, hands in pockets, staring at him.

‘Are you OK?’ John asks. ‘Where were you?’

‘Thinking, finding out, but I’m still not sure, and it doesn’t matter till I’m sure,’ Sherlock says, mostly muttering. He steps inside, shuts the door hard enough for the sound to ring through the room, then drags his coat off in a few small, violent movements, and drops it on the floor.

‘Sherlock,’ John says, starting to stand, but before he’s up Sherlock has crossed the room in a couple of long strides and is pressing John back into the sofa, leaning over him, hands pressing hard against John’s shoulders, curled, fingers digging into the material of John’s t-shirt.
John strokes soothingly at Sherlock’s arms, and tries to get up again. After a moment, Sherlock lets him, straightening slowly and stepping back. As soon as John’s up, though, Sherlock’s hands return to their previous position, clinging, if anything, even harder. John wants to say well done for how much touching he’s doing now, but he doesn’t really think drawing attention to it would help, and anyway, there are more important things to say, namely: ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Would it mean anything to you if I pointed out that the grammatical function of a pronoun is as a replacement for a name?’ Sherlock asks.

‘I – no? I mean, I guess that’s true, but –’

‘If I were to say that you can change the content of a person’s thoughts far more easily than the way they think, that the way people think is shaped throughout their lives, that rewriting every line of their body and mind will still leave behind the story of how it was done and how those lines came to be as they were in the first place –’

‘Nothing,’ John says. Sherlock’s whole body is tense and he’s talking too fast; John puts his arms round him and holds him tightly. ‘Nothing, I’m sorry, I don’t understand –’

‘Go on not,’ Sherlock mumbles, indistinct because his hands have moved to John’s arms and his head is now buried against John’s shoulder, his whole body slumping and bending so he can reach.

‘Shh,’ John says, frightened, his hands reaching up to twist through Sherlock’s hair, not shaking. ‘Whatever’s wrong – it’ll be OK, or if it’s not we’ll deal with it, all right? Whatever you’ve found out. It’s OK.’ He’s uttering platitudes; they embarrass him, but hearing his voice seems to soothe Sherlock in itself; he’s raising his head.

‘I haven’t found out anything,’ he says. ‘Not for sure. I don’t know. Things just – came together, suddenly. But I could still be wrong.’

John doesn’t know how to identify the expression on Sherlock’s face. Hungry, desperate, terrified – is there guilt in there too? John wants badly to ask what Mycroft said, what Sherlock’s learned, what happened to make him come back like this, but Sherlock’s clawing at their clothes, dragging John’s t-shirt over his head and digging his fingers into John’s skin. Sherlock’s lashes are damp against John’s cheek, his nails sharp at John’s sides, his mouth grasping, his arms quick and hot. If John asks he will get no answers, only the sight of Sherlock in pain. So he opens his mouth to ask nothing and to press it against Sherlock’s instead, and he waits for them to half-drown in each other
and then resurface, at which point, maybe, they’ll be able to talk.

Their clothes are in a pile on the floor, the sofa rough against John’s naked back, Sherlock on top of him, all over him, clutching at him. When he touches Sherlock’s sides he finds the slits already wide open, the left vibrating madly and the right making slight sucking movements. ‘Please,’ Sherlock mumbles, but John holds out on him, thinks they could both do with the pace slowing a bit.

So he doesn’t press his mouth to either slit, or slide his fingers in. He doesn’t rub hard at the outside, sparking every mysterious nerve ending there to frantic life, or set up a steady rhythm pushing deep into the centre. Instead, he kisses Sherlock’s shoulders and then his chest and then moves back up to kiss his neck, planting each one slowly and deliberately, before shifting to push Sherlock upright. Sherlock goes very reluctantly, as if unwilling to remove his hands from John’s body now that he’s finally persuaded them there, but eventually he sits up, though as soon as John sits up too Sherlock plasters himself all over him again.

‘No – you lie down – there –’ John says, pushing gently at Sherlock’s shoulders, and Sherlock moves back with remarkable compliance which he has yet to display in any other context, and almost certainly never will. John settles on top of him, trying not to squash him, and yes, this is better, this gives him more room to manoeuvre. More room, in particular, to take his cock in hand, trying not to feel self-conscious, and align it carefully with the slit on Sherlock’s right.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says. ‘Yes, that. ‘And so John begins to rub himself against Sherlock, still self-conscious but unable to stop when it makes Sherlock look quite this shocked and blissed out. John doesn’t know what about this does it for him; it can’t be providing as much stimulation as John’s fingers or tongue did, and yet this seems to be affecting Sherlock if anything more than either of those did. Possibly it’s just because he’s so wound up and so – well, emotional, there’s no other word for it, much as he would undoubtedly hate John to even think it. But his head’s tipped back, pressing hard into the arm of the sofa, and he’s making low noises at the back of his throat, eyes squeezed shut, nails digging painfully into John’s back.

John becomes more daring, begins to experiment more with his movements. He alternates between tormenting Sherlock (rubbing his cock over the slit without going inside, constantly stimulating its lip without providing any relief) and tormenting himself (sliding just the head of his cock into the slit, since that’s all that can fit, in and then out and then in again in tiny motions that threaten to send him insane.)

Sherlock has, as appears to be normal for him during sex, lost the power of speech, making helpless sounds and twisting his head to bury it against the sofa. John’s hand finds its way to Sherlock’s left slit and pushes two fingers inside without preamble. It’s hard to coordinate taking his own pleasure on one side while keeping his fingers moving steadily on the other, but he manages it, even as his breathing becomes laboured and it becomes harder and harder to
concentrate, to remember anything but the feeling of Sherlock’s skin gliding against him, the smooth plane of his side and the tiny rough wrinkle beating against John right in the middle of it, providing a tiny, maddening amount of suction.

John isn’t in love with Sherlock Holmes, not by his own definition. By his definition, it’s not even possible to be in love with someone he’s known for two weeks; it requires a depth of connection that can only come with long intimacy. But he wishes he could say that he were, because then at least he’d have a name for the feeling that’s been gathering itself together in his mind and in his body for days, and which right now fills him entirely. Buoyant, like it might burst out of him or cause him to rise into the air, and burning hot, and too bright to think about for long without needing to turn away again.

‘I want – I need you closer,’ he tells Sherlock, who is too far gone to do more than nod. ‘Don’t want this over yet.’

Sherlock lets out a whimper of protest when John stops rubbing against him, and looks altogether outraged when John staggers to his feet. ‘Not yet,’ John repeats, insistently, holding out his hand for Sherlock, and after a moment Sherlock takes it with no visible flinching at all, and John pulls him up. Sherlock stumbles slightly and then grins at John, shaking his head in apparent exasperation: frankly it’s a relief to see a more familiar expression on his face, although John thinks that the emotional turbulence that was there before is still just below the surface. Then he straightens, and heads for his bedroom.

John intends for them both to sink into the bed and tangle up in each other, but Sherlock’s apparently recovered enough to come up with plans of his own, and instead pushes John into a reclining position on the bed and then settles between his legs. Then he places his hands on John’s body, and begins to move them.

It starts, John thinks, almost as an experiment. Sherlock is watching his own hands carefully, alert for flinching or unplanned movement of any kind. John is silently exultant when there’s nothing, nothing but the uninterrupted sensation of Sherlock’s long fingers sweeping the length of his body. When one of Sherlock’s hands comes down to curl round John’s cock, John’s entire body strains upward, and the corners of Sherlock’s mouth turn up in what John reads as both joy and triumph.

And better still than the altogether wonderful feeling of Sherlock’s hand sliding up and down on John’s cock is the moment when John sees him relax, sees him stop watching his hands, stop having to focus, and collapse into sensation. When that happens John pulls him closer and Sherlock crouches over him and kisses and kisses him, keeping up the steady movement of his fist all the while.

John brings his own hands up and rubs slow circles into Sherlock’s sides with his thumbs, pressing
just a little bit too hard, watching Sherlock rub back against him, first one side and then the other as though his body can’t decide which pleasure to seek out more of. Then Sherlock shudders, and whines, and John’s hands are both soaking all of a sudden and he’s right behind, coming all over Sherlock’s hand and arm.

Sherlock strokes John through it, and John, for his part, lets his hands drift over Sherlock’s sides and stroke him very gently there for a few moments before letting them fall back to the bed. Sherlock’s knees seem to gradually give out, so that he sinks down on top of John till he’s sprawled over him.

They’re quiet for a long time. Then John tilts his face to kiss the corner of Sherlock’s ear, and says, ‘You are going to tell me, aren’t you?’

Sherlock wraps his arms around him and presses his palms into John’s back. ‘Once I’m sure,’ he says. But John can feel Sherlock’s face screwing up against his own, feel the tiny shudders in Sherlock’s body, and though he’s warm and covered in lovely clinging sated Sherlock Holmes, though he’s full of hot light from belly to brain, he can’t ignore the cold that settles somewhere deep in him. Sherlock, John suspects, is much surer about this theory than he wants to admit. A theory that’s made him like this.

I’m going to be in love with him, John thinks. Sooner rather than later. Does it matter where he’s from? What he is?

He hates that he can’t answer the question. Hates himself for the easy, unreserved no that doesn’t come. He pulls the covers over them both, and holds Sherlock tighter than ever.

*

The next morning, Sherlock is obviously waiting for John to ask him again what he’s found out, but John doesn’t. He has to believe that Sherlock will talk to him in his own time. John will wait to ask till he can’t stand doing otherwise.

No. Sherlock’s solved the mystery and won’t talk about it, so there’s no point asking any further questions, even if the thought of his sister still makes him ache. But Sherlock will explain eventually, and then they can find her, unless Sherlock’s sadness means -

No. Not thinking about it. Today John is going to put everything out of his head and actually do his
job. Or at least – in theory his job is to help Sherlock be ‘normal’, and he no longer has any interest in doing that. But introducing Sherlock to the world around him is something different, and as long as John gives up any attempt to do it in the usual ways, to make things normal, he thinks Sherlock may end up enjoying the experience. Today, John decides, they’re going to the Science Museum and the Bee Tower. He’s a bit worried about the levitating areas in the Science Museum, not sure that he really feels like leaving solid ground any time soon, but perhaps they can just avoid those.

Sherlock looks taken aback when John announces his plan, but agrees to it immediately. ‘I’m sure there are things in this city apart from crime that aren’t boring, even if you haven’t bothered to show them to me yet,’ Sherlock says, and John just grins at him.

They start with the Science Museum, and to John’s slight and quickly concealed dismay Sherlock heads straight for a levitating section as soon as they step through the door. It’s not as bad as John feared, though, since there’s no antigravity and they don’t float: instead the floor they’re standing on, the whole room, is kept airborne by....something that’s described in great detail on a wall plaque and which John can’t follow at all. Circulation of...pressure? Something like that. Sherlock seems fascinated, anyway.

John has fond memories of visits here as a kid and it turns out that now, like then, he likes the interactive exhibits best, and they’ve come on since he was last here. There’s an enormous room that simulates the experience of being on a tiny moon orbiting a small, dark rocky planet, outside the solar system and far from any star. The ground and the air are full of strange clouds of silvery dust, and there’s stars all around. Apparently they rent the room out for partnership ceremonies, and bizarre as it is, John can see why; it’s strangely peaceful and beautiful.

After that, they visit the handchip science section, which has a display of innovative new handchip technology – none of which touches the things Moriarty and Irene appear to be able to achieve. John isn’t sure how he feels about having his handchip messed with any further, but when there’s a series of cases with slots to insert your hand into that all have different effects, he can’t resist trying one which purports to affect the sense of taste, convincing the user that they’re tasting strawberries and cream or chocolate mousse or gingerbread, depending on the button selected. It’s a lovely experience, but it takes John less than a second to decide he can’t cope with having his perception affected again after all, and to pull his hand out of the slot. Sherlock tries it but says it has no effect on him at all. John says that perhaps it isn’t calibrated right for afters or something, and Sherlock nods and then looks very grave and sad. John can’t bear that expression, so he suggests that they go on to the Bee Tower.

Sherlock, to John’s relief, seems to have enjoyed the museum for the most part; John was worried he’d find it all far too simple and childish. He really isn’t sure what Sherlock will make of the Bee Tower: he’s going on a theory that Sherlock’s apparent fascination with the dead, his delight in solving murders, really comes from an interest in living things and the systems they operate in. He’s interested in the society he’s found himself in, in the people that make it up, and can study them more easily when they’re still and therefore available to be pulled apart and examined closely. John’s idea is that the complex networks and activities of the tower hives will be both
compelling and soothing to Sherlock, but Sherlock’s so dismissive of things that ‘don’t matter’ that it’s possible he’ll just write the whole thing off as unimportant and boring. Still, seems worth a try. Sherlock chose a bee as his internet icon, after all.

‘It’s the tallest building in London,’ he explains to Sherlock. ‘Really central, you’ll have seen it loads ’cause you can see it from pretty much anywhere. It’s basically a huge conservation project – bees were dying off, and the world really needs them, so some places set aside space to build big towers full of hives and flowers to breed them. Every month there’s a controlled release to hives in countryside pockets and on rooftops; they’re being repopulated pretty fast now. Actually apparently by about ten years ago the tower had pretty much fulfilled its function, but they keep it going as a tourist attraction and because it would probably cost more money to convert it.’

It’s quiet in the tower, hardly anyone around; other people are presumably mostly at work. Quiet at least in the sense of humans talking: the buzzing is deafening, but strangely relaxing to listen to.

And Sherlock is lost. For all John’s theories, he hadn’t dared hope for this; it reminds him a little of Sherlock’s reaction to the violin (and John really must see about getting him one of his own, Clara’s bound to want hers back soon). He walks through the corridors in the protective gear provided at the entrance, his face visible through his clear mask, soft and open and fascinated. He bends to examine flowers, watches as bees settle on his gloved hands and brings them near his face to look at them more closely. John doesn’t try to talk to him, just follows him through the corridors lined with honeycomb, full of the bursting colours and heavy scent of thousands of flowering plants. If only they could stay here forever, forget about the puzzles, about Sherlock’s new desperate sadness, about lost people and lying people and violence. If only they were made to enjoy peace and quiet and repetitive buzzing, didn’t need dangers and mystery to keep going. For a moment, John imagines the two of them together, slow dinners at home and trips to concerts and museums and countryside pockets and this tower, steady jobs, safety, and feels a strange pang.

But it isn’t who they are. Either of them. He knows that.

Sherlock, standing amidst an abundance of dark, velvety roses, turns to face John. When he speaks, his voice echoes strangely inside his mask. ‘Sometimes,’ he says, ‘sometimes it isn’t solid proof that solves a mystery. Sometimes it’s simply that a theory fits the facts perfectly, explains everything, and nothing else does. For an ordinary person that’s not enough. But if you know – if you trust your own mind, and you know that if there were another explanation you would have thought of it –‘

‘You would have,’ John says. ‘I know.’

Sherlock inclines his head. ‘I would have,’ he says, and goes quiet again. A huge, softly furred bee settles on his mask, then flies away again. They both watch it go, and then Sherlock says, ‘We
should go to Mycroft. I think when I say what I’ve learned, what I should have realised a long time ago, he’ll be willing to share his story. To tell us the rest. I may be wrong, I...whatever happens, John, I hope you know that – ‘ He breaks off, stares at the honeycomb wall, at the bees crawling over each other inside it.

John steps forward, amongst the flowers, and touches his hand to Sherlock’s. ‘Should we go now?’ he asks.

Sherlock says nothing, keeps his face turned away from John, towards the bees. Then he turns his head back, suddenly, and takes John’s hand, squeezes it so hard it’s painful. He starts to walk fast, almost dragging John towards the lift. All the way down he keeps his silence and his iron grip, and John doesn’t have it in him to try to break either.

They return their protective suits and masks and step outside, and straight away Sherlock pushes John against the wall, cocoons him in his arms, and kisses him violently. At least, it’s violent at first, mouths crushing together. But within moments Sherlock’s mouth softens, becomes slow, impossibly tender. Sherlock kisses John as though he’s breakable, or even as though the first, colliding kiss actually broke him and only with care and gentleness can he be put back together. They’ve never kissed quite like this, no one has ever kissed John like this, he thinks that he might even have been offended if they had. He isn’t breakable or broken, he doesn’t need this kind of wary attention, to be treated as precious and delicate and therefore terrifying. But he isn’t offended, just – thrilled, and desperate, and afraid, and – he doesn’t know. He has no idea what he’s feeling, but he tries to kiss his feelings back against Sherlock, whatever they are, and Sherlock responds by deepening the kiss and holding John tighter than ever against the wall.

Then, finally, Sherlock draws back. He touches his lips with the tips of his fingers, and holds them there for a second, then lets his arms fall to his sides. ‘Yes,’ he says, as though there was never any break in the conversation. ‘Let’s go now.’
Chapter 29

Sherlock is stranger than ever in the tube car on the way to Mycroft’s office, alternating between a kind of frantic clinginess and sudden flinching aloofness. He climbs into John’s lap and begins to kiss him over and over, almost methodically, his ear, his cheek, his mouth, his shoulder, his hairline, his other ear, the back of his neck. Sherlock’s hands, meanwhile, creep into John’s sleeves and his fingers make minute stroking motions over John’s wrists. Then Sherlock shivers, and almost falls backwards back into the seat opposite. When John moves forward to kiss him, Sherlock screws up his face and buries it in John’s shoulder and seems so violently unhappy that John withdraws, but then Sherlock grips the sleeves of his jacket and holds him in place, before suddenly pushing him away.

John doesn’t ask any questions about any of it. He’s wound so tightly anything he said might turn into raging or crying or god knows what. He ought to be relieved to finally be on his way to getting some answers, but there can be no relief when Sherlock’s like this. The journey passes with agonising slowness.

When they get there, Anthea shows them into the office. It’s too confusing, John decides, to start calling her Mina, and anyway she’s unlikely to appreciate his doing that out loud, so he may as well keep up with the false name even in his head. After all, it’s been hers for a long time now. Mycroft looks them over in a way that’s now very familiar, and tells them to sit down. Sherlock does, which John is glad of, as he looks more than a little unsteady. John decides to remain standing.

‘Are you here to give me the handchip after all?’ Mycroft says.

‘No,’ Sherlock says.

Mycroft sighs, nods, then folds his arms and looks at Sherlock, waiting for him to speak.

‘I should have seen it before, shouldn’t I?’ Sherlock says.

Mycroft looks hard at him, then gives a small, sharp, nod. Something shudders in John’s chest. He doesn’t pretend to understand Mycroft and Sherlock’s silent conversations, but he’s fairly sure of what happened there. Mycroft read on Sherlock’s face what he’s been thinking, and confirmed it. That nod. Yes, you’re right. That terrible theory you have that’s made you unhappier than John’s ever seen you, it’s all true.
Then Mycroft, the bastard, _shrugs_. ‘Sentiment,’ he says. ‘You didn’t want to see it.’

‘It was one of the first theories John mentioned,’ Sherlock goes on. ‘When he first told me about the mystery around the afters, about how people had been trying to solve it for years. He mentioned it and almost in the same breath said it was impossible. Aside from a few conspiracy theorists, it never occurred to anyone here that – that those who sent us here would have gone to the lengths they did. That we would have consented to having the things done to us that it turns out we have. Make sacrifices as extreme as...’ He trails off. John tries to remember what theories he mentioned, but it feels like a lifetime ago, despite how little time has actually passed.

Sherlock takes a breath and turns away from Mycroft to face John instead. ‘So often the simplest explanation is the true one,’ he says. ‘Who would have a motive to send us here?’ He takes another breath, a hard, shaky one.

‘Quite,’ Mycroft says. ‘I’m afraid the world is often dull, and the solution to a problem is frequently the most obvious one. But people have their particular ways of thinking, and can’t imagine that others might think differently, and that has been enough to conceal the truth, as it turned out.’

‘From the very beginning there were things that should have pointed the way,’ Sherlock says, ‘but the truth is that I didn’t see until something Mary said yesterday – although something else she said recently had set the train of thought in motion, when she talked about the Gliesan ambassador meetings. She mentioned that they bring paper and ink with them. I didn’t focus on it at the time, but it occurred to me to wonder for the first time about their communication methods. How awkward it must be for them, needing to carry materials around with them at all times just to speak.’

John frowns, confused as to where this is going. Sherlock continues, ‘But of course, they don’t generally write on paper, do they? The day you got injured, there was an injured Gliesan there too who tried to communicate by moving its brushes over your skin. In which case, it’s also likely that their method of speech developed because they had an adaptation suited to it – the paintbrush fingers, yes, but also an ability to secrete something like ink, or coloured oils.’

‘OK,’ John says, ‘But I don’t –’

‘Why were we instructed so fiercely, conditioned so strongly, not to touch people with our hands?’ Sherlock says. ‘Perhaps because we had a very strong instinct to communicate by moving our hands in patterns over people’s bodies. An instinct that could have given us away.’
‘No,’ John says. ‘That’s –‘

‘Why do we have such difficulty with pronouns? Perhaps because we’re members of a species with no genders and no names. Why do we know so much about the war and so little about the Gliesans? Because the most potentially suspicious parts of our memories were wiped especially strongly. Perhaps the reason that my ability to speak is the first thing to go when I’m – overwhelmed – is because it’s a skill I only began to learn a few years ago. Perhaps we have a strong sense of aesthetics and pupils that dilate excessively when they want to take something in because we’re particularly visual creatures.’

‘Yeah, perhaps,’ John says. ‘But that’s not proof, and anyway, you don’t look like Gliesans. Your tongues, your arms –‘

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘Like I said. We made sacrifices.’

Later, John will remember that this was the first thing to hit him. Not the idea that Sherlock could be a traitor, an alien, an enemy. But the harm, the violence he was claiming had been done to him, that he’d allowed to be done to him. The things he said he’d given up.

‘Cutting off two of your arms,’ John says, ‘your fingers, the things you use to talk, leaving everyone you knew, stitching a fucking tongue into your mouth, adding on human – rewiring half your fucking nervous system – no – why would you –‘

‘You saw the pattern of marks Irene and I both have on our shoulders,’ Sherlock says. ‘Don’t they look like heavy stitches do, after they’ve sunk in and melted away? Don’t they look as though limbs were removed and reattached in a slightly different place?’

‘Gliesans don’t think about these things in quite the same way as humans do,’ Mycroft says. ‘Besides, Gliesans and humans have far more physical similarities than they have differences. We have roughly the same systems, and many of them work in similar ways – the biggest differences are probably to do with the reproductive and endocrine systems, but on the whole the transformation was a straightforward one. Most of the changes were superficial.’

‘No,’ John says. ‘Sherlock –‘

But Sherlock goes on, relentless. ‘The Gliesans know what human bodies look like, they’ve seen enough dead ones, but they don’t know how human sexuality works, how should they? Hence the
trappings of a human reproductive system, but one that doesn’t actually function. In turn you have no idea how their sexuality works which is why no one guessed what we were based on that. The Gliesan ambassadors told ours that Gliesan soldiers disintegrate on death so that we can’t study them and find better ways of killing them, but that’s nonsense: a laser can cut anyone into pieces, after all. It makes more sense, doesn’t it, if they were trying to hide the resemblances between the workings of their bodies and certain aspects of the afters that they couldn’t or didn’t know to change.’

John shakes his head, but it’s no use. Sherlock still isn’t stopping. ‘Why is it so difficult to communicate with the people who’ve disappeared? I didn’t understand that until Mary joked with you yesterday about throwing messages into a particle transit device and I realised that was the explanation for Mycroft’s rare opportunities to talk to his contact. I looked up that meeting with soldiers, Mycroft – they came straight from the attack base and you met them by the particle transit device. In a quiet moment you recalibrated the device to target Gliese 581g and dropped a message in there. That’s why you could talk to Anna Bests so rarely, you could only contact her through the device and you needed an excuse to get close to it.’

John forces himself to calm down, to ask sensible questions. ‘I don’t know if I’m convinced,’ he says, reasonably evenly. ‘But...’

‘Nothing else fits,’ Sherlock says, just as even. ‘And this fits everything. Why would humans from the future send people back, why would the government want to kidnap people and wipe their memories? And if they did, why wouldn’t they send know how to be human? Not knowing about culture is one thing, but things as basic as how to use language, how to move – the first afters to arrive walked normally but held their arms as though they didn’t know what to do with them. Someone on a chatroom told us that, remember? But the Gliesans were clever, they used the necessities of the particle transit system to their advantage. They had no choice but to replace people, as I said before, otherwise they’d have risked putting their people in the middle of a wall. And the replaced people turned up on the Gliesans’ planet and must have been forced to teach the new trainees how to behave, improve their language skills, be observed and copied. That’s why they’re still alive.’

‘So is that what this is about? You’re here to learn about humans?’ John asks, because as little as he wants to, he’s beginning to believe what Sherlock’s saying. It makes too much sense, there’s a sinking inevitability about it. *The simplest solution*...Though he doesn’t know how he manages to get words out; the world suddenly feels unsteady about him, so that he has to set his feet a little further apart to remain upright.

Mycroft looks at him pityingly. ‘A school trip?’ he says. ‘No, John, that’s not why we were sent here. This isn’t a gap year, or a cultural expedition. Don’t you remember what I said to you, the hint I gave you two weeks ago? I told you that you’d never really left the war. That you were still living in it. The real war is here, on earth, the Gliesans brought it here in 2125. The afters are an invasion.’
‘The gun experiment, John,’ Sherlock says miserably. ‘I knew how to shoot, shooting well gave me the kind of satisfaction that had to come from being praised and rewarded for that skill, from spending time in an environment where that skill was regarded as very important. And I had an intensely strong compulsion not to tell anyone that. So did all the others.’ He finally breaks eye contact with John, as though unable to stand it anymore. Then, voice barely audible, he says, ‘We’re sleeper agents. A fifth column. They must have been planning for decades. We were to settle in, infiltrate your whole society bit by bit, and then...’

‘Mass slaughter,’ Mycroft says, and fuck, fuck, would it have killed him to pull punches, to put it any other way?

John’s mouth is moving. ‘Oh,’ it says. ‘Oh.’ He would very much like to sit down, but suddenly more than that wants to be fully upright with his back to a wall. His head is swimming. Every time Sherlock’s lied to him, or manipulated him into doing something for him, was that in reality some kind of unconscious conditioning, the result of his having been trained to trick and manipulate humans? Does Sherlock, as his true self, with his memories intact, hate human beings so much that he was willing to undergo severe mutilation to destroy them? Did he, without knowing it, seduce John as part of a plan he’d been taught and then forgotten – forgotten at a conscious level but retained somewhere deeper? John’s body has never been this still, he feels frozen in place, the room feels huge and empty and strange, his body feels hot and immovable, he has no idea what to say.

Finally he manages something. ‘Your memories,’ he says. ‘Why don’t you remember any of this? Unless – unless you do.’

‘Of course I don’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘I’ve never lied about this, I’ve – ‘ he stares helplessly at John and John can’t bear to keep looking at him.

‘The memory loss,’ Mycroft says, ‘was not quite the original plan. I think perhaps it’s time I tell you what I know.’

‘Why should we believe you?’ John says. ‘You lied to us before. You said the afters were a government programme.’ He stares defiantly at Mycroft. If there have been other betrayals, John can’t think about them right now. This one is small, manageable.

‘We are,’ Mycroft says. ‘I’m afraid that I simply neglected to mention which government.’
John shakes his head, repulsed. ‘Why couldn’t you be honest?’ he asks. ‘You said it was too
dangerous for us to know yet, but I don’t see what danger we were in.’

‘I can answer that question, and many others,’ Mycroft says, ‘if you let me speak.’

John steps backwards until he’s standing against the wall and there’s as much space between him
and Mycroft as possible. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘Tell us.’

*

‘I was born in the – I suppose I can translate it as the Circle sector – of Gliese 581g, as you call it,
in 2104,’ Mycroft says. ‘In 2119, when I was fifteen and Sherlock was six – although Gliesan ages
don’t exactly correspond to human ones, we live a little longer and age differently – the generals
and politicians reached the conclusion that they were going to lose the war, the way it was going.
There were simply too many human beings, compared to us. And after a great deal of discussion
and anxiety, they agreed on a scheme. The war would continue as it had been – it would be too
suspicious to stop, and in any case we had to defend our borders. But the real war would be fought
elsewhere.

They introduced conscription, but conscription that came with options. Physically and mentally
suitable adults were given the choice: the army, or the new programme. Those who chose the latter
had to pass a number of rigorous tests, mostly for intelligence and loyalty, and then training began.
They carried out their first attempt in 2125, switching the first person to enter the programme with
an eighteen year old human named Soo Lin Yao. She was imprisoned in a then small facility built
for the purpose, and the programme was pronounced a success. More followed, and the prison
compound grew enormously.

The prisoners in the compound were forced to teach the trainee agents in the programme
everything they could about being human. Most refused initially, but were moved to very
uncomfortable and entirely isolated conditions until they agreed. My Gliesan teachers always
insisted that that was their only method and that no torture was used. I’m inclined to think that was
ture – the horror of total isolation, on an unfamiliar planet, for the average human being, is not to
be underrated, and I think we would have acquired sufficient teachers that way. We didn’t need
every single prisoner to agree. I always suspected that our human teachers deliberately bungled
certain explanations. The general confusion afters exhibit towards pronouns, for example, I believe
to be the result of a plot spread through the prison compound in whispers to refrain from fully
explaining gender, and its connection to language, in the hope that the Gliesan agents on earth
would then give themselves away.

A feature of the programme was that the particle transit device used was modified so that it would
alter the memories of those who went through it from our side. The programme participants would
arrive on earth knowing who they were and why they were there, but all their memories would be a little hazy. The modifier was set up so that everything they’d been taught about life on earth and humanity would be fresh in their minds, while their knowledge about being Gliesan and their lives on their own planet would be blurrier. It would be too easy otherwise to give things away unwittingly; this allowed them to remember their mission but be less likely to compromise it.

Some of them would infiltrate significant positions; others would simply live as ordinary citizens. The generals knew about handchips – everyone on earth had them even then, albeit more basic versions – and the plan was that when we reached the generals’ target number of agents in position, which was the highest number they thought they could safely send out without humans becoming hostile to the newcomers, a signal would be sent through the particle transit devices in the hub on Gliese 581g to all the handchips letting the agents know it was time to attack. Manipulating handchips on that scale isn’t easy, and a team of experts spent several years working on the problem. They experimented on the handchips of the human prisoners until they finally had a breakthrough, and confirmed to the generals that they would be able to send the message when the time came.

I joined the programme the year after the first replacement took place, at the age of twenty two. I learned all of the standard training in a year, but chose not to apply to pass it early. Instead I requested extra training, sufficient to allow me to infiltrate a human government, or perhaps even the Earth Nations itself. As the years of advanced training passed, however, I began to become concerned. We interrogated the human prisoners who arrived closely about their perception of the “reps”, as they called them. And it appeared that barely any of the humans had ever taken the possibility that the reps could be Gliesans seriously. They all seemed shocked. The few exceptions were angry and irrational and had no actual evidence to support their belief. I was surprised. I had thought that surely, even with the memory modification, people were bound to give something away, that there would at least be some concerns among the humans about the possibility of the reps being Gliesans based on something concrete, however small. I thought it was impossible that we were getting away with it as cleanly as we apparently were, and that something must have gone wrong.

No one agreed with me. They thought the humans were simply – well, stupid. But I could not dispel my anxiety. By 2130, when our plan still appeared to be proceeding better than anyone had dared hope, proceeding utterly flawlessly, I was deeply worried.

So one night, I went to the central hub, the place where all the particle transit devices used for the programme were kept – we had four. During the day, of course, it was full of armed guards ready to take the humans to the prison as soon as they arrived. There was heavy security at night, too, but only outside, and it was straightforward to circumvent it.

I began to examine the devices carefully, and I discovered that the thing I had feared was true. They had been tampered with. The devices weren’t blurring the participants’ memories and knowledge of their lives and identity as Gliesans – they were erasing them, almost entirely. No one had given anything away because they hadn’t had any knowledge in their heads to give away. The
humans suspected nothing because there was nothing to suspect: the Gliesans on earth weren’t trying to infiltrate governments or the army, weren’t doing anything except, presumably, living their lives as ordinary human beings with amnesia.

I knew I had to find out who was responsible, but as I stood to leave and go straight to report my findings, I caught a glimpse of a figure in the distance. I realised at once that I had been followed here, and what was likely to happen. I just had time to touch one symbol in the code for the particle transit device before I found myself on earth. Fortunately, I had understood the code correctly, and broken the memory modification function. I arrived remembering exactly who I was and what had happened. I had also, as an elementary precaution, set the coordinates of the device I was examining before I began work, so that it was focused on an area around a particle transit device on earth. Here I was immensely fortunate: our knowledge of earth locations was very limited, and in any case our ability to target a specific area was very rough. I did my best with the knowledge I had, but it was largely luck that I turned out to be correct. I was luckier still in that it happened to be night in Britain too at that moment, and the only person in the room I targeted was a teenager who had, as I was to discover later on, managed to break into the military transportation facilities, hoping to saw off particle transit device components and sell them. It was her I replaced, though of course I did not know that at the time, and I found myself alone in the room.

Calibrating a particle transit device is difficult, painstaking work. I entered the code for our particle transit hub into the device I found myself beside, but I dared not step into it myself. I had rarely had occasion to use that code and it was just possible that I had entered it incorrectly; it’s a complicated process, even for me. I could have ended up in empty space, or in the core of the planet. Instead I tore off part of my sleeve, managed to locate a pen, and wrote a message on the sleeve fragment to the human I had replaced, telling it that I could prevent it from being locked up if it took a message to certain people whom I described. Then I threw the message into the device. I hardly dared hope for a reply, but one arrived shortly afterwards. It was signed Anna Bests, and it said that she would try.

We have been able to communicate only rarely since, but I eventually found out what happened to her after that. She was, unfortunately, arrested after all, but managed to convince one guard of her story. That guard did not try to convince anyone else, as they were sure they would not be believed, but they helped her, bringing her messages to the device and bringing mine back to her in prison. She has been immensely helpful to me all these years.

Which brings me to the question of what, exactly, it is that I have been trying to do.

I always had grave doubts about the war. I was certain that if we trained people to become explorers and scientists instead of soldiers, if we expended the wealth and time and investment on research and travel possibilities instead of war, we would have an excellent chance of finding another habitable planet. I thought the war misguided in the extreme. But I knew there was no convincing the Chambers of this, and so I had determined to be of assistance to my planet in the best way I could. But now I found myself in a crisis situation – with a potentially unique opportunity.
The generals’ plan had failed, and no one knew it but me and the mysterious saboteur. I knew who I was, and the other Gliesans on earth did not. And I determined then and there to use the position I was in to end the war. It would take many years, and I would be alone through all of them, the only family I had impossible to contact. You must not believe, Sherlock, that I abandoned you willingly. My conscience tore at me every day I remained on earth. But if I had returned I would have had either to remain silent about my findings and allow the war to continue, knowing that our plan was a failure and we were doomed, or to tell my superiors and see them investigate and solve the problem, resulting in the success of the original plan and the deaths of countless humans. I had been prepared to accept the latter eventuality when I thought it was the only option, but with an alternative in sight I could not allow the opportunity to pass. And so I set to work.

I did not expect to have help. I expected, as I said, to be alone. But in the early days of my time on earth I learned something about the extraordinary depths of human beings, or, at any rate, of certain human beings. I developed an attachment that I never anticipated or imagined. And so I acquired a companion. She was alone too. When she left her life behind to disappear with me, she claimed there were no sacrifices, no people to miss. I didn’t know whether you were telling the truth,’ – he looks at Anthea – ‘not for a long time, but eventually I understood that you had been. We came, distressing as it is to say it, to need each other. More distressing still is the admission that I could not have come this far without her help.

And how far have I come, I suppose you want to know. The answer is that I am increasingly hopeful, but there have been setbacks. Catherine Oakshott, for example.’ He looks grave and sad for a moment. ‘She was my worst fear realised: an after who was told the truth about who she was and responded by effectively proceeding with the original plan, attempting to use her government position to cause harm to human beings. You may think that killing her was an excessive reaction, but you must understand that I have progressed too far to allow everything I’ve worked for to be destroyed. It would only take one Gliesan agent to begin their planned work to make peace impossible; once humanity found out – and sooner or later they will – they would never forgive us. I could not have her arrested without some cause; there would have been a public trial at which she would undoubtedly have revealed what she was and then everything would have unravelled. And so...’ He shakes his head. John recoils, but forces himself not to speak. He wants to hear the rest of this.

Mycroft continues, ‘I am now more or less certain that the person who changed the settings of the memory modifier was the person now calling himself Jim Moriarty, even though he would only have been twelve years old at the time or thereabouts. I remember him from the programme; he applied at the age of ten, causing something of a stir, and achieved such extraordinary results in his tests that the panel reluctantly agreed to allow him to become a trainee, on the condition that he would not be allowed to actually travel to earth until he was considerably older. I regret to say that I paid him little attention, seeing him simply as a talented child who would be useful in the years to come. I do remember that he was particularly interested in the work of the expert committee working on sending messages from the particle transit machines to the Gliesans’ handchips, and I suspect it is what he learned from them that has enabled him to manipulate your handchips so effectively.
Whether his motive in tampering with the memory settings was simply to cause chaos, whether he
genuinely wanted to prevent the invasion, or whether he had some other goal in mind, I have not
yet determined, but I think that there may only be one way to find out, which I’ll come to
presently. Matters are complicated by the fact that he was also most likely behind the messages
Catherine received – the presence of the name Sebastian Moran seems too much of a coincidence –
in which case it seems less likely that he wanted to prevent violence and more probable that he is
simply a wide-scale troublemaker. I am, however, not certain, and that worries me.

“Afters” have settled down here. They have partnered humans, made friends and lovers of humans,
got jobs, been happy here. I don’t know what would happen if their memories were to return, but I
am hopeful that they might balk at killing those they’ve spent their lives with. Catherine did not,
but I remain optimistic about the probability of her being an outlier. I am hopeful that this may turn
out to have been an unwitting exercise in interspecies communication. But I am, unfortunately,
certain that the Chambers – which is to say, a loose translation of the term for the bodies that make
up the Gliesan government – will never let go of their plan now, nor will they be willing to make
peace. Anna, however, tells me that there has been increasing restiveness among the human
prisoners, and a growing awareness that the more of them arrive the more dangerous a position the
Gliesans are in. She plans to stage a prisoners’ uprising – there’s no hope of defeating the Gliesan
army, of course, but if the uprising can hold out long enough and cause enough trouble it will put
the Gliesans in a position where they may have no choice but to negotiate and be reasonable.

And this is where I am going to request your help. I have duties here; I have been working on this
government and on that of the Earth Nations for many years, dropping a word here and there,
trying to ensure that when the time comes humanity, at least, may be willing to negotiate. I am
needed here, and so is Mina.

But I need someone – someone I can trust – on Gliese 581g, investigating Sebastian Moran in order
to try and discover Moriarty’s true goal, and helping Anna stage the prisoners’ escape. Even with
the assistance of a guard, there is a limit to what she can do from inside the facility. If we time it
correctly we can ensure you can appear during local night time, and I can give you guidance on
how to avoid security, though of course it may have changed somewhat.

As for why I haven’t spoken before now – well, it wasn’t safe to do so until Anna and those she is
working with were ready to proceed with the rebellion. You might have unintentionally given
something away, to Moriarty, for example. It seemed preferable to keep you in the dark about
everything until I could explain fully. I am sorry if you feel that was the wrong decision, and I
understand your frustration. However, now you know everything, and you are in a position to
make up your minds about what you want to do.’

‘So when you said it was too dangerous to tell us,’ John says, ‘you didn’t mean dangerous for us.’
He can’t keep a little bitterness out of his voice.
‘No, I meant for the prisoners,’ Mycroft says. ‘For whom I would have thought you would have some concern, John. If someone hostile were to find out their plans, they could all be put to death.’

John presses his fists back against the wall and says nothing. Mycroft smiles sympathetically, the most infuriating thing he’s done yet. ‘I know you’re shaken,’ he says, ‘and that you may, understandably, feel revolted at the idea of helping me in any way. But if you have any sense you must want the end of the war as much as I do; you must be as concerned about what Moriarty might be trying to achieve. All I ask is that you think it over.’
‘You haven’t spoken to me for four hours,’ Sherlock says.

John bites back a comment about what an amazing deduction that is, and says, ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.’

Sherlock nods, and the silence pours back into the room at once. He’s right: John didn’t say a word after they left Mycroft’s office and hasn’t said a word since they got home. He supposes it isn’t really fair. None of this is Sherlock’s fault – at least not the Sherlock he knows. But that Sherlock is only a fragment of his real self, and apparently that self decided he wanted to invade John’s planet by stealth.

Sherlock’s arms (his remaining arms) are wrapped around his knees, hunched up against his chest. He’s been staring at John practically constantly since they got back; John wanted him to stop but couldn’t find the words to ask that, either.

‘I don’t know why I came here,’ Sherlock says, voice smaller than usual. ‘I can’t imagine it was patriotism or any desire to kill for the good of my planet. I suppose I could have been looking for Mycroft, but I suspect I was probably just bored.’

‘You were bored so you decided to invade. To make people trust you and accept you into their lives and then kill them.’

‘You’ve killed Gliesans,’ Sherlock shoots back. ‘Dozens of them.’

‘Don’t you mean dozens of us?’ John says.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, eyes hard. ‘You’ve killed dozens of us.’

‘Not by trickery,’ John says. ‘Not people who trusted me.’

‘I’m sure that made a huge difference to their families.’
‘They signed up to fight,’ John says. ‘They knew what they were getting into. They weren’t sitting at home, having a pint with a friend, kissing a partner, and suddenly find that they were bleeding out and their friend or partner was holding a gun.’

‘That hasn’t happened,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s not going to happen.’

‘You wanted it to happen,’ John says. ‘Or you didn’t care, I –’ He shakes his head. ‘I don’t know. Maybe I can’t hold you to account for decisions you don’t remember making –’

‘No, I think you can,’ Sherlock says. ‘It was still me that made them, wasn’t it? But I made them before – before I knew –’ He stops abruptly, hunches up even further.

‘Knew what?’ John says.

‘Knew you,’ Sherlock snaps, the words pushing out of him as though it hurts him to say them. He hunches up yet smaller again, and turns his face into the chair.

John doesn’t know what to say to that, either. He wants, very badly, to believe in the stories he’s already, without meaning to, been writing in his head. There’s one where Sherlock joins the afters programme out of boredom without ever planning to actually come to earth but then gets sent here by Moriarty like Mycroft did. And one where he comes to earth to look for his brother, or to explore, without ever intending to kill people. And one, the one he finds easiest to believe and far too easy to view as acceptable, where Sherlock views human beings as fascinating but distant and not quite real, comes to earth not really thinking about the harm he’s going to do but only about collecting information, and becomes unexpectedly attached to a human. That would mean a Sherlock who genuinely cares about John and who would have come to care about him even with his memories. A Sherlock who would still care if his memories were somehow to return.

‘Perhaps it would be best if I agreed to Mycroft’s plan,’ Sherlock says. His words are muffled, and after a moment he lifts his head again, though he doesn’t look at John. ‘You could have some space for a while, and I...I wouldn’t have to come back at all, if you didn’t want me to.’

‘No,’ John says, immediately, before he even has time to think about it. ‘I don’t want you gone, Sherlock, this is just – a shock, and I – you can’t expect me to be OK with it straight away, but it doesn’t mean I want you to leave, it doesn’t...’ He trails off. ‘And Mycroft’s plan...I was too shell-shocked to interrogate him like I should have done. I don’t really understand how this prisoners’ uprising will help.’
‘Oh, well, that’s simple enough,’ Sherlock says. ‘The Gliesans took an enormous risk keeping all
the human prisoners alive. For every sleeper agent they’ve dropped on earth, they’ve accepted an
enemy onto their planet. Of course the situations aren’t equivalent – by the sound of things, the
humans there are contained, I expect the security’s strong, and they only have contact with prison
guards and trainee agents. Whereas the Gliesans here are wandering around freely. But still…I
imagine part of how they calculated when to launch their attack was based on the number of
humans they can safely contain. It must be getting close to that point now. And if they get out the
Gliesans will find themselves in a position not dissimilar to the one they want to put humans in –
fighting a war on two fronts. They can recall part of the army to crush the prisoners, but that will
leave the soldiers who remain in desperate peril. If, under those circumstances, earth leaders
offered peace terms that included a pardon for the Gliesan agents on earth, I think the Gliesan
leaders would be quite likely to accept. And apparently Mycroft trusts everyone involved to keep
their word.’

‘Don’t you?’ John asks. ‘I suppose we broke the last treaty.’

‘I don’t know,’ Sherlock says. ‘People here seem exhausted by the war to me. There’ll be anger, of
course, when the truth about – about us – is revealed, but even so, I think there’s a chance the
treaty will stick. As for the Gliesans – if we refuse to do what we were sent to do, I think it’ll be in
their interests to keep to the peace. The most dangerous period will be immediately after they find
out what happened; they’ll probably start trying to persuade us to fulfil our mission and possibly
try to return our memories to us – I imagine the process may be reversible, although I can’t say for
sure. The prisoners’ uprising should distract them sufficiently, though, if we can make it happen.’

‘If the prisoners present such a risk,’ John says, ‘why keep them all alive? Why not kill each person
once they’d taught everything they knew?’

He’s slipped into question and answer with Sherlock, he realises. It’s almost like they’re on a case
together, like nothing’s changed. Then Sherlock says, furiously cold again, ‘Do you think your
species has a monopoly on morality?’ and the illusion’s gone.

‘Forgive me for thinking that the people who planned mass killings of civilians wouldn’t have too
many qualms about morals,’ John says, cold himself.

‘Can you not see that there’s a difference between killing civilians en masse to avoid the risk of
perhaps a thousand deaths and doing it to avoid the certainty of total extinction?’ Sherlock says. He
doesn’t give John a chance to answer that, or to say sorry. ‘I think the prisoners’ escape is as good
a plan as we can expect to have. If you really don’t want space from me –’
'I don’t,’ John insists. ‘Anyway, I still don’t think we can trust Mycroft. I think I need to go too, for my own peace of mind.’

‘To protect me from whatever Mycroft’s scheme might be getting me into?’ Sherlock asks. ‘Or because you also don’t trust me?’

There’s no answer to that. John says, instead, ‘Anyway, I have responsibilities, same as you. Things I promised to do, even if I didn’t know quite what I was promising. And if there’s any chance of finding my sister…I’m coming with you.’

Sherlock nods, his face a careful blank. ‘I’ll tell Mycroft to have a particle transit device ready for us as soon as is practical,’ he says. ‘Till then, you should get some sleep.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘You’re probably right. Um – I was thinking, someone should probably stay in Harry’s flat while she’s...away. Look after it. So –’

‘I’m not going to kill you in your sleep,’ Sherlock says, voice flat. ‘I’m not going to try and get into bed with you, either. You can stay. I won’t touch you, I won’t come near you. I promise.’

John’s heart twists so violently he wants to double over. He stands up a bit straighter instead. Has less idea of what he can possibly say than ever. He wants to say Sherlock’s name (they don’t have names) but is afraid his voice will break if he does. He wants to hold Sherlock close or at least put a hand on his shoulder, but he can’t face it. So he stands and stares at Sherlock like an idiot, like there’s nothing that needs to be said, until Sherlock says, ‘Are you staying?’

That, of course, makes it worse. But it also makes it more necessary that John answer, so he risks his voice failing him, and says, ‘All right.’ Thankfully, it comes out whole and audible.

Now Sherlock doesn’t say anything. After several moments pass John says, ‘Good night, then.’

‘Good night,’ Sherlock says, and John turns around, and goes upstairs to his bedroom, where he lies down, and doesn’t sleep.

*
He lies there not sleeping for hours. Thinking about what’s happened, what he’s learned, what he’s lost, alternating between rage at Sherlock and then Mycroft and then himself and then the whole fucking galaxy.

When he hears violin music drifting up the stairs, he gives up on sleep, and goes back down.

The second step creaks when he steps onto it and Sherlock looks up and stops playing immediately. ‘Did I wake you?’ he says.

Yesterday, John would have praised Sherlock for his solicitude. Now a small voice in his head wonders whether Sherlock’s unpredictable kindnesses are all part of his training, imagines an instructor saying *keep them guessing, keep them doing what you want, it’ll come in useful in the end*. Another voice berates him furiously for the thought. And it is a ridiculous thought, really: John’s met plenty of afters and none of them are anything like Sherlock. There’s not much of Sherlock’s personality that can rationally be put down to anything that all of them would have in common.

‘No, I couldn’t sleep anyway,’ John says, starting to walk down the stairs. ‘Thinking.’

‘Understandable,’ Sherlock says, starting to play again. The music is even sadder than his playing from the other day, and it makes John want to hide. But he sits in his armchair instead, and forces himself to listen.

It might go on for an hour, or three. Sherlock doesn’t look at him once, keeps his eyes firmly fixed on a spot somewhere beyond John’s head. The music gets sadder and harsher and somehow still more beautiful, and as John’s desire to flee increases so does his determination to do nothing of the kind. This is Sherlock talking to him, and John needs every way of understanding Sherlock he can get right now. He owes it to them both to listen.

He’s terrified that he’s being manipulated, and almost more terrified that he isn’t, that this is genuine emotion he’s hearing. The pressure builds in him until he can’t sit still any longer, and so, to prevent himself from running away from Sherlock, John gets up and walks towards him instead.

Sherlock puts the violin on his chair, and then stays where he is as John approaches. John halts in place when he draws near, caught between the pull of Sherlock’s presence and the fears circling his own brain.
‘I’m sorry,’ John mutters. ‘Sherlock, I...’

Sherlock just shakes his head. John doesn’t know what he’s negating. Maybe all of it.

‘I want to touch you,’ John blurts out. ‘Hold you, or...something. But I can’t when I don’t know how I’ll feel tomorrow. It wouldn’t be fair.’

Wordlessly, Sherlock steps forward until he’s right against John, and rests his chin on the top of John’s head. John feels the heat from Sherlock’s body through Sherlock’s clothes and his own, which he hadn’t bothered or remembered to take off before going to bed.

Sherlock promised not to touch him, so if there’s another move to be made John will have to make it. Not liking himself much, John puts his arms round Sherlock. And though it may well be a terrible idea, and though it is almost certainly a cruel thing to do to Sherlock, the relief that John feels at doing it...

Partly because being close to Sherlock like this has been comforting every time, and partly because this at least surely cannot be manipulation. John’s brain cannot seriously put forward the idea that the Gliesan sleeper agents have been trained to exude a sense of comfort and affection and wellbeing when humans hold them. Seduction clearly isn’t a standard part of the Gliesans’ infiltration strategy; physical relationships between afters and befores are rare. John still can’t quite push away the possibility that select afters were trained to seduce particular targets, but then why bother with John, who’s entirely unimportant? And the way this feels – he can’t see how anyone could be conditioned to produce that effect. Surely that’s impossible.

Sherlock’s words are wonderful and brilliant and compelling and John adores them all, but right now he can’t help but be a little afraid of their effect on him. Whereas this...this doesn’t feel like it could be a lie. Maybe John’s wrong or completely naive, but he needs this, and so he hangs onto it as hard as he can.

‘Can I...’ John mumbles. Sherlock lifts his head and pulls back slightly to study John’s face, as if in need of more data.

Then he says, ‘Are you sure? Wouldn’t you...wouldn’t it...’

‘No,’ John insists. ‘I mean, I am. I’d like to.’
Sherlock nods, looking puzzled, but steps backwards and removes his shirt. Then he stands there, half-bare, and John can’t explain, but he kneels and kisses each of the small white lines on Sherlock’s sides. Then he rests his head there, and holds onto Sherlock’s legs, and Sherlock just goes on standing there.

He doesn’t know how to put this into words for Sherlock, to say why he wants this, when Sherlock might reasonably think that the most obvious reminder of his strangeness would be the last thing John would want to see or touch right now. But John wants to remind himself, tangibly, that Sherlock didn’t hide this from him, that John wanted to touch him here before he knew what he was touching, wants to remind himself how open and unguarded Sherlock became when he did. They’ve trusted each other so much and so quickly. And perhaps they shouldn’t have, but –

John kisses the lines again. They’re not opening for him this time, at least not until he presses the flat of his tongue against one and pulls it across, then presses just the tip to the other one. Even then it’s only a little, a tiny, grudging gap, and when John looks up Sherlock’s face is screwed up as if in pain. John stands and kisses the lines of freckles – the healed stitches – on his shoulders. And then he puts one arm around Sherlock again and with his other hand strokes one of the slits slow and gentle for what feels like a very long time, until Sherlock shudders and turns his face away, and John’s fingers are drenched in liquid the exact colour of his own skin.

Really exact. The same base colour, the same variations in tone, and it’s speckled with lighter and darker drops that mimic the discolorations and variations. As it trickles down John’s palm, it’s hard to tell where it ends and his skin begins. ‘That’s what it’s been doing,’ John realises, saying it out loud without quite meaning to. He thinks of the colours it’s turned each time. ‘It’s been getting more like...it’s been changing to...’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, still not looking at him. ‘I don’t know why. I expect Mycroft could tell you.’

John has his own ideas, but he doesn’t know whether he wants to think about them or not. He stretches to kiss Sherlock on the forehead, then goes to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.

Yet again, he doesn’t know what to say. And since there’s nothing to say and nowhere else, really, to go, he goes back upstairs to lie down and fail to sleep.

* 

At about four a.m. John begins to become increasingly aware that he’s lying in bed on top of the covers, in the clothes he wore yesterday. After a bit, he shakes his head at the ceiling, and goes downstairs to shower before coming back up to change. He’s going – he can’t quite get his head
around the idea, but he’s definitely going – out into space, to fucking Gliese 581g, and they could be leaving for the particle transit device at any time. He and Sherlock are going to be together in dangerous and difficult circumstances which will require them to coordinate, and whatever he’s feeling right now is beside the point. Time to pull himself together.

After a moment’s hesitation, he messages Mary.

She doesn’t reply for over half an hour, and he assumes she’s asleep – it had been a long shot messaging her, but he remembered her mentioning she’d been having trouble sleeping, and thought it was worth a try – when his handchip suddenly beeps.

I’m outside.

He goes quietly down the stairs in case Sherlock’s asleep, but the door to his room is as firmly shut and unrevealing as when John went down to shower. John passes it, goes through the living room, opens the front door and goes down to let Mary in.

‘Sherlock sleeping?’ she asks.

‘Don’t know,’ John says.

‘Let’s go for a walk, then,’ she says, and turns on her heel before John can answer. He has to hurry back upstairs to shut the inner front door, and his leg screams at him when he does. Using Sherlock’s technique suddenly feels enormously alarming – who taught Sherlock that trick in the first place, and what was it really intended for? – but he doesn’t want to keep Mary waiting, and he can’t bear to keep second-guessing everything, so he ignores his doubts and finds it as disconcertingly effective as ever.

Once they’re both outside and walking, Mary says, ‘So. You said you wanted to talk. And your tone in the message was pretty…well. Tell me.’

He arguably shouldn’t tell her, it’s undoubtedly a level of top secret beyond anything there’s even a classification for. But he’s got to tell someone, and so he pours the whole story out to her while she stands stock still, hair ruffled by the night time breeze, eyes wide and one hand slowly coming up to cover her mouth, a cartoonish level of astonishment on her face.
‘I don’t even know why it’s a shock,’ John says. ‘It was always the most obvious solution, really.’

She lowers her hand again and shakes her head. ‘Maybe right at the beginning. My mum says it was everyone’s first thought. But then people considered it, and...I guess no one thought anyone would make that kind of sacrifice.’

‘Yeah,’ John says. ‘Having had a limb stop doing its job properly, I definitely wouldn’t want to give half my arms up for good.’

Mary shakes her head. ‘I didn’t mean that. I meant – they gave up their lives, John. Left their families...there are people who’ve been here twenty, thirty years. If things had gone according to plan, what would they have done when it was all over? They’d have killed the people they’d spent half their lives with, and the people they’d loved before would practically be strangers. Of course we didn’t think they’d do that. That’s a terrible...an unimaginably terrible thing for anyone to have to do.’

‘Yeah,’ John says, staring at the e-screens, at the clouded sky. He hadn’t really thought about it that way before. But then there must be lots of things he hasn’t thought about yet, hasn’t had time to understand.

‘How...’ Mary bites her lip. ‘How does Sherlock feel about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ John says, and he can’t look at Mary when he says it, because he knows that should have been the very first thing he worried about.

‘Hey,’ Mary says, softly, putting a hand on his arm. ‘I wasn’t trying to –’ She shakes her head and strokes his arm, falling silent.

‘Do you think Sherlock left people behind?’ he asks her. ‘Do you think he had...parents, other siblings maybe, friends, lovers...?’

‘He’s still the same person,’ Mary reminds him. ‘Even with his memories, I doubt he’d be as different as you think. So honestly on balance I’d guess no to friends and lovers. If he did...I guess maybe we’ll be able to find them when we go to Gliese.’

John frowns at her. ‘We? Mary, you can’t...you’re not even supposed to know about any of this.’
Mary’s eyebrows shoot up and she withdraws her hand, folding her arms. ‘John, my dad’s there,’ she says. ‘In an alien prison. I know you’ve had a shock, but you’re seriously fucking deluded if you think I’m doing anything other than going straight there to break him out.’

‘Mycroft –’

‘- will seriously regret it if he tries to stop me,’ Mary says, narrowing her eyes. ‘God, please tell me you’re not going to try and talk me out of it.’

‘Nah, I know better than that,’ John says, finally smiling at her. ‘And it’ll be nice to have another human being along for the ride, to be honest. I just don’t know how you’re going to get him to let you.’

‘Me neither,’ Mary says, smiling too. ‘But I will, I promise you that.’

They’re quiet for a minute after that. Then she puts her hand back on John’s arm. ‘Listen, you need to feel what you feel and just get through it. I’m definitely not telling you to magically be OK with everything, I know you’ve got to just…work through things. But...look, I am so not fucking qualified to give anyone emotional advice or, God forbid, relationship advice, but Sherlock is...I think what you’ve got with him, what you could have with him is...’ She shakes her head, frustrated. ‘I dunno, I don’t really know how to put it. I just think it’s important, and it’s not something you’re likely to find again. So...don’t beat yourself up about anything, but maybe try and remember why you’re in this in the first place.’

John’s heart makes another strange motion, one he hasn’t quite got the words for. ‘You’re a pretty great friend,’ he tells her.

‘Sort of offended you felt that needed stating, to be honest,’ Mary says. She steps forward, wraps her arms round him and squeezes him hard, and then steps back again and shivers. ‘God, it’s cold,’ she says. ‘Can we please go home and sleep now?’

John smiles, and feels a little lighter. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘I’ll text you when we hear from Mycroft.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Mary says. ‘Not letting you out of my sight or you might change your mind and run off without me. I’m sleeping on your sofa.’
‘You don’t trust me?’ John says indignantly.

‘To make reliable decisions? I mean this in the nicest possible way, but you’re kind of in bits right now. I have no idea what your brain’s going to tell you is a good idea, but honestly it’s probably going to be stupid quite a lot of the time for a while.’

‘I take it back, you’re a terrible friend.’

‘C’mon,’ Mary says. ‘Back to Baker Street.’

*

John unlocks the door to hear violin music and see the lights on. A moment later, as he starts up the stairs, he hears a voice he recognises and tenses instantly.

‘- species. Of course he cares, and I don’t doubt that he’ll try; it’s in his nature. But ultimately...ah, John, you’re back. And you’ve brought a friend.’

Mary, who hasn’t even stepped through the front door yet, raises her eyebrows as John sends her an apologetic look, then pushes past him and runs up the stairs. ‘Mary Morstan,’ she says, coming to an abrupt stop by Mycroft, who is sitting in Sherlock’s chair. ‘Lieutenant Morstan, actually. And I assume you’re Mycroft Holmes?’

John follows her the rest of the way up the stairs. ‘Why are you in our living room, Mycroft?’

‘We’re ready to progress,’ Mycroft says, simply. ‘I’m here to provide instructions to the two of you –’ he pauses, glances at Mary, then sighs. ‘The three of you, apparently, as to what to do when you arrive in the hub. You’ll be in a lot of danger and you’ll need to follow the plan I give you exactly to have any chance of surviving, let alone succeeding in your mission.’

‘Great,’ John says – sarcastic, but he can’t help suddenly feeling a tiny spark of genuine excitement. This is like nothing he’s ever done before, like nothing any human being has ever done before. The ambassadors meet on a neutral moon; nobody’s ever landed on Gliese 581g itself. He glances at Mary, to see that she’s looking a bit taken aback at having got in on the plan quite so
easily, but increasingly excited too.

Sherlock, however, looks seriously unimpressed. ‘You didn’t make the level of danger clear before,’ he says.

Mycroft looks politely disdainful. ‘You were never so careful of your own skin as a child,’ he says. ‘Studying live fear trees, trying to climb over the acid fountains...’

‘It’s not my own –’ Sherlock starts, then bites back whatever he was going to say. ‘Never mind. There’s no talking you out of coming, is there?’ This directed at John.

‘Not a chance,’ John says, and smiles at him. It feels odd to do it, and Sherlock’s slight, unexpected answering smile makes him suddenly giddy, almost queasy.

‘Right,’ Mary says. ‘So what exactly is this follow-it-or-die plan of yours?’

Mycroft steeplets his fingers, a gesture John’s seen a dozen times between the two of them by now, but now he wonders about it. Is it instinctive – did they have these limbs for enough years to develop new habits and impulses for them? Or is it deliberate, dramatic, look everyone I’m having intelligent thoughts? John stifles a weird, misplaced giggle. God, he’s all over the place. The plan to pull himself together doesn’t really seem to have worked.

‘The hub is built in a spiral shape,’ Mycroft says. ‘That’s quite common, it allows for as much wall space as possible, and since the rules and regulations relevant to a particular building have to be displayed on its walls, official buildings need a lot of wall space. It also means that anyone who appears in the hub when they’re not supposed to has a very long way out that’s thoroughly patrolled at every stage. There are, however, air vents and floor hatches for maintenance purposes, hidden amongst all of the painted messages.’

‘So we need to escape through a floor hatch,’ Sherlock says.

‘They’re locked,’ Mycroft says. ‘You’ll have to make your way towards the middle tier of the spiral – it’ll take you about four loops round to get there. The maintainers’ quarters are there; you’ll have to find one who’s on their own, knock them out and steal a keyblock. The hatches are also more or less invisible, so after that you’ll have to feel along the floor until you find one and insert the keyblock.’
And oh, yes, all right, John’s getting into this. It feels like an age since he’s sat and listened to a
strategy unfold like this. Sometimes he’d throw in his own ideas, but mostly he was happy to sit
and take in his orders. If things on the ground turned out differently from the way the plan said
they would, which happened all the time, he’d improvise, or Mary would. Usually the officers
who’d given them the plan wouldn’t like that, but John and Mary had never allowed that to bother
them unduly.

‘And once we get into the maintenance tunnels, we find our way to the prison compound,’
Sherlock says. He looks annoyed, though John isn’t quite sure why.

‘Indeed,’ Mycroft says. ‘The compound is attached to the hub. It’s vast, but I will provide you with
directions to Anna’s zone. Once there, find her – I will also provide you with an image of her – and
she will tell you what to do next.’

‘Why not just tell us now?’ Mary asks.

Sherlock narrows his eyes. ‘It’s so that if we’re caught, we can’t give it away, because Mycroft
will want to send more people to try it once we get killed. Which we will, because this plan is
impossibly vague, replete with hazard at every turn, and bloody suicidal.’

‘It’s vague because I expect you to improvise, Sherlock,’ Mycroft says. ‘I don’t know how things
stand there presently. I’ve been away a long time. I cannot give you any more precise guidance
than I have; you will have to do your best with the knowledge available.’

‘We’ll be arrested as soon as we land in the hub,’ Sherlock snaps.

‘No,’ Mycroft says. ‘The particle transit devices don’t only take people to and from earth, but
elsewhere on the planet. They’ll just think you’re part of the programme.’

‘Yes, until it becomes clear that we can’t write a word of the language. Or Mary perhaps can write
about ten words, but I don’t suppose she knows how to use them correctly, and I certainly don’t
remember any.’

‘I was coming to that,’ Mycroft says in a slightly long-suffering tone. He opens a bag that’s sitting
by the chair to reveal a set of paintbrushes and brightly coloured jars. ‘I’m going to paint messages
on your skin, which will tell the Gliesans that you’re part of the afters programme, in a special
training module for the duration of which you’re only allowed to speak the earth languages you’re
learning, no Gliesan at all.’

‘And if they don’t believe that?’ Sherlock demands.

‘Then, as you say, you will be arrested,’ Mycroft says, calmly. ‘Sherlock, believe me, I would not even be contemplating this if there were any alternative.’

Sherlock looks around the room, meeting John’s eyes briefly, then back to Mycroft, expression twisting bitterly. ‘Well, you’ve well and truly seduced John,’ he says. ‘There’ll be no talking him out of it now. Alien bases and exploration and saving the day, what could be better than that?’

‘We could just go,’ John begins, slowly. ‘Without you.’

Sherlock makes a disgusted sound. ‘You really don’t –’ he starts, then stops, and says, ‘That wouldn’t help. No, we’re all going. A happy little excursion to our probable deaths. Lovely.’

‘This paint is suitable for skin,’ Mycroft says in a businesslike tone. ‘It’s not dissimilar to the stuff Gliesans use when they’re writing formal messages, or ones that need to last, as messages painted with our natural dyes fade into the skin and disappear in under a minute. Who wants to begin?’

‘I will,’ Mary says, before anyone else can speak. ‘John, Sherlock, go upstairs and talk while I do that. The emotional strain between you’s killing me.’

John blinks, then smirks at Sherlock’s put out expression, then goes upstairs. He doesn’t really expect Sherlock to follow him, but he hears footsteps behind him a moment later, and finds himself smiling in response.
Chapter 31

Sherlock shuts the door to John’s room behind him, then makes a huffing sound. ‘Is she honestly so naive that she thinks we can have a nice little chat and sort everything out?’

John laughs. ‘She just can’t bear seeing people having feelings at each other and not talking about it. I don’t think she expects us to sort it out, but she’d rather we fail to sort it out somewhere she doesn’t have to watch. But for all that, we could talk –’

‘What good is talking about any of this going to do? Anyway, we already have.’

John shakes his head. ‘I have. You haven’t said a thing about how you feel.’

Sherlock tenses. ‘I don’t think you want to hear it,’ he says. ‘And I know I don’t want you to hear it. So. We’re best off going on as we are.’

John cautiously puts a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘Look, I’m not saying I’m OK with any of this. I’m really…not, obviously. But my job is still the same and I still…you know. It’s not like any feelings I had before just went away the second I heard the truth. I know I’m maybe not being very rational at the moment, but that’s not all there is going on in my head. I care, and you need to talk about it, and…I do want to know, so…’

Sherlock’s eyes shift away. He doesn’t speak, and John thinks he’s just going to walk back downstairs without saying a word, but then, eventually, he says, ‘I can’t. I’m sorry.’

‘Really?’ John says, irritated in spite of himself. ‘That’s all you’ve got to say? I thought you were done keeping things from me.’

Sherlock’s gaze settles on him and remains there. ‘I’m sorry,’ he repeats, and then: ‘I could have lied, though, or – no, I could have answered you with something perfectly accurate, I could have said I’m angry with myself for not realising the truth sooner or I’m concerned about what knowing the truth now will cost us both and whether our relationship is salvageable. And you would have accepted that as the whole, or at least the principle elements, of how I was feeling and gone away – not satisfied, obviously, but – but I didn’t say that. I told you I was keeping you in the dark because yes, we agreed I’d be as honest as I could. And I am.’
‘All right,’ John says, the anger dissipating, or perhaps just changing state, sublimating back to a kind of frozen misery. What right has he got to be angry, anyway? They haven’t talked, yet, about what he’s guilty of, beyond his brief, unreasonable reply to Sherlock edging near that territory yesterday. Though sooner or later, if Sherlock doesn’t bring it up, John will have to make himself do it, even though he’s barely been able to bear to think about it so far. For now he just says, ‘Can you tell me why you can’t tell me?’

‘I suppose I can’t face it,’ Sherlock says, tone matter of fact. ‘I can’t face the thought of talking about it, and I think it’ll do more harm than good; in fact I know it will. That’s all. And if that isn’t a good enough reason I accept that, and I’ll be entirely honest with you. It’s your choice.’

‘You know I won’t make you,’ John says, the icy unhappiness threatening to become anger again. ‘You don’t have to –’

‘I’m not manipulating you,’ Sherlock says. ‘At least, I didn’t mean to. I can’t – this is what I’m like, John, I don’t know what you expect –’

‘Neither do I,’ John says, and his voice comes out louder and sharper than he meant it to. He exhales, solid and cold all the way through now.

Sherlock, when John glances up to check, is still staring at him. John says, ‘These feelings you won’t talk about – are they about me?’

‘Not directly,’ Sherlock says. ‘It’s just that – I want things that I know would upset you enormously, if they happened. And I don’t like wanting that.’

‘Oh,’ John says. He has no idea what to make of that, what that could mean. ‘Look – you know where you came from now. Maybe that’s what should matter to you, and not…I mean, we’ve practically just met.’ He can barely get the words out, but he forces himself not to look away as he says them.

Sherlock’s face twists alarmingly, and then he looks away, for the first time in long minutes. ‘How can you –’ he turns, paces, turns back to John again. ‘You know how much I see, how quickly I see it. I know you. And anyone who really knew you – which is almost no one, a fact you take some trouble to keep true – anyone…in that position. Would surely have to feel like this. If they had any sense, which admittedly most people certainly don’t seem to but –’
He seems to be going off track, and John has to know what he was going to say. ‘Like what?’

Sherlock’s face does the twisting thing again, then he glares at the floor and folds his arms. ‘Like they wanted to keep you, or for you to keep them. To – be yours. And for you to be happy,’ he mutters, and then he gives a sort of weird shake, stalks out of the room, and shuts the door behind him.

John stands, and stares at the door, and forgets to move. He feels more tired than ever, but also…he gropes around his mind, all the heaviness and cold, trying to identify the feeling, but can’t name it.

Sherlock lies to John sometimes for no good reason. Sherlock kisses John sometimes like nothing and no one else in the universe exists. Sherlock is a Gliesan sleeper agent. Sherlock feels things he won’t talk about, things that he believes could somehow actually make things worse. Sherlock wants John to be happy.

It isn’t as though any of this should be news, really. But –

‘John, are you coming?’ he hears Mary call up.

John puts his hand on the door handle, and grasps it. He twists it, and pulls the door open, and walks down the stairs.

*

He blinks when he sees Mary. Her arms, neck and face are completely covered in intricate painted designs. She grins at his surprise, and says, ‘I think I quite like it. Never got any tattoos, had a friend with a bunch of 3D-glimmer ones and they were kind of creepy, but I’ve thought about it from time to time, and this is great. There’s something about the paint, isn’t there? It’s really rich and deep.’

John looks over to see that Mycroft is putting the same patterns, or very similar ones, onto Sherlock’s arms. It’s odd to see Mycroft performing these intricate movements, John doesn’t remember ever seeing him carry out this much activity before. Sherlock sits very still, looking out into the room.

It takes a while, though Mycroft is unbelievably deft and quick, and John watches in fascination.
He wonders what this is like for Mycroft: if this is how Gliesans communicate normally then in a way this must feel like he’s talking to his brother for the first time in years – and Sherlock can’t understand any of it. The sadness that passes momentarily through John is a surprise – he wouldn’t have thought, after all this, that he could feel for Mycroft, could empathise.

In addition to the same designs he gave Mary, Mycroft also lifts up Sherlock’s shirt and paints on his stomach. The way this makes John feel is decidedly more intense and slightly confusing and uncomfortable, so he looks away for that bit. When he looks back, he sees that Mycroft’s painted an image of a dark-haired girl with wide, pensive eyes, and beneath that a series of arrows and tiny, neat writing.

‘That’s Anna?’ John asks. ‘And our directions?’

Mycroft nods. ‘Try to avoid letting anyone you pass see that,’ he says. ‘Gliesans don’t wear as much as humans in general; they dress for warmth rather than to cover particular parts of their bodies for social reasons, as they don’t have the same attitudes to physicality. However, since you’re meant to be in deep training, the messages on your skin also explain that you’re expected to dress like humans, so keeping your stomach covered shouldn’t present any difficulties.’

‘My turn?’ John asks. He steels himself: for some reason he doesn’t like the idea of Mycroft painting on him. He suspects he won’t be able to stop thinking of the Gliesan in the pit, its arm reaching for him, the curved bristle of hair on the end of its finger.

‘I’ll do it,’ Sherlock says immediately. ‘I can copy the patterns on Mary, and I expect I still know the right style, instinctively – don’t I?’

Mycroft raises his eyebrows, smiles superciliously, and hands the brushes and paints to Sherlock. John wonders if he should protest, say he ought to get a say in this, but really he’s more comfortable with the idea of Sherlock doing it. Possibly a little too comfortable: he doesn’t think he can handle any more confusion or unsettling reactions today.

Which is unfortunate. Because Sherlock settles on the ground, on his knees, beside John, and lifts the brush, and from the first focused, gentle stroke along his arm, John is done for. He’s not turned on, as he was a bit afraid he would be, but it feels shockingly intimate. The thought that occurred to him watching Mycroft paint Sherlock returns in force: this is how he communicates. This is him, as he really is, talking to me for the first time. Not that Sherlock can even understand the language he’s pouring onto John, and it isn’t even for John, it’s a message to other people. But despite all that this feels...important. Sad. Lovely. His skin tingles against the rough sweep of the brush, the paint slick and smooth against him. Sherlock is so careful, concentrating so hard, glancing from Mary to the brush and back again, and just once to John’s face. John doesn’t know what Sherlock sees there, but his eyes flash down again instantly.
It feels like it takes much longer than the others. Maybe that’s true, and Sherlock is slower at it than Mycroft, or maybe it’s that time’s oozing through John’s head like treacle, and it feels like even his heartbeat has slowed to keep time with Sherlock’s brush strokes. He can’t be sure.

‘There,’ Sherlock says, at last. ‘Will he do?’

‘I’d suggest adding the appropriate details under the clothing as well,’ Mycroft says. ‘Best to be safe.’

John isn’t sure what this means, but Sherlock’s grimacing. ‘Sorry,’ he says, and John doesn’t have time to wonder what for before Sherlock is lifting John’s shirt almost gingerly. John, too startled to stop him, watches as Sherlock holds the shirt up with one hand while dragging the tip of the brush up John’s side. ‘There,’ he says. A tiny white line, similar to –

‘Oh,’ John says. His breathing’s gone strange. ‘Right, of course.’

Sherlock adds one to the other side too, and then paints stitching scars onto John’s shoulders. Then he stands abruptly and strides to the other side of the room. John tugs at his shirt, still, somehow, feeling exposed, even though it’s covering him again.

‘Good,’ Mycroft says, looking oddly at Sherlock. ‘Your body remembers more than your mind, evidently, even though you weren’t born with those arms. But I suppose you’ve probably had them for a number of years now. Are you ready?’

‘Do we need to bring...I don’t know, sleeping stuff? Changes of clothes? I don’t know what we’re likely to...’ Mary trails off, looking questioningly at Mycroft.

‘I think it’s best not to,’ he says. ‘Anything too obviously foreign could give you away. Anna will be able to help you once you free her; she’ll know where you can find any practical items you’ll need to sustain you during your investigation. She’s learned a lot about the planet while imprisoned.’

‘Right then,’ John says. ‘In that case, I guess we just – head out?’
It’s a long ride to the particle transit facility. It’s made longer by the fact that Sherlock insists, halfway there, on landing the avia so he can get out and ‘make his own way there’. John thinks of asking where he’s going but then thinks better of it. Mycroft, on the other hand, argues for ten minutes, in his own stately, detached way. Eventually he sighs in defeated disappointment and lets Sherlock leave. Unless Sherlock somehow has access to his own avia, though, it’ll mean waiting around for him once they get there.

John recognises the hub immediately: it’s the same one from which he used to travel out to the starline and back. The army requires such an enormous volume of transportation that they have several facilities; John wonders if it’s just a coincidence that Mycroft chose to use the one John knows.

The hub is abandoned; John doesn’t know if it was like this anyway, or if Mycroft arranged it somehow. They stand there in silence while they wait for Sherlock, which turns out to be a wait of nearly an hour. Another argument develops between the brothers when Sherlock does arrive, but John’s had enough. ‘Let’s get on,’ he says, and they, gratifyingly, fall silent immediately.

Each of the three of those preparing to travel stands over a particle transit machine and watches as Mycroft uses the panel at the edge of the room to have the machines detect their presence. Then he enters the code for their destination, and pauses before sending them on their way.

‘Good luck,’ he says. ‘I am more grateful than I can say for your decision to help. If you succeed in finding out what Moriarty’s plans are and stopping them, if you can help Anna free the human prisoners and keep the Gliesan government occupied while I complete my work ending the war, then two planets’ inhabitants will owe you gratitude too, though most of them will never know it.’

‘If you don’t shut up, I am walking out of here right now,’ Sherlock says.

Mycroft smiles. John thinks it looks sad, but certainly doesn’t trust himself to read Mycroft Holmes correctly, less than ever now.

Then Mycroft inclines his head, and touches the panel.

*
Particle transit is instant. There’s no flash of darkness or bright light. One minute you see one thing, the next another. A lot of soldiers used to close their eyes to avoid the unpleasant momentary dissonance, but would naturally get mocked for doing so if anyone spotted them. John never closed his: there was something thrilling about that first, impossibly sudden sight of the base which never got old no matter how many times he came back from leave.

It’s normal to experience some disorientation on finding yourself suddenly somewhere completely different, particularly if you don’t close your eyes – in the army it was commonly described as all your senses suddenly yelling what the fuck happened? John got used to it over time, though, and he expected to cope with this trip just fine, even if it has been a while since he’s done it.

But there’s light and heat and noise and for a moment he is more dizzyingly confused than the very first time he travelled. The first thing he knows is that there’s a burning smell, and then he knows he’s looking at flames, and then he feels the heat radiating against his back and knows there are more flames behind him, and then he shuts his eyes and opens them again and sees –

He’s in the ruins of what once was a room made of some kind of dark wood, covered from floor to ceiling in painted shapes. In the places where the ceiling’s caved in, he can see bits of dark sky. The room is full of fire.

He looks at the others, who are both still standing motionless. Mary’s eyes are flickering about though, taking in her surroundings. Sherlock seems completely overwhelmed, but just as John’s about to take his arm and forcibly drag him to safety if necessary, he seems to come back online. ‘Hatch out as an option, obviously,’ he says. His head swivels to a gap in the wall not yet blocked by burning debris. ‘That way?’

Mary, the most familiar with navigating hostile terrain, leads the way, though she’s clearly nervous at doing so, less used to traversing territory on foot than in a ship. They make it to the hole in the wall and slip out in single file, John bringing up the rear.

With the evidence of that much recent destruction, John expects outside to be even more chaotic, but instead it’s deathly silent, without a single person to be seen. That leaves him free to just stare for a moment: a canal runs past them, with streets on either side covered in an almost mirror-like glass, and buildings in strange curved spiralling shapes arch up to the sky, with bridges made of what look like enormous spider webs running between them high in the air. There’s no sign anywhere of the kind of damage they just saw. He glances back, and sees that even the building behind them is pretty intact for now, although they should definitely move before it starts to collapse as the fire spreads.

‘I don’t suppose either of you have any idea what the hell’s going on?’ Mary asks.
'Possibly the Gliesans somehow discovered we were coming,' Sherlock says. 'Setting their own hub on fire to disrupt our arrival seems an excessive reaction, but if they’ve had spies discover the nature of Mycroft’s conversations with Anna Bests they might see us as a serious threat, considering how dangerous Mycroft believes a prisoners’ rebellion would be to them…'

'So what do we do?' John says.

'It’s more important that we find Ms Bests than ever,' Sherlock says. 'If the officials know about us, they know about her. She’ll need our protection.'

'I think you’ll find, actually,' says a voice behind them, 'that the reverse is true.'

Mary turns fastest, and has already let out an, ‘Ah,’ by the time John takes in who they’re looking at. Standing by the gap in the wall, framed by flickering shadows, are two women. One is perhaps fifty, with long black hair streaked with grey and tied back in a plait. She looks very familiar, and John is sure he’s seen her or an image of her somewhere very recently. The other one he knows he’s seen: she closely resembles the image Mycroft painted on Sherlock’s stomach, though she’s quite a bit older now.

‘You’re Anna Bests,’ he says.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘And you’re Mycroft’s people, I take it. You’re a bit late, I’m afraid. We had to start without you.’

‘You mean – the rebellion’s begun?’ John says.

‘Well under way,’ the other woman says. ‘I’m Soo Lin Yao, incidentally. Ah, and by your faces you’ve apparently heard of me.’

‘You were the first person to disappear,’ Mary says. ‘Everyone’s heard of you.’ Her eyes are very bright suddenly. ‘Mycroft said everyone was still alive, but I didn’t know whether to believe him. But if you’re here…’

Soo Lin gives Mary a slightly puzzled half smile, then turns to Anna. ‘Back to the base,’ she says.
‘We’ll take them too, get them set up with pallets. You can fill them in on the way; we shouldn’t stay here too long.’

Anna nods, then turns, kneels, and presses her hand to the street behind them. ‘Keep a lookout,’ she says. ‘This area’s been evacuated because of the nasty dangerous human rebels, but you never know when there might be soldiers skulking about.’ Mary immediately turns and begins scanning the area, as does Sherlock; John’s certainly not going to see anything that they miss, so he watches Anna instead, sees the pavement below her hand suddenly dissolve, leaving a circular gap in the ground and a ladder leading downwards. She springs into the gap, landing about halfway down the ladder, and leaps again, entirely ignoring the rest of the rungs. ‘Hurry up and follow,’ she calls up to them, and Mary and Sherlock follow her, though choosing to climb rather than leap. John climbs in after them, with Soo Lin following last. After she climbs in she reaches up, and before John’s reached the bottom of the ladder they’ve been plunged into gloom as the hatch shuts behind her.

It’s dim, the tunnels lit only by the glowing paint that covers the walls, but Anna strides ahead confidently. ‘Keep up,’ she says, ‘I’ll be happier when we’re well away from where you landed. I don’t think they’re still monitoring the hub, especially after we set it on fire, but we can’t be sure. Our inside man should report back in a few days and then our intelligence should be a lot better.’ She glances back at them. ‘But you don’t know about any of it, I suppose. We’d better fill you in.’ She turns off at a narrow slit in the wall John hadn’t even seen amidst the swirling images, and they squeeze after her along a tiny corridor until they reach a wider tunnel again.

‘No one knows their way around here like she does,’ Soo Lin says. ‘It’s extraordinary, when you consider that she’s been in a cell for years. But Garrideb – that’s what we call the guard who’s been helping her – brought her maps and she’s studied them obsessively. Her memory for routes is astonishing.’

‘It’s all a matter of organised thinking,’ Anna says, briskly, and explains, ‘Soo Lin is our general; she’s in charge of strategy, and then she’s got three seconds-in-command. I do admin and civilian organisation, and Garrideb and our inside man are jointly in charge of intelligence – one goes out into the field, and the other collects and analyses the reports. Or at any rate that’s the plan; at the moment Garrideb’s the one at the base and te’s still waiting for news.’

Soo Lin, John notices, doesn’t look altogether happy at being referred to as a general, but she doesn’t dispute the point. ‘I don’t know what I would have done without Anna,’ she says. ‘The amount of organisation the base takes, you can’t imagine. There’s ensuring the children are looked after and rationing the food and choosing the raid teams…and that’s barely scratching the surface.’ There’s more than admiration in her voice, John thinks. He looks thoughtfully from one of the leaders to the other: Anna is looking back at Soo Lin, a hand twisting at her short dark hair, smiling. Soo Lin looks away almost immediately.

‘Right,’ Anna says. ‘So, here’s what you need to know. The breakout started yesterday. Soo Lin’s
been caching weapons for years now, hiding them in her research materials – tell you about those later – Garrideb used to collect them for her. Like Soo Lin said, that’s the Gliesan guard who helped me when I first arrived here, because he wants to stop the war and he believed that Mycroft and I were the best shot at managing that. Two weeks ago I was moved to share a cell with Soo Lin; we got to know each other, she told me what she was planning, and I helped her put the last details together. Yesterday we got out of the cells, started letting other people out, killed a lot of the guards…Then we escaped into the tunnels and set up a base in the best-hidden place I could find. We’ve been leading raids since then to steal more weapons and food and things, and as you can see today we set fire to the particle transit hub to make it harder for them to send reinforcements out to hunt us down. But I’ll give you more detail once we’re at the base. Which will take about forty minutes, I’m afraid, we’ve got a lot of tunnel to get through.’

‘What are these tunnels, anyway?’ Mary asks.

‘Pretty much all the government buildings and a lot of other ones besides have maintenance tunnels. There’s sewers, too, but we’ll avoid those. We broke out of the tunnels under the prison by breaking down hatches and digging through walls and got through into other buildings’ tunnels, and kept doing that till we were far away. Then we blocked off the entrances so they just look like part of the wall; you’d never know we were there. They’ll figure it out eventually – I give it a week, I reckon – but I plan for us to be gone by then. Keep moving around, stay hidden. Going to be hard shifting everyone, though. Especially when they’ll just have got settled.’

‘And did everyone…’ John doesn’t want to ask this, but he has to. ‘In the breakout. Did you have many casualties?’

‘A few,’ Soo Lin says, voice grim but quiet.

John takes a closer look at her. She and Anna share the same hard-to-place accent, which John suspects comes from living among a mix of nationalities for so long, and the same look of exhaustion, but Soo Lin is older, and smiles less. He seems to remember that she was eighteen when she disappeared, so she must be, as he thought, forty nine or fifty now. She’s spent most of her life here. She seems composed – they both do, which is surely extraordinary for people facing the kind of pressure that they are. But while Anna’s composure gives the appearance of being bizarrely complete, Soo Lin gives the impression of seething with something just below the surface. Rage against the Gliesans? Fear about what might happen to her and her fellow rebels if they fail? He can’t tell, and he suspects that she wouldn’t appreciate it if he asked.

‘It’s just,’ Mary says. ‘It’s just, we’re here for Mycroft’s plan, yeah, but we’ve got…we’re also looking for people.’

‘Who?’ Anna asks. ‘I’m trying to put together a list of names, get exact numbers and make sure we
know who’s on our base, but it takes time and it’s only half done. Still, if we’ve used them on raids I might remember the names.’

‘Harriet Watson and Amar More,’ Mary says.

Anna and Soo Lin both stop in their tracks. ‘Amar?’ Anna says. ‘You’re looking for Amar?’

‘Yes,’ Mary says, and seems barely able to get the word out.

‘He’s alive,’ Anna reassures her immediately. ‘He’s one of our intelligence commanders. Our inside man.’

‘Then –’ Mary seems caught between relief and anxiety. ‘You said he was undercover at the moment.’

‘Yes,’ Anna says. ‘And I won’t lie to you, it’s dangerous work. He’s passing for a rep at highest level training, hanging out with the other students. Like most of us he’s picked up a lot of Gliesan in his time here, so he watches what people say to each other, all the gossip, gets info that way. But he’s good, you have to believe me on that, and I have every confidence that he’ll make it back to us safely.’ She pauses, and then her eyes light up. ‘Of course,’ she says. ‘You’re his daughter. You do look like him, I can see it now. He’s spoken about you often.’

Mary swallows, and looks away, unable to reply, and Anna smiles gently at her.

‘We’re protecting him in every way we can,’ Soo Lin says, gravely.

‘Harriet Watson isn’t a familiar name to me,’ Anna says, ‘but I’ll check the list when we get back.’

John thanks her, trying to keep calm still, and they continue along the corridor in silence for a while. Eventually they turn a corner, and Anna scrambles through a tiny metal slot in the wall. The rest of them follow. John and Soo Lin are about Anna’s height, and Mary quite a bit smaller, but Sherlock is significantly taller and struggles to contort his body through the gap. They wait for him, Mary giggling at him behind her hand and him glaring, until he manages to pull himself through. Then they pass through more tunnels, until they reach what looks like a completely ordinary bit of wall, and Anna reaches out and presses the opening of her sleeve against it, then
shoves it hard. It gives slightly; she pushes again, and a door swings back out of nowhere. She gestures them through.

The camp sprawls out further than John can see. In the distance, he can just make out what he reckons is the flicker of a bonfire. Closer by, there’s beds made of piles of clothes and people sitting on them and talking quietly, or sleeping. Some people, he notices, are sleeping with safety-locked laser guns clutched to their chests.

‘This way,’ Anna says, and she shuts the door and does something complicated to it which John assumes is a lock, before setting off to weave her way around the beds.

A number of the people who aren’t sleeping call out to Anna and Soo Lin as they pass, while others incline their heads respectfully. Everybody looks curiously at John, Sherlock and Mary, and some of the stares border on hostile. They walk fast, but Soo Lin and Anna both stop occasionally to have brief conversations with people. Soo Lin is somehow both perfunctory and tender: she’s usually answering queries about how many weapons raids were carried out today, or what the plans are for tomorrow, or whether the particle transit hub is completely cleaned out of guards now, but somehow her concern for the rebels she’s leading bleeds through into everything she says. Anna, meanwhile, answers questions about food supplies and childcare rotas and the queue to cook at the bonfire, what she’s saying clearly caring but also brisk, making it clear that she has things to get on with. John gets the sense that he, Sherlock and Mary have burst into a schedule that’s already packed tighter than it can go.

‘You got this set up amazingly fast,’ Mary says.

‘We had to,’ Anna says. ‘After we broke out we raided some weapons and food supplies, and then…we knew word would be getting out to the army, we had to hide. People had to eat and sleep and learn how to shoot. So we got down here and I found us the safest place I could.’

They’re getting closer to a large makeshift tent, clearly put together in a hurry using bits of cloth and metal poles and thick tape. Anna grins and says, ‘It’s a miracle it hasn’t fallen down yet. First raiding party to find us a real tent gets…well nothing actually, we haven’t got anything to give them, but they’ll get smiled at a lot. By me, anyway. Soo Lin adores them all but she doesn’t normally smile.’

Soo Lin shakes her head, looking vaguely amused. Sherlock murmurs, so quietly John reckons only he hears: ‘Except when she talks about you.’

‘So what, the raiding parties sneak up through the hatches at night and bring stuff back?’ Mary
‘Yeah,’ Anna says. ‘Garrideb leads a lot of them, he knows the tunnels very well because he used them to come and visit me in secret when I was locked up. We get food and weapons and things, we’re building up a proper stockpile.’

Inside the tent is a pile of cloth surrounded by stacks of paper. Anna strides through and without hesitation picks up one of the stacks and begins to glance through it. ‘Right,’ she says, ‘there’s a space for you about a ten minute walk from here. I’ll show you in a sec. But first…’ She picks up another stack of paper. Going through that one takes longer. Finally, she looks up, her agile, expressive face bursting into its widest smile yet. ‘Here’s Harriet Watson,’ she says. ‘Alive and accounted for, and her pallet location’s marked on here too.’

John squeezes her hand, relief bursting through him. Anna’s smile softens, and she pats his hand gently before moving away from him to the back of the tent, where there’s a bucket of water. She produces some bits of cloth from somewhere and dips them into it, before handing them out. ‘You guys try and clean up a bit,’ she says. ‘That stuff on your skin makes you look Gliesan, and people might start to get restive seeing you about.’ She glances at Sherlock. ‘You must be Mycroft’s brother,’ she says. ‘I can recognise a rep when I see one, but fortunately for you not everyone can, and the longer we can keep your nature a secret the better. They accept Garrideb because of everything he’s done for them, but a rep…’ She shakes her head, looking worried. They troop out of the tent again, attempting to scrub themselves down with the cloths as they go.

Soo Lin heads off in the direction of a group of people who’ve been waving at her and holding up what look like laser gun fuel cartridges. Anna continues to guide them around the little clusters of beds.

For the first time since they arrived, John looks properly at Sherlock, who’s been bizarrely quiet. He’s staring around him, eyes wide. John wonders if he’s been doing that since he got here. Wonders what this is like for him. This planet, which is or was his home, which he doesn’t remember and is now entirely strange to him. Is seeing it jogging memories – or does everything feel persistently familiar but impossible to place, which would drive Sherlock insane – or is he searching for memories that just don’t come, finding the place entirely, painfully new?

And then John forgets about Sherlock, and lets out a harsh, painful breath, because there, curled up into a tight ball on a pile of clothes, is a woman with tangled brown hair and narrow limbs and tiny but broad hands. He’s seen her in this position so many times it’s practically more familiar to him than her face. He bends down and puts a gentle hand on her arm. ‘Harry,’ he says.

He thinks for a second she’s asleep, or ignoring him, but then she uncoils, looks at him, and gives a full body start. ‘John,’ she says, and then shakes her head, and winces. ‘Hallucinating?’ she says.
Fuck that. Fuck it. Oh God.

‘You’re not hallucinating, I swear,’ John says. ‘I came to find you.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Harry mumbles.

‘Did it anyway,’ John says. He takes a critical look at her. She ought to be mostly out of withdraw now, unless she’s somehow managed to find alcohol here, which he wouldn’t put past her. She’s not in any medical danger, he decides, just feels like shit. The situation is so familiar – a situation he swore he wasn’t going to deal with any more – that it feels almost anticlimactic. He came to save Harry from aliens, not to fail to save her from herself again.

Oh well. He knows what his job is now. He turns to Anna. ‘Would it be OK if I stayed here with my sister? If I pull some of these clothes around we should both be able to fit.’

‘Nah, we’ve got enough space where I’m taking you guys,’ Anna says. ‘She can come too.’

‘If I can get her to walk,’ John says, dubiously, but Harry’s already getting to her feet, wobbly but determined.

‘I’ll walk,’ she says. Then she hugs John. She doesn’t smell of alcohol or of lying in bed drinking; he wonders if the Gliesan guards made her shower, as it seems very unlikely that in her current state she would have decided to do it for herself.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ Harry says, as John hugs her back. ‘Even though it’s still impossible.’

By the time they reach their pallets, John is very ready to be lying down on one. Theirs aren’t made of clothes but of what look like random bits of cloth. Anna explains that they raided various warehouses and one of the things they stole was material, but that there wasn’t anything like enough to make beds for everyone. All prisoners, however, were given clothes on arrival – two sets of day clothes and two for night – so Anna instructed people to use the spare sets for beds. ‘We’re all going to be very grubby soon,’ she says apologetically. ‘Hasn’t been my biggest concern, but if this rebellion is going to take long I’m going to have to think about hygiene. Mainly because of disease; we haven’t found a medicine warehouse yet, though Soo Lin’s told the raiders it’s a priority.’
The cloth they did have was used to make spare beds, apparently, in case there were cells elsewhere they didn’t know about. Apparently Soo Lin has been studying the system for years through little more than the odd seemingly-casual question to a guard, and she’s pretty confident that all the prisoners were kept in one huge compound, which they’ve now emptied out, but she can’t be sure.

Harry flops immediately onto her bed and curls back up again, wrapping her arms around herself. John touches her arm and she presses her hand over it; then he withdraws. Mary settles on the pallet next to Harry and Anna says, ‘You’d better get some sleep. Most things happen at night around here; I’ll come and wake you if you’re needed, or if we get news from Amar.’

John nods and takes the next pallet along, and Sherlock the one after that.

‘Thanks,’ Mary says to Anna, quietly. Then she meets John’s eyes, gives him a little twisted up grin, and says, ‘I’m fine. Going to sleep.’

She lies down in a hard straight line with her back to him before he can say anything, so he just says, ‘Night, Mary,’ and she gives him a thumbs up behind her back.

‘Well,’ John says, after a moment, looking away from her, ‘we found what we were looking for. Some of what we were looking for, anyway.’

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says. He’s sitting on his bed, hands together under his chin, more achingly familiar than he has any right to be.

‘How are we going to…report back?’ John asks.

‘I don’t think Mycroft expects – oh, I see,’ Sherlock says. ‘Yes, we’ll have to consider that. I think the report may have to wait until we return.’

John nods, and considers pulling his pallet just maybe ten centimetres across the ground to lie close to Sherlock, to hold him. He doesn’t though. He still doesn’t know who he’d be holding, and he still minds about that more than he really thinks is fair. Tomorrow, maybe, he thinks. Maybe tomorrow I won’t mind any more, and we can sleep wrapped up in each other again.

‘Are you OK?’ he asks Sherlock instead. ‘It must be strange for you, being here.’
'Everything’s strange, here or anywhere else,’ Sherlock says, shrugging, and lies down. John follows suit. There’s no cover to pull over himself, but the tunnels are warm. He wonders what the temperature is outside – what the hell Gliesan weather is even like. He’s been vaguely conscious of a slight heaviness in his limbs, which he put down to tiredness, but actually it could be that the gravity’s a little bit different. Everything is a mystery, and for the first time since arriving John finds himself feeling a bit excited about that, and relieved about Harry, and wonderfully, joyously afraid about the likely fighting to come. He’s missed that fear: fear with a clear source, fear he knows how to control and face down and come out on top of.

He looks over at Sherlock and sees that Sherlock is staring at him with a strange half smile. John raises his eyebrows. ‘What is that look about?’

‘You were thinking about fighting,’ Sherlock says, ‘and I was…enjoying watching you think it. That’s all.’

‘Oh,’ John says, fighting an inexplicable desire to blush, and a less inexplicable desire to pull Sherlock over to him and kiss the hell out of him and not give a shit about whether they’ll regret it.

He looks back, and sees that Sherlock’s smile has grown, and has definite intent behind it now. He wonders yet again if he’s being manipulated. This time the thought that flits through his head is whether Sherlock could be trying to get John to have more ill-advised sex with him and then feel guilty and therefore more ready to move on from his reservations. But the thought feels half-hearted and automatic, and when Sherlock turns away from him without further comment, John’s left irritated with himself, and more tired than ever.

_I should sleep_, he decides. _I’ll have more luck making sense of things when I’m less worn out._

Sleep comes surprisingly easily, despite, or because of, how strange and unsafe everything is, and he has no dreams that he remembers.
John wakes up feeling happy and comfortable and far too hot. For a minute, he lies there with his eyes closed enjoying the first two things and in no real rush to do anything about the third or to bother trying to remember where he is. Then he opens his eyes.

Sherlock is sprawled on top of him, fast asleep, legs stretching out over the pallet – right, yes, that’s where they are, sleeping on a pile of clothes in the underground maintenance tunnels of an enemy planet – and onto the floor, one reaching all the way back to his own bed, which he seems to have half dragged with him as he rolled over in his sleep, so that it’s at a diagonal to John’s bed. His head is drooping over John’s shoulder, leaving John with a faceful of curls; his nose is just clear, which is presumably why he didn’t wake up gasping for air.

John isn’t sure what to do – he doesn’t know how Sherlock would feel about this if he were awake, but equally John really doesn’t want to push him off and wake him up, and he can’t deny that, despite the increasingly suffocating heat, it feels very nice, having him there.

He pulls his head a little bit out of the way, as much as he can without disturbing Sherlock, to look around him. Mary’s nowhere to be seen; there’s a note on her pallet but he can’t read it from here. He shifts, and Sherlock’s eyes open immediately, suddenly completely awake. But he probably just wakes up fast, John decides. The thought that he could have been faking sleep as an excuse to stay where he is a little longer is…disconcerting. Or, no, it’s –

Sherlock rolls off him, and the tunnel air, so warm and stifling last night, feels cold in comparison to the heat of a sleeping body. John shivers, and stands before he has time to miss the weight of Sherlock against him too much. He reaches for Mary’s note, which tells them she’s in the strategy tent, smooths Harry’s hair away from her forehead, and then heads for the tent with Sherlock.

As they reach the tent, Sherlock pauses suddenly and throws his arm in front of John to stop him. They pause there, and John hears voices he recognises coming from inside:

‘I only met her very recently,’ comes Anna’s voice. ‘When I arrived, the Gliesans were seriously suspicious of me – Mycroft wasn’t meant to go to earth yet, and definitely not in the middle of the night. I was kept in a cell alone for a year and questioned endlessly. Eventually they decided I probably didn’t have anything to do with whatever weird thing had happened and it was probably some scheme of Mycroft’s own, and they let me in with other people. But just in case I was up to something, they never let me say with the same people for more than a couple of weeks at a time. I was a bit lonely.’
‘I can’t believe you managed to plan a rebellion in a week,’ Mary says.

‘Well, Soo Lin already planned most of it,’ Anna says. ‘She’d been working on it for years. But the bit she was most worried about was what the hell to do with everyone once she got them out, and that was where I tried to help.’

‘Mary has a definite knack for getting information out of people,’ Sherlock murmurs. ‘Without even trying. She could be very useful in our future –‘ he cuts himself off, abruptly.

John frowns at him. ‘In our future what?’

Sherlock gives him a curious, calculating look, then says, ‘I’ll explain later.’ And he ducks under the tent flap, leaving John to hurriedly follow in his wake.

Once in the tent, John sees that Soo Lin isn’t there; Anna explains she’s in the camp talking to some of their fighters. But there is – John manages to stop himself from jumping visibly – a Gliesan here, who must be Garrideb. John tries not to stare openly, tries to focus on teir face, which is round and youngish and really pretty human, and not on the disconcerting unobscured view of the inside of teir mouth when te opens it, or the movements of teir arms, teir habit of wrapping them all round temself while te’s standing still.

‘Let’s eat something,’ Anna says. ‘The evening ration – yes, it’s night – that’s already been handed out, but we keep our share in the tent and I don’t think any of us have had a chance to touch it yet. We’re often too busy to eat. It’s probably horrible, I warn you – it’s just prison food from the storage there, I’ve been eating it for years and I can’t even tell any more, but I’m pretty sure it’s awful.’

She fetches some cans from the cupboard and opens them, to John’s amusement, with a laser gun; then she points the laser briefly at the contents to cook it. As she warned them, it’s pretty disgusting, but John, as it turns out, is starving, and it’s extremely welcome. As they’re eating, Soo Lin enters the tent, looking as worn out as ever, and grabs a can.

‘Now,’ Anna says, ‘I’ve been telling Mary all about us, but I’d like to know more about you. Mycroft and I were very limited in the extent to which we can communicate. He hinted that you aren’t only here to help us with our rebellion, but he couldn’t say more than that. If you tell us we’ll help as much as we can, as long as it doesn’t interfere with our own activities.’
‘The Gliesans’ invasion plans were sabotaged by someone called Jim Moriarty,’ Sherlock says. ‘One of their own – a rep. That was when he was still a child; more recently, as an adult, he’s brought about the deaths of several people on earth. We think he may possibly have plans beyond causing general chaos and bloodshed, but we aren’t certain. What we are more certain about is that he has an associate who is among the escaped prisoners and assisting with Moriarty’s plans from here, who on earth called himself Sebastian Moran. We’d like to find him; we have seen an image of him but one taken from a distance and in any case he had a face without many distinguishing features; I don’t think we can count on recognising him. We need to stay here and spend time amongst the rebels, take note of anyone with unusual movements or characteristics or behaviours. All we need from you for the time being is to tell us anything suspicious that you notice.’

‘Nothing I can immediately think of,’ Soo Lin says at once. ‘But yes, I’ll tell you. Anna, anything?’

Anna shakes her head regretfully. ‘Nothing so far, but I’ll keep an eye out.’

Soo Lin nods, then pulls what looks like a map towards her and begins poring over it. Anna smiles. She smiles a lot, John’s noticed; it seems to be her response to feeling more or less any emotion, and she’s very expressive, her whole face changing shape when she does it. ‘You’re so obsessive,’ she says, fondly.

‘I have to be,’ Soo Lin says, head still bent over the map. She tilts her head. ‘It may be time to switch direction for the raids. I don’t want the Gliesans to pick up on our pattern and intercept us, or trace us back here.’ She sighs, gets up again, and steps outside. Peering out, John can see a group of people in front of her all wearing similar grim, set expressions, a variety of weapons clutched in their hands. ‘Take the ocean tunnel,’ she’s saying, ‘see if you can get to the nearest training quarters. They do shooting training there, you might be able to find some more weapons, but you’ll have to be quiet and careful. That’s further out than we’ve been; there may still be Gliesans there.’

Her authority is unmistakeable; John feels half inclined to leave along with the raiding party as they head out. Once they’ve gone, she comes back into the tent and returns to her maps.

‘Hi,’ comes a voice from outside the tent, and Harry pushes through the flap. ‘Someone said they saw you guys head over here.’ She’s looking somewhat better, although John can still see the strain in her. She draws a breath and says, ‘Listen, I was really out of it when you arrived, and I’m sorry, and I don’t want to hear anything about it.’

John looks at her curiously. After an episode she’s usually painfully apologetic, sometimes stumbling over her words in a way she never does normally, often crying, always desperate for his approval and forgiveness. Later on she might get defiant, defensive, but never so soon. ‘You won’t,’ he says, shortly. He hates the grovelling, hates the way it makes him feel, but he’s taken
aback not to get it. He came out to fucking Gliese 581 to rescue her, and OK, so as it turned out someone else had already done most of the rescuing, but he still wouldn’t mind some sort of thank you.

Despite everything, despite how distant they’ve become, she still knows him too well. ‘I said I was sorry. And now I’m saying thank you, for coming to get me. And now I want to know how the hell you managed that.’

John hesitates, then shakes his head. ‘I can’t go into details,’ he says. Harry is mad and unstable and though she can definitely keep a secret as long as she’s got herself together, is herself, all it would take is one bad day and there’s no knowing what she’d do.

Sherlock’s been watching them both with a calculating expression, and now he says, ‘John, she can help us. She’s a salesperson, she’s used to paying close attention to people to see if they’re convinced and work out what it would take to convince them. She knows how to watch people, and she’s been here slightly longer than we have. She probably doesn’t know anyone because she’s been “out of it”, but people will recognise her as a fellow prisoner and be less suspicious than they are of us.’

‘Fine,’ John says. ‘I’ll tell you, but you have to keep it to yourself, OK?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Harry says.

‘Moran probably saw us arrive or heard about it from the other rebels, and can guess exactly what we’re here for anyway,’ Sherlock points out.

‘Still,’ John insists. ‘Fine, if you can promise. It’s like this –‘

* * *

Harry listens to all of it quietly, which is something of a surprise, but when John’s done she shakes her head immediately. ‘We have got to come up with a better plan than “wander round the camp in the hope that we bump into him”,’ she says. ‘We should set up a trap or something.’

‘That has possibilities,’ Sherlock says, ‘though it would be easier if we had a better idea of what he was here for. Hard to lay bait for a man when you don’t know what he wants.’
'He must be sneaking out to communicate with Moriarty sometimes,' John says. 'And whatever Moriarty’s plans are, I doubt they can all be carried out from inside the camp. We could keep a watch on the exit for people going out at night.'

Sherlock’s eyes light up. ‘Ah,’ he says. ‘Of course. You’re right, he would need to leave frequently – but why do it covertly, when he could leave openly with a raiding party? All he’d have to do would be to slip away from them for a short period of time on the pretext of carrying out reconnaissance.’

‘So –’

‘So we should find out how many raiding parties there are and who’s in them, and travel out with the ones that could potentially contain Moran.’ He looks at Soo Lin.

‘We’ve decided to send out three every night,’ Soo Lin says. ‘We’ve sent some during the day as well, but I want to do that as little as possible. We’re desperate for weapons at the moment, or I wouldn’t risk it.’

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says. ‘Then we’ll look at the lists of raiding parties, if you have them, pick the most likely contender, and see what we can find out.’

*

Poring over lists of people involved in raiding parties and asking for descriptions of them is decidedly not the sort of work Sherlock prefers. He’s going gradually stir crazy, desperate to get out and explore but unable to do so. The door is kept locked, with Soo Lin and Anna controlling exits and entrances, which only they and the raiding party leaders are able to open: it’s essential, Anna says, for everyone’s safety. If someone were to wander off and get followed back, they could all be wiped out.

Anna moves around a lot, back and forth between chatting to them where they’re working at their pallets, organising things in the strategy tent, and moving round the camp sorting out various disputes and problems. They see less of Soo Lin, who tends to either be instructing groups of fighters or strategising in the tent. Eventually Sherlock concludes that the best group for them to go out on a raid with is scheduled to leave the following night; Soo Lin offers to move it to tonight but Sherlock says that would look suspicious, so they agree to wait.
At what is apparently some time before dawn, Anna and Soo Lin both turn up and explain that Garrideb has – as they apparently does from time to time – insisted that the two of them have a break and a drink. Anna produces a strange pink liquid which was brought back on an early raid and which turned out not to be medicine, as they’d hoped, but some kind of mood altering substance functioning similarly to alcohol. ‘Shouldn’t drink on duty really,’ Anna says, ruefully, putting her cup to her lips, ‘but God knows how long we’ll be at this, and sometimes you just have to have just one.’ John glances at Harry at that, because just one is a loaded phrase for them, and she glares at him but declines the drink when Anna offers her one.

John wasn’t sure if Soo Lin would drink too – she seems fanatically dedicated – but she does, and a tension seems to leave her. She smiles, and looks a little younger. Knowing what John does about her, it seems no wonder she’s strained, and he thinks, too, that the endless fighting is wearing on her. She’s not like him and Mary, he thinks; she gets no joy out of it, but she’s decided it’s necessary, and she’s determined to see it through to the end.

Though Soo Lin and Anna are meant to be off duty, people come up to them frequently. Anna is resolute with them, telling them to come back in an hour, and explaining once they’ve gone that she hates to do it but has no choice: she needs these snatched moments of quiet to cope. ‘Soo Lin’s too soft, though,’ she says ruefully. ‘She can’t do it.’ And it’s true: while Soo Lin will turn away people who come with questions about strategy and their next move, she won’t if they come bearing news of an injury or with anxious questions about someone. In one instance a man appears desperate for news of one of the women on the raids who it transpires he shared a cell with and who is clearly a great deal more to him than a cellmate. Soo Lin hasn’t had a report yet, but she promises he’ll know as soon as she does, and when someone else turns up with the news that the raid has returned she leaves immediately and only comes back some time later after she’s found out that the woman’s safe and let the man know.

‘How on earth does she have the energy for it?’ Mary says. ‘That sort of kindness takes work, especially for a general with dozens of people to look out for…’

‘It’s half killing her,’’ Anna says with a shrug that doesn’t mask her obvious concern, ‘but she can’t help it. Most of these people weren’t asked if they wanted to escape, didn’t know it was going to happen till it did. She had no way of consulting them, but the fact that she didn’t…I think she’s having trouble coping with that.’

After Soo Lin comes back from that errand she seems more tired than ever, and Anna rubs at her shoulders and tries to convince her to have a second drink. ‘Would you?’ Soo Lin demands, and Anna admits that she wouldn’t, and so they continue to sip slowly at the drinks they have.

Considering they’ve just met, conversation flows remarkably freely. This is in large part down to
Mary, who seems not quite herself. John knows her well enough to see that part of this is because she’s making herself as large and vibrant as possible so she can ignore her anxieties about her father, but it’s more than that. With a shock, he realises that she’s flirting. She’s sharp, bubbling with energy, caustic but affectionate, herself turned up to eleven. She challenges Anna to arm wrestling that’s blatantly an attempt to show off and initiate some apparently innocent touching, and wins; gets Soo Lin talking about Gliesan archaeology (which seems to bring her alive in a way no earlier subjects have) and holds eye contact for a little too long as she listens. And there’s no doubt that they’re flirting back – or Anna is, definitely; Soo Lin John finds a little harder to read, but she’s not breaking the eye contact either. John would never have predicted this, but they both have the kind of single-minded competence that marks out Mary’s type, and God knows she could do with something to take her mind off things.

The unexpectedly intimate atmosphere all this brings on allows Sherlock to ask, ‘How much contact have you had with the Gliesans, apart from Garrideb?’

Immediately they both look serious again, and Anna gives Soo Lin a quick sideways glance. Soo Lin says, ‘There was a student – a pre-rep, studying to go to earth, that I was working with. I’d been made to help dozens – maybe hundreds – of students in that way before, but this one was… different. We became close, though of course I could never forget what we really were to one another; our relative positions. But I cared for them. A lot, by the end.’

‘The end?’ Harry asks, looking concerned.

‘Te went to earth,’ Soo Lin says, shortly. The rest remains unspoken.

That’s one question answered, anyway. Things become still and solemn until Mary proposes playing games to pass the time. Harry suggests ‘Never have I ever’, which John quickly vetoes, imagining Sherlock answering each question with I don’t know, staring at the floor. Sherlock, of course, doesn’t miss why John does it, looking at him appraisingly as John babbles his made up explanation. ‘Who’s in the bag’ is out too, since Anna and Soo Lin have been gone for too long to know the names of anyone famous and Sherlock wouldn’t have a clue either. So they play ‘Would you rather’ and ‘Invisible monopoly’ and ‘Laser story’.

Harry, easily the best economist amongst them and not a bad manipulator, wins Invisible monopoly hands down; then it leads to an argument as it always does, John insisting that one of her imaginary companies wasn’t plausible. Mary hurriedly moves to distract them by proposing a contest as to who has the worst item of clothing – Sherlock insists that all his clothing is carefully chosen and tasteful, while Anna and Soo Lin shrug and say that all they’ve had for years is their prison clothes and they don’t remember what they had before, so it comes down to John’s Christmas jumper, Harry’s singing watch and Mary’s opera hat. Anna declares Harry the winner; then they do worst thing they’ve ever cooked (something John tried to cook out on the starline with a laser gun once wins) and then worst middle name. That ends up a contest between John’s Hamish and Anna’s
Moira, because Mary likes hers (Sevitha), Harry’s is the wholly ordinary and innocuous Adair, and neither Sherlock nor Soo Lin has one. John wins that one, and since he and Sherlock seem to have outpaced the others some way in drinking, is far gone enough to punch the air and cheer. He catches Sherlock watching him with an expression so soft John doesn’t know if he can bear to look, but can’t manage to stop either.

Anna and Soo Lin leave after that, saying that’s all the time they can spare, Mary offers to go with them and help, and Harry slips away, probably tired of watching other people drink. Suddenly John and Sherlock are – not alone, because there’s people everywhere, but unaccompanied, and drink-softened, smiling.

‘I want you to be happy too,’ John blurts out, only realising as he says it how important to him that really is.

‘I know,’ Sherlock says. He presents something vaguely resembling a smile. ‘Perhaps we both will be.’

‘You never know,’ John says. He hesitates, then slides over towards Sherlock’s pallet, and takes his hand. ‘I wish you’d tell me…I wish I could know…’

He doesn’t manage to complete the thought. Sherlock closes his eyes, and they lie there, touching nowhere but that one place, even their sides a centimetre or two apart, and John waits in the hope that soon he’ll catch up with himself, and make sense of what he wants.

* 

They wake up too early the next evening, and by the time Anna tells them it’s night outside, Sherlock is about ready to vibrate out of his skin.

The raiding party show no surprise at their arrival and have presumably been forewarned that they’re coming. There are ten of them, in a range of ages and John thinks a mixture of genders, though it’s hard to be sure without the usual cues people provide – they’re all wearing the same thin pastel coloured clothes which were presumably issued to them as prisoners.

Apparently they’re heading to ‘the sun tunnel’ – John learns that the rebels refer to the tunnels by names referencing the colours and designs on their walls – and through to a hospital where they can hopefully find some medicine that would work on humans as well as Gliesans, if there were an
outbreak of anything. The difficulty, Soo Lin explains, is that the safest way is to come up above ground not in the hospital itself: its hatches, unlike those of most places, are guarded, because people sometimes try to use them to steal drugs. Instead, she says, they should come up through the nearest building, exit it through the window, and climb up to the second floor window of the hospital. She’s been studying her stolen maps, and she shows them where the window most likely to lead to the stuff they want is.

‘The nearest building is a history museum,’ she says. ‘Be careful there. Remember who we are and what we’re doing: our aim is to build up our supplies until we can mount an attack on the Chambers and force them to negotiate and agree to send us home and stop the rep programme. We kill as few people as we can and we damage property and objects only when we must. You are to treat the items in the museum with respect.’

‘She told me she always wanted to work in a museum, before she got brought here,’ Anna says to them, quietly. ‘I don’t know if she ever would have got the chance, the way her life was, but she said she’d download catalogues and read them. The guards here needed to keep us reasonably happy so the pre-reps could learn from us, so they gave us books and stuff, even choices about what we’d get. She asked for history books and archaeology stuff and she’s basically an expert on…I can’t even remember now, some particular area of Gliesan history and its artefacts. The week I was sharing with her some students – like, not pre-reps, proper students from a sort of university – came by to quiz her on it; apparently she knows more than most Gliesan scholars. She wrote a book about it. In prison. While planning a rebellion.’

John smiles slightly at the level of admiration – though what Anna’s saying is admittedly pretty impressive. Soo Lin seems so hardened it’s sort of a surprise to see her so anxious over a place full of what must be, if Gliesan history museums are anything like earth ones, old weapons and teapots and painted vases; her face has softened, talking about the care that ought to be taken with them, and he gets a glimpse of how she might look if she had time to focus on things she loved rather than the grim struggle she’s committed to.

‘We won’t touch anything,’ the leader of the raiding party promises, face solemn. Soo Lin nods, satisfied, and John is impressed all over again: he hasn’t seen a flicker of dissent so far, despite the fact that everybody’s trapped together in an underground tunnel with limited food and no showers – excellent conditions for bickering, pettiness and simmering rage, awful conditions for morale.

‘God, I’d kill to have her as a commanding officer,’ Mary whispers to him, and he nods in agreement.

‘Good,’ Soo Lin says. ‘I’m also sending Garrideb with you. Te knows that museum, te’s been there before, and te’ll be able to show you the best way through it.’
On cue, Garrideb hurries up. They head out, keeping a close eye on the people they’re walking with. They chose this party primarily because it had the largest number of men of about the right age, according to Anna – four of them, and those are the ones John watches most carefully.

Their names are Nathan, Hamilton, Howard and Lysander. Nathan is the party leader, and seems slightly bemused at having guests, but clearly uninterested in questioning Soo Lin’s orders. Hamilton is the oldest and Howard the youngest, both of them only just plausible age-wise; John doesn’t think either of them look much like the picture, but then honestly none of them do. Sherlock, however, is insistent that they can’t rely on the picture, and that he doesn’t believe either of them will recognise Moran if they see him. Lysander talks incessantly and has been repeatedly told to shut up by Nathan, but apparently is tolerated because he has a genius for finding hidden supply caches.

They make their way through the sun tunnel – which is painted in deep reds and oranges, with a bright flare of blue right in the centre of the roof. Sherlock’s eyes roam over the images, and John wonders whether there’s any chance that anything could be coming back to him. How the memory wiping process worked – whether the memories were removed for good, or just suppressed.

Sherlock deserves to be happy, to know who he is, and John’s well aware of how much he hates the chasm in his memory. But the idea of him recovering memories is nevertheless unsettling. Would John matter to him at all, then, with a whole life as competition?

Walking along, watching Sherlock take in the world that was once his, John has no choice but to be very aware of how sick he feels at the idea of becoming unimportant to Sherlock, and of how much John doesn’t want to lose him. Whether this is unconscious manipulation on Sherlock’s part or not, how things would have been if Sherlock had been his true self – it doesn’t matter: John adores the person he’s ended up knowing, and the idea of not knowing him any longer, or even of not being with him day in and day out, not caring about him and being cared about, not laughing inappropriately, not kissing, not solving puzzles, is one he hates to contemplate.

‘Sherlock,’ John whispers, because it’s somehow imperative to say it now, right this second.

Sherlock looks at him, his expression the increasingly (distressingly) familiar creased one, curious but troubled.

‘You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,’ John says, in the same low voice. ‘I thought – well, it doesn’t matter now, because I was wrong, and nothing else has ever… I’m going to try, that’s what I’m trying to say, I’m going to try harder than I ever have at anything. I am throwing every scrap of determination I have in me at this. And I know – I do believe – that who you are now is what matters. Everything else is gone, anyway, you don’t remember. And I don’t, or at least I’m not going to care about your past, if you think there’s a shot at us having a future.’
Sherlock smiles, but there’s something not quite right about it. His eyes are strangely dead. ‘Thank you,’ he says, and then, as if sensing that’s not quite the right thing to say: ‘Good. I’m glad. And… good.’

There’s an emptiness behind Sherlock’s words that worries John. But then, as declarations go, John’s didn’t give Sherlock much to respond to, did it? John’s only managed to say that he’ll try to accept Sherlock for who he is now.

John knows himself, knows that when a goal is worth fighting for he will make his way there no matter what. He trusts himself to get there, in time. But he can hardly blame Sherlock for not being thrilled with how things are, or object if Sherlock decides he’s not prepared to wait around for John’s instincts to catch up with what he knows to be true.
They go from the sun tunnel to smaller, narrow tunnels, with fewer and less detailed paintings. The raiding party is silent, mindful of the prospect of Gliesans listening above, trying to track down the location of the rebels – these tunnels are much nearer the surface than the base, for which Anna deliberately chose the deepest location she could.

Garrideb and Nathan walk in front, Garrideb occasionally gesturing towards a particular tunnel. It’s impressive that they trust tem so much, considering te’s a Gliesan: they trust him because Soo Lin does, and she in turn trusts him simply because Anna does. A woman she’s known two weeks. John isn’t really in a position to criticise her for that, though.

Sherlock, John, Harry and Mary are near the back, with Hamilton and Howard bringing up the rear. Once they reach the museum, Sherlock whispers, ‘If one of them’s going to break off, now’s the time to do it. We should each shadow one of them. John, you take Nathan.’

John frowns. Nathan’s the leader, it would be far more difficult for him to sneak off than anyone else. He’s definitely the least likely of the four suspects to be Moran. He wonders whether Sherlock doesn’t trust him to successfully follow Moran if it comes to it. He hates this: it reminds him of being left outside a tall building while Sherlock climbed balconies, of being dismissed and forgotten. He doesn’t argue, though, can’t risk anyone overhearing.

Anyway, it’s not as though any of the others seem that probable either. Howard and Hamilton are inseparable, practically one person; they’re not really possible unless they’re both working for Moriarty, since there’s no way one could sneak out without the other noticing. And Lysander’s so bubbly and talkative it’s pretty difficult to imagine him as a hardened plotting criminal. Even so, Sherlock must suspect him the most, because he says he’ll shadow Lysander himself, assigning Mary and Harry to Howard and Hamilton respectively.

The museum is dark when they climb out of the hatch, sliding it noiselessly shut behind them. John stays close to Nathan, who in turn is following Garrideb through the room. Occasionally John feels himself brush past what might be a case or a display stand – or would be, anyway, if they were in a museum on earth. He has no idea how Gliesans display their artefacts. Somehow, the thought is a lonely one. He fought Gliesans for years, has kissed and laughed with and blinked sleepily on waking at one of them without knowing it, and yet he knows almost nothing about them. He resolves to ask Soo Lin about Gliesan museums when they return to the base.

There’s a bit of light coming through the windows – there’s no blackout projection over them, or blinds or curtains – though very little. It’s just enough for John to keep his eyes fixed on Nathan, and when Nathan comes to a sudden stop, head lifting to stare at something just ahead of him, John blinks in surprise. Then he follows Nathan’s gaze, and stares in bewilderment. Where Garrideb
was, leading the way, there are now – three of him? Except, wait, no, they don’t even look that alike, that’s just John’s limited perception, something he’s trying to get over – and the other two Garridebs are facing them, and –

There’s a sound John knows very well, and then he hears Nathan shout, ‘Gliesans!’ John’s hand is on his handchip – already primed – at once, but Nathan says: ‘They’ve found us. Get out, not the way – this way –’ and then the whole raiding party is running, John included, not back towards the hatch they came in by but through the museum.

They stay ahead of the Gliesans long enough to get to a different hatch – of course, they can’t go back the way they came, at all costs they must not lead the Gliesans to the base – and duck through a series of complicated tunnels until they stop, panting, looks of fear on some and determination on others. Images jump out at John, stark and strange as the world always looks mid adrenaline rush: Lysander’s expression (panicked) and his hand (steady and sure on his gun); Hamilton’s fingers digging fiercely into Howard’s shoulder.

‘We need to get back to the base before they find us again,’ Nathan says. ‘Let’s go.’

As they set off, John becomes aware that Sherlock’s not immediately in front of him or to either side, and looks back to see him a long way behind the others, walking very slowly.

John’s moving before he has time to understand what’s wrong, reacting purely to the instinct that freezes his blood and tells him things aren’t as they should be. By the time he reaches Sherlock, he’s begun to see more than the haze of adrenaline again, to read the red trickling along Sherlock’s forearm and the way Sherlock’s dragging himself forward as if every step is an effort, and knows –

‘Sherlock,’ he says, and then, to the others, ‘Wait.’ They keep moving, though, and John has no time for them, doesn’t think they can help anyway.

‘Sherlock,’ he says, again, as calmly as he can, ‘Your arm’s been hit by a bullet tipped with a fatigue poison that –’

– that, should enough of it make its way to your vital organs, will slow you down and then stop you altogether. He swallows the words, and Sherlock’s in no state to listen anyway, barely moving at all now. ‘Sit down,’ John says, sharp and fast, ‘You might be dying. Sit down.’ Sherlock sinks to the floor at once, sagging against the tunnel wall, and John looks up. The raiding party’s gone, but Harry and Mary are hovering.
'What do you need?' Mary demands. 'We’ll get to a hospital. I saw Soo Lin’s maps, there’s one nearby.'

‘Adrenaline,’ John says. Part of his brain is a mass of desperate, helpless fear, because Sherlock isn’t even human and what if John’s medical knowledge is all wrong, why the hell didn’t he train to treat afters, and what if a Gliesan hospital doesn’t have what he’s familiar with anyway – but the rest of his mind is emptying out of everything except: ‘Lots of it. A blood CAR, that’s a Cleansing-And-Rerouting device, and a blocker kit. I don’t know where they’ll be, I don’t know how Gliesan hospitals are laid out. You’ll have to raid where you can get to without getting caught and take what you can. If you can’t get adrenaline grab what hormones you can, anything that gets his body working will help.’

His voice is calm. Harry, who’s never seen him on the field, is staring, but Mary’s already dragging her away along the tunnel. John bends over Sherlock, who’s stayed quiet, keeping his eyes open with an obvious effort of will, while John’s been talking.

‘Try and stay awake,’ John says, ‘or you’ll make it easier for the poison. But don’t talk, and use as little energy as you can. The bullet just grazed you so it shouldn’t have left enough poison in your system to kill you – if I’m right your body should be able to fight it off within fifteen minutes or so. If I’m wrong, I’m going to save you anyway.’

Sherlock smiles at him, and John shakes his head. ‘Don’t. Don’t move.’ He kneels, puts his forehead against Sherlock’s and his hands in Sherlock’s hair. ‘Stay still,’ he whispers. I’ve got you, he almost says, but doesn’t, knowing very well that it isn’t true: Sherlock could slip from him at any moment. The thought is barely thinkable, unacceptable. Please, John thinks, please, I can’t do without you.

Of course it’s obvious now. Perhaps it was obvious before; in fact John thinks it was. But so large, so close, so blindingly true, he couldn’t see it clearly. Equally obvious is the fact that he should say it, in case he doesn’t get another chance. I need you, whoever and whatever you are, I’m sorry for ever considering otherwise.

Say it. But it’s hard to form the words, knowing that Sherlock can’t reply. It must have been ten minutes now. If Sherlock doesn’t sit up soon, the colour back in his face, it will mean – the odds of Harry and Mary returning in time seem slight, and the mission John sent them out on is so dangerous they may not come back at – but no, what use is it thinking like that – eleven minutes, then twelve – Say it –

‘John,’ Sherlock says, and John takes it in: the pallor receding from his skin, his motion becoming more natural and easy as he shifts more upright. The relief is so violent the breath John releases is tight and painful, and all of a sudden his hands, steady throughout, start to shake very slightly.
‘I’m recovering, aren’t I?’ Sherlock says. ‘I can feel it.’

‘Stop fucking talking, you maniac,’ John whispers, Sherlock’s hair slipping through John’s unsteady hands, soft on his fingertips. ‘You’ll faint. Yes, you’re recovering.’

He could still say it. But he knows he won’t now, and perhaps Sherlock wouldn’t, in any case, want to hear such raw sentiment. Sherlock cares for him, certainly, but I need you is at least as much a demand as an expression of affection, and the last thing Sherlock needs right now is people asking things of him.

He makes Sherlock sit still for another fifteen minutes, John still kneeling in front of him, leg increasingly sore, stroking Sherlock’s hair and trying to breathe normally. The idea that only half an hour has passed since before and now is bewildering; he feels like it’s been years, like he’s crossed an abyss. He stares at Sherlock and thinks I almost lost you, my God I almost lost you, you would have been gone by now. At his insistence Sherlock is staying silent so there’s nothing at all to distract John from the thought, pounding in every cell of him.

Then he hears running footsteps, and looks up to see Harry and Mary holding bags. They come to a stumbling stop, Mary breathing heavily and Harry more or less gasping for air. John winces: in the strange adrenal stillness in which he makes decisions when under stress, he sent his sister, still recovering from a binge and decidedly not in a good way, out on a life-threatening mission that undoubtedly pushed her to limits she shouldn’t have been pushed to.

‘Typical,’ Mary says. ‘We risk our lives to save you and you get better all by yourself.’ But she’s smiling. Then she says, ‘We need to move, though. I think we were –‘

A laser cuts across the tunnel, centimetres from Mary’s head. ‘Followed,’ she finishes.

John pulls Sherlock to his feet. ‘How many?’ he asks Mary.

‘Five,’ she says.

‘Good,’ John says. ‘Mary, get Sherlock and Harry to safety. I’ll see off the Gliesans and then follow.’
‘Don’t argue,’ Mary snaps at Sherlock, who’s opened his mouth. She’s already dragging him away as she says, ‘Don’t say you’ll stay with him. You’re half falling over, you’ll get him killed. Harry, come on.’

The Gliesans are likely some distance away still, hence their inability to aim: they must have lasers that can rebound off walls, turning two or even three passage corners. The further away the others can get before their pursuers arrive, the better. John flicks his handchip into military mode and stands ready to either fire it or dive away from a laser. His won’t go round corners, which means he’ll get one shot. If he’s lucky.

The next laser cuts so close to his leg he can feel the heat of it. He flattens himself against the wall of the passage, hoping he’s picked the right wall, the one the laser will bounce off and therefore away from. He has, but its angle takes it right past his leg again, and this time the stab of pain tells him it’s made contact, though hopefully only just. But there’s no time to examine it, because – there –

John fires, and the tiny glimpse of hair he saw just starting to turn the corner tumbles forward along with the head it’s attached to, severed from its body. There’s a moment’s silence, and then four other bodies come rushing round the corner, firing as they do.

John has less than a second. He’s moving before he sees them, his only chance of survival to accurately predict their movements. He throws himself to the ground and raises his hand as he does, pressing his thumb to the trigger and holding it while he moves his hand in a rapid sweep. Their lasers shoot over his head and down the tunnel; his cuts across their torsos, and then there’s silence.

He gets to his feet, and tries to set off at a run down the tunnel to try and find the others. When he does, though, the pain is so acute that he’s forced to slow to a brisk walk. He’s only turned one corner, though, when there’s a feeling like a scream spreading out from his leg through his entire body, and then he discovers that he isn’t walking any more, but is gradually sinking to the floor.

A glance down reveals the worst: the laser that scorched his leg cut deeper than he’d hoped. A line has been carved right along the leg, not quite severing it in half but getting part of the way there. Blood is gushing enthusiastically from it. ‘Ah,’ he says. He’s dizzy too, and it occurs to him that he’s been walking and even briefly running on a leg held together mostly just by the weight of his body above it, and that he must have lost quite a lot of blood already.

He sits down, and fumbles at his sleeve, managing to tear it. He wraps it tightly around the wound but knows there’s little point – this sort of thing, before blood CARs and thirty second stitches were invented, used to kill people. A bandage isn’t going to be enough, but he holds it in place anyway. He has no intention of giving up without trying.
He thinks he hears footsteps, but escape isn’t an option. He raises his arm, ready to fire, but he’s already losing consciousness, and his arm flops to his side again, too heavy to hold up. He fights to keep his eyes open, and only knows that he’s failed to retain consciousness when he sees Sherlock bent over him, hands smoothing helplessly down John’s arms.

‘I’m sorry,’ he tells Sherlock. ‘I tried to stay awake. But you should be safe, you and Mary and Harry, I think I got you enough time to get away. I hope so, anyway. Be fucking annoying if I…’

‘John, please,’ Sherlock says, ‘Just hold on till they make sense of the equipment. I need you to do that. Promise me.’

‘Listen,’ John says, ‘I’ve been an idiot.’ Lying here in a pool of his own blood with Sherlock’s beautiful imaginary hands on him and Sherlock’s beautiful imaginary head falling apart in terror over losing him, it’s remarkably obvious. Because this isn’t real, but it could be. Because seeing it, it convinces, far more than John would have expected. Sherlock would be just like this, if he could see John dying, and John is grateful that Sherlock won’t really be there to see it.

‘You’re not an idiot,’ Sherlock says, almost whispering, and that is less believable, but it doesn’t matter.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t know,’ John says. ‘Should’ve. But I’ve got it sorted now.’

‘Why are you apologising?’ Sherlock demands, sounding almost angry. ‘Don’t you – you utterly absurd –’ he sounds half wrecked, pressing John’s leg together in a way John would suspect was pointless if he could remember much medicine at the moment. But perhaps the rules of medicine are different in hallucinations anyway.

‘Because I don’t know how much longer I can –’ John says, he’s not sure if that actually was what he was apologising for, but it seems more relevant now. The ceiling is becoming blurred and distant and unreal, just as if he were passing out. Is it possible to pass out while already unconscious?

‘Do not lose consciousness,’ Sherlock says, fiercely. ‘John, that’s an order. You’re used to obeying orders, it ought to get through – stay awake.’

‘Sorry,’ John mumbles, ‘I’m so sorry, Sherlock, you’re too late,’ and the ceiling and Sherlock
become one soft blur, and then vanish altogether.

*

‘- finished with the CAR, now it’s just the stitching.’

‘I’ve had to do this before, once or twice, when there wasn’t a medic around. It won’t be neat, he’ll scar, but –’

‘Just hurry, Mary.’

There’s a horrible pain in his leg, and he makes a small noise of discomfort. He hears gasps all round him at that, and the pain travels farther and faster up his leg.

He opens his eyes.

The first thing he sees is Sherlock, face inches from John’s own, eyes staring intently towards somewhere in the region of John’s nose and mouth. As John blinks Sherlock’s eyes move, almost reluctantly, to meet John’s. They stare at each other for a moment, and then Sherlock disappears from John’s field of vision. He tilts his head to see Mary stitching his leg up, and tries not to wince at it.

She sees anyway, of course, and what’s more is instantly able to tell that he isn’t wincing at the pain. ‘Excuse me,’ she says. ‘I did just save your life. You can complain about my technique later.’

‘I did once show you how to –’

‘Yes, hence you being alive,’ Mary says. ‘I was very grateful to your training in blood CARs and in stitching a few minutes ago, but now you need to shut up and let me finish.’

‘I almost died,’ John says. ‘You should all be weeping and wailing over me. Did Sherlock just leave?’
'He could see you were OK,' Mary says. ‘Come on, John, you know why he left. No, for God’s sake, don’t try and get up, you are the worst patient in history. You can go and do feelings when you’re actually in one piece.’

‘You’ve been at this at least a minute,’ John complains. ‘They’re called thirty second stitches for a reason, you know. My record was seven and a half seconds.’

She smiles at him, and he can see that beneath her insistent levity she was worried. ‘Close thing, huh?’ he says.

‘Much too close,’ she says, fingers moving busily. ‘You’re a fucking moron. And I’m worse. Sherlock was right, I should never have let you stay behind.’

‘There really wasn’t any other choice,’ John says, firmly. She sits back, looking critically over his leg. ‘Am I allowed to sit up now?’

‘Under no circumstances,’ Mary says. Her expression sobered. ‘I managed to drag Sherlock round about five corners before he recovered enough to break off. He insisted we go back; I said you knew what you were doing and we’d wait for you a couple more tunnels away. I said he didn’t understand what war was like and that sometimes you had to make hard decisions and trust the people alongside you. And he said if I trusted you not to get yourself killed then I was an idiot, and I said fine, we’d wait where we were for five minutes and if you hadn’t turned up we’d go back.’ She shakes her head. ‘If he hadn’t been there you’d be dead.’

‘You had civilians to look after,’ John says, struggling to an upright sitting position despite Mary’s glare. ‘You were absolutely right not to come back, and yeah, OK, I’m glad Sherlock being a stubborn idiot saved my life instead of getting the three of you killed, but to be honest the latter was more likely. You made the right call. I would’ve done the same, and anyway, I’m not dead, so hey.’ He grins at her, and after a moment she smiles back, if a bit uncertainly.

‘Are you all right?’ Harry says, crouching next to him, looking deeply anxious. ‘You were – it wasn’t good, John.’

‘I’m fine,’ John assures her. He looks around him. ‘Where exactly are we?’

‘We couldn’t move you,’ Mary says, shrugging. ‘So we’re where we found you. Er, we might want to do something about that, though. Sooner or later somebody’s going to find the bodies of the
Gliesans you killed, or someone at the hospital will realise they haven’t come back.’

‘You were the one who said I couldn’t get up,’ John says. At Mary’s look he adds, hurriedly, ‘And don’t even think about suggesting you all carry me.’

Mary sighs, but helps John up, and when he can’t help wincing she only glares at him without trying to persuade him to change his mind. ‘Do you have any idea where this is?’ he asks. ‘I mean, we ran out of the museum, and then…’

‘No,’ Mary says, ‘but that doesn’t normally stop me finding the way back to a base, although tunnels are not my comfort zone, got to admit.’

‘I have some idea,’ says Sherlock’s voice from the dark end of the tunnel, and he steps back into view. John grins at the idea that he was lurking there the whole time.

‘Good,’ Mary says. ‘Let’s find our way out.’

* 

While they walk, they talk quietly, Harry relaying the story of sneaking into the hospital, her and Mary’s frantic search for what they needed, slipping into the shadows when Gliesans passed, once pretending to be patients – afters-in-training injured by the escaped prisoners. Eventually they’d found what they needed and escaped, but not without being spotted. She’s flushed and excited as she tells it and John studies her with interest. Don’t think you get to mock me for being an adrenaline junkie any more, Harry. He doesn’t say it, though: he’ll save that one up for later.

Mary leads the way. At first, Sherlock keeps pace with her, pointing out details he observed on the way that they can use to trace their way back. After a few minutes, however, they reach territory Mary recognises, and Sherlock falls back immediately to where John’s walking slowly behind the others. John takes his hand, and Sherlock grips it so tightly it’s painful. John strokes Sherlock’s white knuckles with his thumb, and thinks that the things he needs to say can wait until they’re back at the camp.

‘We didn’t really know what we were looking for in the hospital,’ Mary says, ‘so we took a lot of stuff we didn’t really understand. Which is just as well, or we wouldn’t have had the stitches.’
‘You did a great job,’ John says, mostly sincerely: all right, it could be neater, but he’s alive, isn’t he?

‘Thank you,’ Mary says dryly, glancing over her shoulder to smile at him. ‘Not that it took you long to say it, or anything…’

‘She was brilliant,’ Sherlock says, with remarkable warmth. ‘I was just…’

‘Crouching and staring in frozen terror?’ Mary suggests, looking back again. As Sherlock’s expression falls and then is hastily schooled into indifference she adds more gently, ‘And holding John’s leg still while I worked the CAR. Couldn’t have done it without you.’

‘I was the one who was really useless,’ Harry says, ‘but my hands still aren’t the steadiest. Didn’t want to make it worse.’ Again, there’s a matter-of-factness to her tone that takes John by surprise. Alluding to the state she’s in so casually is not at all typical.

‘I’d never have got out of the hospital alive without you,’ Mary tells Harry, and then says to Sherlock, ‘And like I was telling John before when you definitely weren’t lurking and listening in or anything, we wouldn’t have got back to him in time if it weren’t for you.’

John kisses the side of Sherlock’s head in a sudden impulse, and Sherlock nearly falls over in surprise. When he looks at John, his eyes widen, and he looks away almost immediately, then lets go of John’s hand. ‘I should help navigate again,’ he says, and slips forward. John’s not quite sure what to make of that.

*

‘You’re supposed to be a scout,’ Sherlock says.

‘You’re supposed to be a genius, and for the love of God, let’s not bicker, all right?’ Mary says, staring at the tunnel wall in front of them, covered in colourful designs that they’ve definitely seen before.

‘There’s a hatch above us,’ Harry points out.
‘I could climb out and see where we are,’ John suggests. ‘I know it’s risky, but…’

‘Risky and unlikely to help,’ Sherlock says. ‘We don’t know the surface any better than the tunnels.’

‘It’s got to be worth a try,’ John says.

‘Yes,’ Mary agrees, ‘except you’re definitely not doing it, John. You need to rest that leg.’ And before he even has a chance to argue, she’s pushed the hatch aside and is swinging herself up through it. A moment later it slides shut behind her.

They wait twenty minutes for her to come back, John becoming increasingly restless until he knows he can’t take it any more. He doesn’t say anything, knowing the others will try to stop him; instead he just reaches for the hatch to follow Mary’s example. Before he can grasp at it, though, it suddenly falls open, and he jumps back as someone drops through.

As the person turns to face him, John is on his guard, reaching to switch modes on his handchip, but the person’s face is familiar somehow, and that makes him hesitate. But this must be a Gliesan, so –

Mary drops through next, and shuts the hatch behind her. John looks at her, and then stares. Her eyes are shining wildly, an expression on her face he’s never seen before. ‘John,’ she says. ‘John, this is –’

Recognition hits him just as she’s speaking: a picture he saw God knows how many times, stuck to the dashboard of Mary’s scout ship. Her mother and father, two years before his disappearance. And this man is –

‘My – my dad,’ Mary says, unable, John thinks, to quite comprehend it. ‘This is my dad, John.’ And she turns away rapidly, which John suspects is because she’s suddenly close to tears.

‘Amar,’ the man says, shaking John’s hand and then Sherlock’s and Harry’s. He seems composed, but there’s a light in his eyes too and he keeps glancing sideways at Mary with a look of bewildered tenderness. John suspects he’s too overwhelmed to react – Mary, at least, had some kind of build up to this, but Amar had no idea he was ever going to see her again.
Mary turns back, looking a little bit more like her usual self. ‘Right,’ she says, with a try at her normal tone, still miles out, ‘Apparently my dad also knows the way back. I’ll tell you about what happened up there while we walk.’

* 

What happened, apparently, is that Mary stumbled into the after training class in which her dad was undercover – less of a coincidence than John at first assumes, since, as Amar points out, he naturally chose somewhere close both to the base and to locations likely to be useful to raid. She played along, and when the lesson ended ducked into the cupboard that housed the hatch, while he, recognising her despite all the years that had passed since he saw her (though barely able to believe it) followed her there once the coast was clear.

‘So you’re coming back with us?’ Harry asks.

‘I’m not letting Mary out of my sight,’ Amar says, just as Mary says, ‘Like I’m ever letting him out of my sight again.’ They glance at each other and laugh, and John thinks he feels some tension he wasn’t aware of easing up.

‘Anyway, I don’t know how much more I could have found out there,’ Amar says. ‘Besides which someone could have got suspicious at any time. It’s been useful, though.’

John pulls Sherlock back, since, ‘giving Mary some privacy to talk to her long-lost father’ is the kind of subtle emotional detail he might or might not consider himself, and Sherlock pulls his hand away from John’s almost at once. John tries not to let that worry him.

* 

Anna and Soo Lin are thrilled to see Amar – and to see the rest of them back safely, since when the raiding party returned without them there was some concern.

‘To be honest,’ Anna says, ‘we really didn’t think you were coming back.’

‘At one point, neither did we,’ Mary says grimly, glancing at John, and Anna reaches out to squeeze her shoulder. Amar looks at each of them in turn, and tips his head slightly to the side.
‘Debrief, Amar?’ Soo Lin says, and he turns apologetically to Mary, who nods.

‘I’ll hover outside the tent,’ she says.

Then Harry, who can be tactful, slips off with a mumbled excuse, and suddenly John and Sherlock are sitting on their pallets staring at each other, without anything to distract them.

They look at each other, then John smiles, a particular wry, lingering smile he’s only ever had occasion to direct at Sherlock. ‘Thanks for not dying,’ he says.

Sherlock returns the smile, though not, John thinks, without some effort. ‘You too.’

John steels himself. ‘Look,’ he says. ‘I’m just going to go ahead and say this. I don’t even quite know what I’m saying yet, but…OK. Yes. I’ve worried about – about us, from the beginning, you know that. I worried that I was taking advantage of you, that you were clinging to the only thing you found familiar, which happened to be me. Lately – well, lately I’ve had other stuff on my mind, haven’t I? But nothing’s changed. You might know more about where you’re from now, but that doesn’t mean you’re not vulnerable.’

‘You’re not that stupid,’ Sherlock says, ‘which means you’re being patronising. Everything’s changed. And you’re the one who’s been feeling vulnerable.’

‘No, I’m just the one who’s been talking about it. It’s because you never admit to feeling vulnerable that you are,’ John says, inelegantly. ‘No, don’t – I won’t press the point, fine, we’ll say you’re not. But I – I saw you when I was…’

‘Dying,’ Sherlock says, flatly.

‘Which I didn’t,’ John reminds him. ‘I thought I was hallucinating but I wasn’t, was I?’

Sherlock doesn’t answer, but looks slightly hunted. John says, ‘I don’t know what I ever did to deserve to mean that much to you. I think I should be trying to show you how many people there are in the world cleverer and more interesting and generally more worthy of you. But I’m too selfish for that. And when you were hurt, I…before that, even. You were here on this planet where
you used to belong and I – I didn’t think about it, not consciously, but something in me made up its
mind.’

‘About what?’ Sherlock says. His eyes have been oddly still throughout this conversation, rooted
on John’s face.

‘I realised,’ John says, fumbling for the words, ‘Oh, God, I’m shit at this. But I realised that, you
know, you matter more to me than – I guess than all the other crap I was thinking might matter. I
realised there was no contest. Look, I know I said I’d try but I keep reaching for you anyway and
forgetting all the rest of it, I don’t think it’ll even be that hard. Maybe that’s grotesquely optimistic,
I dunno, maybe it will be, but I don’t – it doesn’t matter, really, because there’s no question of me
failing. If you come and live on this planet or stay on earth or whatever happens – if I can follow
where you end up going, and if you want me there, then – then that’s where I’ll be. I’m with you,
Sherlock, whatever happens. If you’ll have me.’
'Oh,’ Sherlock says. His knuckles are white. John stares at them, at the flush around the white, thinks of bioengineering, refuses to think of sharp edges and the flesh of arms.

‘Is that – is that all right?’ John says. ‘You don’t have to say anything back. I just wanted you to know.’

‘You feel like that,’ Sherlock says, and then seems to grind to a halt. He tries again: ‘You feel like that, even with…everything I’ve done?’

‘You mean –‘

‘I haven’t apologised,’ Sherlock says, thoughtfully. ‘Is it a thing you can apologise for? I’m sorry I planned to make you trust me and then kill you. I’m sorry all the things I’ve done and said out of fascination and affection and attraction are things I might have once intended to do as part of a trap. It doesn’t work, does it? But I am sorry. I regret the decision bitterly even though I don’t remember, and, yes, even though I’d never have met you if I hadn’t –‘

‘Stop apologising,’ John says, something breaking in him. He’s frantic, suddenly, to say what he’s been refusing to think about, what so very much needs to be said. ‘You didn’t even…what about what I’ve done? You never killed anyone; maybe you would have, but I – I suppose I believed what I was told, I expect the people doing the telling mostly believed it too. That we were fighting for survival and they – the Gliesans, I mean – you – were fighting for domination. I mean, I was never like the mad jingoists who thought you were just galaxy conquerors with no real need for Nova at all. I believed, I guess, that you needed it, just on a different level of need from us. That for you staying on your own planet would mean overcrowding and hardship and an increasing mortality rate – that it would be terrible, but compared to what our scientists were unanimously saying it would mean for us, within less than thirty years, to stay on earth…sometimes the Gliesans sent research that said more or less the same about their planet, and I suppose there might have been – probably was – more that the Earth Nations never had published. But I didn’t really believe it anyway; I thought they’d figured out how we thought and were sending us whatever they reckoned would persuade us to give in.’

‘You’re speaking in past tense,’ Sherlock says. He sounds calm, but his fists are still tight. ‘You don’t believe that now?’

‘How can I?’ John says, unhappily. ‘No one would do what the Gliesans have done unless – well unless they were purely selfish beings devoid of any concern for other species, or just so different
from us that their motivations would be incomprehensible to me – and you…knowing you, I know those aren’t options, so that leaves – you wouldn’t have done this if you weren’t desperate. More desperate than us.’

He feels the need to pace, suddenly, like Sherlock in the grip of a passage of thought, but holds himself in place. He can feel something slipping from him, a loss uncoiling somewhere deep inside himself. ‘I don’t really believe that Mycroft is certain that pouring money into science and exploration will save us. I don’t see how he could be. I think this is an enormous, horrifying gamble, but…’ John shrugs. ‘None of the other options are acceptable to me any more.’

And there: it’s gone. He feels the space it left like a physical thing, like an actual hole has been roughly gouged from somewhere at his core. When he was sitting in a blank government flat explaining the ins and outs of polite conversation to a stranger who didn’t matter to him, when he was lying in bed watching a red light blink kindly amidst the shadows against his skin, when he was limping up stairs or along a street or gazing at the walls of his own miserable flat, he was waiting, always, for sleep, for the few hours in which he knew he’d dream of spaceships and lasers and purpose. And since Sherlock curing his limp, and Mary’s tentative comment about John going back, the dreams have been brighter than before, camaraderie and blood-streaked laughter slipping into them amongst the violence. It would have been a terrible choice, whether to stay on earth – stay near Sherlock, if Sherlock would have him near – or return to the starline. But having it wrenched away like this…because John wouldn’t go back now. He doesn’t even want to go back to the memories.

It’s more than losing something – the sense of purpose, of doing what he was best at in the best of causes: survival for the whole of humanity. It’s the slow grip of the idea that he never had what he thought he did in the first place.

‘I’m sorry,’ he hears Sherlock say and, when John fiercely shakes his head, afraid to talk for fear of how his voice will sound, Sherlock clarifies, ‘Sympathy, not apology.’

It’s the right thing to say. A slightly shattered laugh eases its way out of John’s body. ‘I don’t think sympathy is appropriate either,’ he says, and his voice is a bit more normal than he’d feared.

‘No, but neither is anything else,’ Sherlock says, and John laughs more even though it’s hard on his stinging throat.

‘So we’ve both done unforgiveable things to each other’s people,’ John says, at last. ‘Now what?’

‘We forgive each other anyway, I suppose,’ Sherlock says. ‘And you were fighting for your
species’ survival, John –‘

‘As were you,’ John says.

‘Yes, but I –‘

‘No,’ John says. ‘No, I’m done with – I…’ He trails off, but goes on shaking his head, as if that’ll somehow convey what he’s unable to find the words for.

‘Anyway,’ Sherlock says, after a moment’s pause, ‘the Gliesans are hardly mine, or at least I’m certainly not theirs, now.’

Sherlock’s matter-of-fact tone seems to transfer the sting in John’s throat to his chest. ‘I’m sorry,’ John says, quietly.

‘Inappropriate sympathy again,’ Sherlock says, quirking a smile.

Then they’re both quiet. John doesn’t know what to say. For all he said you don’t have to say anything back, he admits he hoped for…something, even if all Sherlock said was that he needed more time to think. And he’d like something to distract him from the loss still gaping inside him, which he isn’t prepared to think about right now.

He looks at Sherlock and sees, to his surprise, that Sherlock’s wearing an expression John associates with him grappling with a particularly complex puzzle. Has Sherlock gone straight back to thinking about Moran again? Before John can ask, though, Sherlock says, in a sudden outburst, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ Then he looks surprised, as though he hadn’t meant to speak aloud.


‘I don’t know what you’d want,’ Sherlock says, starting to pace. ‘I wasn’t going to – I’d thought it through, but I’m having doubts.’

‘What?’ John says.
Sherlock looks at him, expression pained, and says, finally, ‘You want me to tell you things. But in this case it’s far more selfish to tell you than not. I thought I could live without – but if I can’t, then…no, but I can, of course I can if the alternative –’ His hands are in his hair, scraping through it roughly.

*I want things that would make you unhappy*, John remembers, and suddenly there’s something he’s afraid of, something he can face up to. The bruised aching feeling inside him eases, very slightly. ‘Tell me,’ he says.

Sherlock’s eyes meet his, and they’re too bright, too still. ‘All right,’ he says. But then he goes quiet again, and John thinks he’ll have to push him further. As John’s about to speak, though, Sherlock says, in clear, measured tones: ‘You keep saying – you’ve been trying to accept me for who I am now, and cast away any thought of who I was. And I…have been trying to do the same. But since I realised the truth about where I came from, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how much I’ve forgotten.’

‘But you already knew you’d forgotten your entire life,’ John says, surprised.

‘Yes, but…having more information about what it is I don’t remember has made it more concrete, it’s…tangible, almost within reach, I can imagine what it might be but can’t get to it. There’s so much I must have known, John. I can’t imagine I was any less curious or obsessive, I must have found things out – interesting things. I hate the fact that I can’t remember them. I hate the fact that I can’t fully understand myself, that I’m shaped by an entire lifetime of things I don’t know about. I hate all of it more than I know how to express. But…’

John’s stomach feels heavy, and he isn’t sure why. ‘But?’

Sherlock throws his arms up. ‘I’m afraid of finding out, and of never finding out,’ he says, still looking away. ‘I can’t bear the idea of never knowing, of everything I knew, spent my whole life up till now discovering, learning, being lost. But I’m afraid of what would happen if my memories were to return. Of who I’d be, and how you’d feel about that person.’

‘And how that person would feel about me?’ John asks. Sherlock looks at him then, and frowns, but doesn’t answer. The heavi ness in John’s body begins to make a lot of sense.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sherlock says. ‘This is why I didn’t want to talk about it. I know I should want to move forward, to go on with my life on earth and focus on what I have here and not think about
who I was. And I’m little accustomed to worrying about what I should do, but in this case…”

‘I don’t matter,’ John says. ‘Why should I? Not compared to your whole life. It would be selfish of me to –’

‘God!’ Sherlock explodes. ‘How can you not know – haven’t I made it agonisingly clear by now – why do you think I hadn’t planned to tell you I was dwelling on my lost past? I’d made my choice, that’s why. If you decided you could have me for who I am now I thought I’d gladly jettison everything else and never mention the loss. I thought it would be an easy choice. And it – it is, that’s still my intention, but I couldn’t hide it as easily as I thought I’d be able to, and I can’t stop wanting to remember, and I’m horribly afraid that you accepting my present self won’t be enough, that it will still always feel like a rejection, however irrational it is to feel that way. And even though I plan to continue working on eradicating those feelings, in the light of my agreement to avoid lying to you, I thought…well, perhaps I shouldn’t have said anything.’

John shakes his head, sore with emotion, exhausted from its battering at him. ‘I’d rather have the truth,’ he insists. ‘Always.’

‘But it’s hurting you,’ Sherlock says, eyes raking over John. ‘That much is obvious.’

‘It would’ve anyway,’ John says, shrugging, though why he’s bothering to try and appear nonchalant he has no idea. ‘I just wouldn’t have understood why. This is…better, and – it’s not as though it’s wrong for you to feel like that, you’re bound to, it’s…it’s my failure that I can’t…’ He runs out of words, his throat now as dry as it is stinging. He’d thought he was accepting Sherlock, that he’d opened himself to loving Sherlock fully, in full knowledge of who and what he is. He’d considered the possibility of Sherlock wanting to consider his Gliesan identity, return to this planet…but it’s now obvious that despite that John was still really only thinking of Sherlock as he is now, Sherlock trained to act human, that John’s still shutting parts of Sherlock out. Is that what John wants, really? Less of him? And yet who would Sherlock be, if…

He doesn’t know how much longer he can go on with this conversation; wants to retreat to his pallet and put a finger and thumb tight round his left wrist, where the handchip is, feel his own pulse beat side by side with the laser. But then Sherlock says, ‘We should discuss Moriarty and Moran,’ and John smiles at him, weakly grateful for the change in subject, however abrupt.

‘Well,’ John says. ‘We do know something about what they’re planning, thanks to –’

‘Not here,’ Sherlock says, warningly. ‘We don’t know –’
'Right, yeah, of course,' John says. He’s stupid with exhaustion, even more miles behind Sherlock than normal. ‘Where?’

They end up going to Anna to ask her for permission to slip outside the base and have a private conversation, but she refuses apologetically. ‘I’m really sorry, guys,’ she says, ‘but the rules have to apply to everyone or people will start getting angry, and we can’t afford that. Besides which you were both seriously injured not long ago; you should be resting, not sneaking around outside where you might get shot at or chased.’ She smiles at them. ‘Next raid you can go and slip away from the rest of the party to have a chat, OK?’

Reluctantly, Sherlock agrees to this. John wonders what there could be to discuss anyway. They have a good guess as to one element of Moriarty’s plan, no idea who Moran is, and little idea of what to do if Moran moves ahead before they find him. John can’t see how further discussion could change any of that. But then Sherlock, no doubt, has seen things John hasn’t.

They head for the strategy tent instead, and as they go John says: ‘At least we know a little bit. And I still can’t quite believe we won’t recognise Moran if we see him. I know the photograph’s from far away, but…’

‘I wouldn’t rely overmuch on that photograph if I were you,’ Sherlock says. ‘We’ll catch Moran through his behaviour, not his appearance. The picture I don’t trust, not considering…my own opinion is that we certainly could look straight at Moran and not recognise him. But sooner or later he’ll have to show himself through what he does.’

When they reach the tent Amar is finishing up his report for Soo Lin, with Mary sitting on the floor and listening too.

‘…located about here,’ he’s saying as John and Sherlock enter the tent. He points at a map. ‘I think if we use the tunnels and avoid stopping we can get there before they realise it’s our target; they won’t expect us to be making for it so soon.’

‘Perfect,’ Soo Lin says. She smiles. ‘It’s good to have you back.’

‘So you’ll wait, what, a whole twelve hours before sending me out again?’ Amar says, grinning. Mary looks alarmed.
Soo Lin considers for a moment. ‘I think we’ll keep you here for now,’ she says. ‘We need to give
the pre-reps time to forget about you, can’t have you popping up in too many different places right
after each other. Anyway, we need you here to direct the capture of the Burned Sky Bridges, since
we’re using your intelligence.’

‘Thanks,’ Amar says. He glances, almost shyly, at Mary. ‘Stroll around the camp?’ he asks. ‘Er –
catch up, I suppose? I…I’d like to hear about – your mother, and…’ His relaxed, easy manner has
gone again. John watches them leave and tries to imagine what this must be like, but can’t get
there.

It occurs to him that if they somehow, impossibly, succeed in everything they’re trying to do,
things on earth are going to be pretty shaken up. If they end the war and get all the human
prisoners safely back to earth, then, well, that’s a hell of a lot of ghosts showing up – people who’d
been painfully, unwillingly consigned to the past suddenly present and alive. It’s hard to picture
what that will be like, a mass return from the dead, people like Mary and her family who’d
mourned and moved on suddenly faced with what they’d lost.

And – ‘Are there children here?’ John asks Soo Lin, suddenly. ‘I don’t mean from earth. I mean
children born here.’

A small, bitter sound that might be a laugh escapes Soo Lin. ‘You think the Gliseans would allow
that?’ she says. ‘Our numbers are dangerous as it is. Look, you don’t know them, even though…’
She glances at Sherlock. ‘Well. Neither of you knows anything about them, actually. Like on earth,
there’s a lot of contention about the war and a hell of a lot about the reps thing. There’ve been
mass protests about it but there’s enough people who think they have to do it to survive that all but
one of the sectors voted for it, although in most cases by a narrow margin. The Chambers were
divided as well – the Chamber of the Appetites was mostly in favour, Justice mostly against,
Accomplishment pretty much split down the middle and the Chamber of the People, which has
more say on this kind of thing, almost entirely in favour. Or, you know – obviously I was in prison,
so I just know what students would tell me and I heard different things, but that’s what I pieced
together.’

‘My understanding of Gliesan politics is pretty limited,’ John says. ‘What are the different
Chambers?’

‘Won’t go into it now,’ Soo Lin says. ‘Essentially they have different powers and there are
different ways of getting into them.’

This is the chattiest John’s seen her, but he’s more aware than ever of something bubbling beneath
her passionless outer appearance. Nor is he quite sure why she’s suddenly launched into telling
them this. ‘So the students talked to you about this stuff?’ he asks.
‘Yes,’ she says. ‘And they were all very, well, they were pre-reps, of course they’d had to convince themselves what they were doing was OK.’ Her eyes are fixed on John; she hasn’t looked at Sherlock once. ‘And some of them were so anxious to convince me, which was…painful to have to listen to. They’d come and sit and go, we’ll kill as few humans as we can, we’ll try and focus on military targets but those are harder to get to so we’ll have to do what’s possible, we’re just trying to survive and if we don’t you’ll take the new planet and leave us all to die here. And then – then they’d fucking say, *We kept all the prisoners alive, every single one. We didn’t have to, it’s far more dangerous for us, but we did. There were protests when the proposal was being drafted, everybody said they’d vote against it if it didn’t promise to spare the human prisoners.*’

She makes a small sound, perhaps an intake of breath, but it sounds almost like a hiss. ‘Well, I didn’t argue, I didn’t want to have them stop bringing me books or museum catalogues. But my cellmate once interrupted them, just said, “I lived in the Alps. I used to go for long walks in the summer, and I wanted children.” They didn’t get what te meant, and te wouldn’t say any more after that. But.’ She stops, abruptly, and, finally, looks at Sherlock. ‘I want peace,’ she says. ‘It’s the only thing to want. This has all got to stop. But I hope you understand that if we manage it, if we all go home and everybody stops killing each other – just. Don’t expect it to be easy. Going home doesn’t mean anybody gets back what they lost. Anna was sixteen when she came here. I was eighteen.’ Her face is smoother and calmer than ever, but her fingers flicker against each other so rapidly John tilts his head to remove them from his peripheral vision. ‘I don’t know if you understand what I’m saying. I hope so. Anyway. Things to do.’ And she’s gone from the tent, leaving John looking at the roof, and Sherlock standing close by, silent.

‘We actually got her alone,’ John realises. ‘We should have taken the opportunity to –’

‘That was never part of our task,’ Sherlock cuts in, quickly. ‘Yes, I suppose you’re right, we should talk to her about that eventually, but I’d prefer to wait until we’ve made progress on finding Moran.’

They stand there in silence for a moment more. And John thinks of Mary and Amar and Soo Lin and Sherlock and even Irene Adler, of how much has been lost and how little, really, can be done to fix it.

‘Don’t,’ Sherlock says. ‘We’re doing what we can, aren’t we?’

‘Listen,’ John says, in a rush, and he’d thought he needed longer to think but now, suddenly, he knows that to stop and think, and to do it apart from Sherlock, is the last thing he wants. He’s made too many speeches lately, had too much unfamiliar and drainingly complex emotion to deal with and to convey. He doesn’t know how much more he has in him, and they never quite seem to say what he wants them to say anyway. The thought of trying again is not appealing at this point. But:
'We don’t even know if it’s possible for you to ever get your memories back. Do we have to let it – do we have to plan for it now? Can’t we just – I miss you, and you’re here and I almost lost you and then I…it doesn’t make sense that I’m not touching you, not – because of something that might never happen. You said it might be enough, how I feel now. I don’t care if it makes no sense to say I’m in love with you, I don’t know what fucking else to say, and we’ll cross other bridges when we come to them.’

Sherlock makes a noise so quiet John can’t identify the tone, can’t guess at what it might mean, and then goes quiet and unmoving for so long that John is on the verge of becoming seriously alarmed. ‘I haven’t broken you, have I?’ John asks him, at last, and Sherlock stays frozen for another moment and then cracks a smile.

‘Generally speaking,’ he says, ‘It’s – from the beginning, it’s been quite the reverse.’ But then he shakes his head. ‘John,’ he says, ‘I don’t want you to – please don’t decide you’re sure if you’re not, even sure with conditions, I can’t…’ He pauses, then says, ‘Even if I never get the memories back, even if I stopped so much as thinking about them. So many of the things you’re worried about haven’t changed. You’re still going to be afraid that I’m lying to you, or manipulating you…’

‘You’re getting better about that,’ John says. ‘You told me the truth about –’

‘I know,’ Sherlock says, ‘But if I were lying about something you wouldn’t know, would you?’

It’s true. But – ‘I trust you,’ John says, and he knows that’s true too, and Sherlock says ‘But –’ and John says, ‘It doesn’t matter anyway, you’re too important, there’s nothing to be done – of course you deserve to know all of it and I will make myself want it too, I will –’ and Sherlock makes a strangled sound and steps – oh, God, finally – into John’s space and the reach of his arms. And then the world goes very soft for far too short a while, until –

‘…is this a bad time?’

The others are back, holding bottles of the strange Gliesan alcohol. John reluctantly disentangles himself from Sherlock, mouth still stinging slightly from the intensity of the kissing, and says, drily, ‘What could possibly give you that idea?’

‘Sorry,’ Anna says, smiling. ‘But the camp’s thrilled to have Amar back and we decided it’d be a good opportunity for a celebration. Keep morale up. There’s a few people who’ve managed to fashion things you might generously call musical instruments, we’ve been handing round the drinks, and there’s going to be some dancing. We’re planning the biggest raid yet tomorrow, so we need everyone in good spirits.’
‘Musical instruments?’ Harry says. ‘Isn’t that a bit of a risk?’

Anna shakes her head. ‘We’re a long way below ground, and far off any of the commonly used tunnels. Anyway, the camp’s loud enough in general, though we try to keep it as quiet as we can. If someone passes, they’ll hear. We keep guards posted at seven points around the edges of hearing distance and if anyone turns up and seems curious I’m afraid the orders are to kill them before they can alert anyone to our presence.’ Her expression’s become stony. ‘You were barely here a week,’ she says to Harry, who’s looking slightly distressed. ‘You can’t understand. We can’t be captured again.’

‘We won’t go back,’ Soo Lin agrees, quietly.

‘I wasn’t judging you,’ Harry promises, though she still looks ill at ease. ‘Is there somewhere quiet I could go while the celebration’s on, though? I’m very tired, and…’ She trails off.

‘Of course,’ Anna says. ‘I can’t promise very quiet, but I’ll find you a corner.’

John briefly considers offering to go and keep her company, but perhaps she really would rather be on her own. And he wants to celebrate. Mary’s found her father, a fact almost too staggering to contemplate, and John…John feels emotionally wrecked, but the press of Sherlock’s mouth has left its impression on him and touching Sherlock properly has left him buzzing, left him happy. Even if it’s only for days or minutes, right now that doesn’t matter, he won’t think about anything further ahead than that. He watches Harry leave with Anna with a small pang of guilt, then feels his eyes being drawn inexorably back to Sherlock, who is staring at him, and doesn’t look away when John meets his eyes.

‘You up for a celebration?’ John asks. He’s not quite sure how Sherlock feels, and is well aware that what John said may have caused more pain than joy. John might want to celebrate where they’ve got to, the decisions he’s made about how to go forward, but it’s different for Sherlock.

‘I understand such a thing would involve loud noise masquerading as music, people intentionally making themselves stupider and forced conversation with large numbers of the aforementioned stupidity-enhanced people?’ Sherlock says.

‘I take it that’s a –’
‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, swooping in to kiss John again. ‘Yes, let’s celebrate.’
Chapter 35

The party is both a lot of fun and slightly agonising. On the one hand, John’s surrounded by people he’s become quite fond of, and watching Soo Lin smile and sip her drink and toy hesitantly with Anna’s hair, Anna laughing loudly at something Amar said while Mary giggles and stares in continuing awed disbelief at her father – watching that, and the people around them in the camp relaxing just a little bit, that’s all wonderful. But Sherlock is right there next to him and John does wish there was some way for them to be alone together at some point in the foreseeable future. And not, frankly, because he wants to discuss Sebastian Moran, but because all he can think of now is touching Sherlock again, of them burying themselves against each other and staying as close as possible for as long as possible and not thinking about anything else just yet. He can’t see this rebellion ending quickly, and as long as they’re here there seems little chance of privacy.

Still, this is nice, and even Sherlock looks like he might be enjoying himself.

‘Well, I was a petty thief, and then a slightly less petty one,’ Anna’s saying, in answer to some question of Mary’s, ‘not to mention the angriest teenager that ever lived. Wanted to find something, wanted things to mean something. And I always thought everything could be much more efficient than it was, the way the world was run drove me crazy. I stole some things to live and some to prove I could and some just for the hell of it. Breaking into the particle transit hub was a bit of all those things, really.’

‘Were you ever in a gang?’ Soo Lin asks.

Anna shakes her head. ‘Didn’t play well with others,’ she says. ‘Not unless I could be near the top, tangled up in the running of things. As a kid of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, I’d have been right at the bottom of the pecking order in any criminal gang with a big enough reputation to interest me. Couldn’t have stuck that.’

‘Good decision,’ Soo Lin says, and Anna lays a brief, soft touch on her hand. John looks, thoughtfully, at the two of them, and at Anna in particular. He imagines her all those years ago, just a kid, marching into the hub with all the arrogance and optimism she could muster, terrified underneath, and the horrific shock when her surroundings changed and she realised what had happened to her. He thinks of her alone on a strange planet, more frightened than she’d ever been in her life and trying not to give into that, trying to think of a way out and realising there wasn’t one, that there was no one to help her. And then Mycroft’s note, a reprieve from the sudden crushing aloneness. No wonder she’s so determined to help him now.

Something nags at the corner of John’s mind but he ignores it; if his mind wants to start comparing Anna alone and lost in the Gliesan hub to himself when he got home from the war, to start being sentimental over rescue and companionship, now is not the time. This weird drink is clearly pretty
strong. He focuses on watching the others again instead, and on stroking the back of Sherlock’s hand and taking pleasure in how Sherlock looks surprised but then gradually relaxes into the touch.

Soo Lin is relaxing too, her gestures becoming less controlled and more expansive, her smile settling on her face as if beginning to accept that it has a place there. When Amar raises a toast to, ‘Making those Gliesan bastards sorry, no offence Sherlock and Garrideb,’ she sits back thoughtfully.

John wonders if she’s about to stop looking so relaxed and talk as she did earlier, but what she actually says surprises him: ‘The funny thing is, I actually owe the Gliesans my life.’

Heads turn in her direction. She smiles, self-conscious, down at the floor. ‘Right,’ she says. ‘I haven’t talked about this. Well, Anna knows some of it. I got myself mixed up in a gang. And then I tried to get myself un-mixed, and they weren’t prepared to let that happen. I knew their codes, I’d worked out…more than they expected. Certainly more than they were prepared to let go.’

She resettles herself, moving a hair’s breadth closer to Mary. Mary’s hand creeps towards Soo Lin’s but hesitates before they touch.

‘I hid. But I would never have been able to hide forever,’ Soo Lin says. ‘They were close to finding me, when – well, I disappeared. And you know something? I’m not grateful to the Gliesans for that. Not one bit. Because I chose to join that gang – I didn’t have many other options, and most of them were various kinds of death, but I chose it. I chose to leave it, knowing it was more or less bound to mean dying. And again, my alternatives, at that point, were all horrible. Nevertheless, I made my awful choices and I was ready to take the consequences. Us, the people the Gliesans took away – they didn’t force us, they didn’t bribe, they didn’t threaten. They just made it happen. And maybe it isn’t the years in prison, it isn’t spending half my life in a cell, it isn’t the darkness or the loneliness or the bewilderment and contempt of the guards, thinking about it, that’s not what I want retribution – justice – for most of all. The thing that has to be paid for is that moment, that one less-than-a-second moment that I never even felt happen, when they lifted me out of my world and dropped me into theirs without so much as a please or a gun to my head.’ She pauses, seems for the first time to hear how much she’s said. ‘I don’t suppose that makes any sense to anyone,’ she says. ‘And peace is more important than revenge, obviously. That’s our ultimate goal. I won’t lose sight of that.’

John knows, suddenly, that somebody’s going to kiss her, but isn’t sure who. It turns out to be Mary, who takes Soo Lin’s hands in hers, and kisses her hard on the mouth, then pulls back, claps her hands over her mouth, shakes her head, mutters ‘Sorry’, gets up and runs off.

Soo Lin looks immensely flustered, then gives an unexpectedly shy and tiny smile and looks studiedly at the floor, as if there’s a complex and interesting pattern there to examine. Anna smiles
and swirls her drink around.

There’s a tugging at John’s hand, and he turns to see Sherlock looking at him with a sudden light in his eyes. ‘I’ve just thought of something,’ he whispers, and stands, pulling John to his feet. Sherlock doesn’t stop to explain or give John time to let the others know, just pulls him away.

‘Where are we going?’ John whispers. Sherlock doesn’t answer, just keeps moving, tugging John along, until they reach a relatively quiet corner, at which point Sherlock sits down, and gestures for John to join him. Puzzled, John does so.

‘Turn onto your stomach,’ Sherlock says, doing so himself.

‘Why are we doing this?’ John says, as he does as Sherlock’s asked.

‘Because the body responds when the mind is stimulated,’ Sherlock says, cryptically, ‘and you won’t want anyone to see. I’m sending an address to your handchip. We don’t have internet headsets here, of course. I’ve been practicing the technique Irene used to enter the online world without one, but you won’t be able to do it, so shut your eyes: you won’t see the site, but the handchip can trick your other senses even without a headset, if you let it.’

John turns his head to the side to look at Sherlock curiously. ‘What are you up to?’

‘What are we up to,’ Sherlock corrects. ‘We’re having sex, or the nearest thing possible. You’ve been thinking about it for hours. Well, so have I. This is my solution.’ He smiles. ‘Extraordinary things, handchips. You know that a handchip separated from a body retains little processing power but a strong homing instinct and the ability to send incredibly powerful signals that will aim roughly towards wherever the body the handchip used to be in is? And they have, of course, an amazing ability to fool the senses. Which is what I’m primarily interested in now.’

This isn’t…quite what John had in mind. He’d wanted sex, yes, but mainly he’d wanted some way of showing all the stuff he’s still having trouble saying. Handchips, avatars, Sherlock’s impulsive-yet-methodical approach to problem solving…it makes John smile, brings a little spark of joy at how Sherlock is, and all these things are a reminder that Sherlock is himself, the person John fell for, and not just one of many incomprehensible aliens. But nevertheless…

‘Try it,’ Sherlock says, and his tone is commanding but his face is pleading, and apparently John hasn’t got any better at saying no to him. He goes to the handchip address, and shuts his eyes.
‘I wrote this site for us while we were sitting with the others,’ says Sherlock’s voice in his ear, impossibly close, deep, dark and silken. ‘And I’m still writing it now. It’s programmed to respond to voice commands. I can make it anything you want.’

John shivers: all right, this might not have been what he thought he was after, but on reflection he might just be able to live with it. ‘You know what I want,’ he says, because he can’t quite, at this moment, say You, I just want you, come as close as humanly possible. And then he thinks, not humanly, and doesn’t flinch to think it. And then he feels skin on his. It’s slightly too smooth, and where the textures are more real they aren’t always positioned exactly right, but John lifts his hand and feels the shape of Sherlock’s face beneath it, and it’s eighty, ninety per cent accurate – not anything like close enough, but this is more than he’d thought they could have.

He knows that if he were to open his eyes the sensations would vanish, and that his real arms, in the fleshworld, are still lying by his sides. All that’s really happening is avatar is touching Sherlock’s avatar, but it feels… ‘Thank God for technology,’ he says, softly, and hears Sherlock’s laugh, almost feels it slip into his ear.

John shifts – his avatar shifts, moving like a body, realigning itself – moves nearer Sherlock, presses up against him, wriggles upwards so they can kiss. And then goes very still.

‘What do you think?’ Sherlock says. ‘I can try another option, if you’d like.’

John’s cock – already hard – is pressed up against Sherlock. Against Sherlock’s crotch, where there’s an answering hard bulge. ‘I told you,’ Sherlock says. ‘I can make it anything you want, make myself anything you want. We can have the kind of sex you’re used to, here.’

John shakes his head, feeling Sherlock’s skin move against his hair as he presses his head against Sherlock’s face. He’ll have to say it after all, Sherlock still isn’t getting it. And it shouldn’t be this hard. ‘Don’t. I told you, I want you.’

The words are out before he can lose courage, and saying them is worth it, because there’s an intake of breath, and suddenly Sherlock’s long-fingered hands are in John’s. The amount of detail he’s captured for the avatar is extraordinary; they feel almost like the real thing, and John’s questing hands feel up them to Sherlock’s wrists, to his bare arms and then to his shoulders. Sherlock’s body changes shape against him; John’s hands reach for Sherlock’s sides and yes, there, exactly as it should be.

He experiments with opening his eyes and shutting them again, his other senses rushing to match the experience of his vision. Within a second of opening his eyes he feels the ground pressing
against his cock, the warmth of Sherlock by his side; closing them again the pressure on his cock
vanishes, leaving it twitching in search of touch, but is far more than made up for by the sensation
of something very like Sherlock’s skin against John’s fingers.

‘You’re brilliant,’ John tells him. ‘I never would’ve thought of this,’ and Sherlock’s exhale, its
warmth against John’s skin, might be flesh or electric and it doesn’t matter, because either way
John knows it to be real.

‘I was motivated,’ Sherlock gasps as John teases little circles against him, fingers thrilled to find
themselves here again, and this is strangely familiar territory now. ‘I wanted – John, oh –’

John wants to look, curses himself for not looking and looking every time he had the chance back
on earth. He concentrates on the feeling instead, because Sherlock’s clearly put effort into the
detail, turning his powers of observation on himself to reproduce his body for John, and that’s a
breathtaking thought in itself. The one slit slippery and sucking, the other pulsing, the tiny sounds
of flesh against fingertip, Sherlock’s body moving around a little part of John’s. ‘If we were at
home,’ John tells him, hardly knowing what he’s saying, ‘I’d pin you to the wall and kiss every
part of you I could reach. I’d kiss you till you could barely stand.’ Sherlock breathes harder, and
John says, ‘You’d sink, leaning against the wall, I’d wrap myself around you and hold you, I’d
press against your side and rub against you.’

John hears Sherlock whimper, feels fingers in his hair, tugging his head towards what turns out to
be Sherlock’s neck. That feels pretty real too, and John pays it the attention it deserves, Sherlock
squirming against him. John swings his leg over Sherlock to crouch over him, and then Sherlock
reaches up and pulls him down hard so that they’re pressed together, John laughing breathlessly to
find himself there all of a sudden. ‘If we were at – on earth, in the flat,’ Sherlock says, his breath
catching as John’s fingers resume their gentle exploration, ‘I’d want to just – look at you.
Microscope app, maybe. Study hair samples. I’d want you in my hand and my mouth and between
my thighs and taking pleasure from me anywhere you’d let me give it.’

‘I’d let you do anything,’ John says, rubbing harder at Sherlock’s sides, and rubbing himself
against Sherlock. ‘I don’t care, it still frightens me but I would –’

Sherlock groans, and the pulsing slit pulses harder, John’s hand heated and dampened by it. He
slows his movements with that hand and, without meaning to, the other hand slows as well. That
makes Sherlock whine, and his skin is hot all over now. John strokes his hair back from his face
and lets his other hand speed up again. ‘I would,’ he says again. ‘I wish we were at home now.’

‘Promises,’ Sherlock reminds him. ‘Things to see to. Tell me –’ a small gasp – ‘what else you’d do
–‘
Just be near you, John thinks, sentimental suddenly, but he imagines how they would look if he could watch and says, ‘I’d strip you, I’d be on top of you just like this, rubbing against you. And I’d –’ he’s almost embarrassed, but wants to hear Sherlock’s reaction, so goes on, ‘I’d be so turned on, God, Sherlock, how could I not be, I’d be leaking all over you, and I’d – I’d run my fingers through it and then trail them up your sides and into you, leave traces of myself in your body –’ and John can feel Sherlock’s chest moving with the breath that leaves it and Sherlock’s hand darts out without warning to grip and pump John’s cock once, twice, three times and then both of them are coming, or whatever the hell it is that Sherlock does but at any rate they’re clinging to each other and John’s hand and Sherlock’s legs are wet and slick, and John –

– opens his eyes.

The change in sensation is jarring: everything he’s feeling vanishes at once, to be replaced with the sensation of the ground hard against his front and, particularly, against his equally hard cock. He groans, and hears Sherlock laugh.

‘There were some flaws in this plan,’ John says, sitting up and wincing at the rub of movement against his erection. He supposes he’ll just have to sit very still and not look at Sherlock till it goes away.

‘Do you regret it?’ Sherlock says, his voice coming out a smug rumble. John amends his plan: he’d better not look at or listen to Sherlock for the time being.

‘Definitely not,’ John says, ‘and please, please don’t talk, or I’m never going to be in a decent state to go back to the others.’

Sherlock laughs again at that, which is no better than talking. John puts his arms round his knees and stares fixedly into space, trying to think about dead bodies and mess dinners until finally he feels safe to look at Sherlock again. He thinks he catches Sherlock off guard, because there’s a strange, barely-present smile on Sherlock’s face which vanishes the instant John catches his eye.

‘Ready to go back?’ Sherlock asks.

‘Almost,’ John says, and leans forward to kiss him. He keeps the kiss soft and gentle to try and avoid getting aroused again. It’s still almost too much, his body tingling with it, but he only lets it go on a moment and then pulls away. ‘Now we can go,’ he says.
When they return they find that Mary’s come back, alternating between shooting shy glances at Anna and Soo Lin and repeatedly checking that her father’s still there. John’s tired, and elects to return to his pallet after too long. Sherlock says he’s going to wander round the camp and talk to people, try and get more of a feel for the people here, but when John offers to change his plans and go with him Sherlock tells him to sleep, and promises to let him know what he finds out. John smiles at that.

As he’s heading off, Soo Lin runs after him and says, ‘John. A word before you go?’

She sits down on the ground beside him and says, immediately, ‘Be careful.’ And then, as he frowns, adds, ‘I was in love with a Gliesan once.’

John glances at her, surprised. She nods. ‘I suppose I probably still am, even though…look, I told you about that pre-rep in training I knew. Who used to come and visit me, talk about history, about teir studies. Te was younger than me, quite a bit younger, but so clever you’d never know it, and we’d talk for hours and – almost other things, though te always drew back. I thought it was because te was uncomfortable with the fact that I was trapped in here, and te wasn’t sure how much of a choice I felt like I had. But perhaps that wasn’t it. Anyway, one day te went off to earth. It didn’t matter to tem that we’d got close, that we had this connection, te were quite happy never to see me again and to kill people for being of my species.’

‘Sherlock wouldn’t –’

‘I know. But we’re still at war. I hope Mycroft’s plan works, I really do. But – remember you might not know him as well as you think you do.’

‘I know him,’ John says, and Soo Lin shrugs, smiles at him, and walks away towards the others. John, a little shaken despite himself, lies down on his pallet.

She’s not wrong, of course. But he thinks of how Sherlock looks at him, of the way he says John’s name sometimes, and knows it would be unbearable to give any of it up. He presses his fists together and buries them in the pallet and thinks, fiercely, that he’ll make it work, that he’ll drag his puzzled heart wide open and envelop everything that Sherlock is and was and even the things he could have been, which are perhaps the hardest of all to let in. But John will. Because hasn’t he wanted all along to have more of Sherlock, to be closer to him, to see him? Isn’t that part of why he
hated the lying and the being left behind? And now they have, if not all the answers, at least all the right questions, and if Sherlock wants to ask them then John – John will do what he always does when Sherlock has a puzzle, which is to follow ten steps behind and offer what help he can. It hurts, obviously. Knowing that Sherlock’s mind works in a way John will never really understand, that he’s been shaped by a culture John is completely ignorant about, knowing that life on earth with John isn’t enough for him. Maybe it’ll always hurt. But so many worthwhile things do.

Despite the noise coming from all around, he falls asleep almost immediately.

When he wakes, he’s not certain for a moment what’s woken him. He’s aware that something’s changed in his surroundings, but isn’t sure what. This happened all the time at home, his senses still sharpened from years of sleeping in a base that could be attacked at any time, and he’d just glance round the room and then try to go back to sleep, though he’d usually fail. At least till he started sleeping with his laser enabled.

Now he’s in hostile territory again, so he opens his eyes and puts a thumb against his handchip, ready to flick on the laser. But as soon as his eyes are open he sees Anna leaning over him, her hand on his shoulder, and he takes his hand away from the laser and sits up. ‘What is it?’ he whispers.

‘Not here,’ Anna whispers back. ‘This way.’

John glances back once and sees that Sherlock, Harry and Mary are all here now too, asleep on their pallets, before following Anna, who leads him towards the camp exit. ‘I need to talk to you about Mary,’ she explains, still in a whisper. ‘I don’t know what to do, and you know her better than anyone. I’d rather not talk about it anywhere the others can hear, though.’ John’s never seen her look this anxious or flustered. He nods, and lets her lead him out through the exit and along the maze of tunnels outside the camp.

Eventually they sit down in a corridor Anna pronounces ‘safe’, and Anna starts to talk. ‘It’s been a very long time since I felt like this about anyone,’ she says, ‘let alone two people. And I find myself worrying about all sorts of stupid things. Like, Soo Lin and I are running this camp together, what if Mary feels left out? What about what happens if we ever get home, and she goes back to the army? If you guys succeed in stopping the war, how will she feel about not being able to go back to the army?’

‘I think you’re getting a bit ahead of yourself,’ John says.

‘I know,’ Anna says. ‘But I suppose what I want to ask you is whether it’s really OK for me – us –
to be trying anything at all. She’s just got her father back, and I guess she must be emotionally all over the place right now…”

John feels again that strange pang, the warmth towards her. Again the image of her as a kid, alone in the particle transit hub, strikes him forcibly. He’s not sure why it’s so vivid to him or why it keeps coming into his head, nagging at him persistently. Perhaps because the way she’s sitting here now, twisting her hands and trying to navigate what seems like unfamiliar emotional territory to her, makes John think of all the years she was alone after that, cut off from her planet, what that might do to a person.

Or is that it? Something about the image still strikes him as not quite right somehow, as if he’s missing something.

‘Look,’ he says, ‘It’s hard for me to know what the best thing to do is, but I know she likes you, and if you just take it one day at a time, and –’ He freezes as a strange low beep sounds from somewhere nearby. ‘What was that?’ he asks, standing up.

Anna doesn’t stand. He looks down at her, calm, apparently unsurprised, and frowns. Something in her expression is troubling him, nagging at him in the same place as the thought that…that he reckons, actually, is centring around the word alone. Identification perhaps, his own memories of loneliness, of having no one to work with or for, no tasks to fulfil…

‘Anna – ‘ he says, and when she doesn’t move he repeats: ‘What was that noise? Do you know?’

And then, as she starts to stand, face still impassive, he understands. He’s been thinking of her, in that hub, young and scared and alone, but he thinks of his own experiences of particle transit, of how it works, and sees what should have been obvious.

*she wouldn’t have been alone.*

‘That was the signal,’ Anna says, and suddenly there’s a sharp pain running from his wrist right through his body, and then nothing at all.

John opens his eyes, thinks *I am getting really fucking tired of people knocking me out with my
handchip, and says, ‘You don’t look much like the photograph.’

Looking around, he’s not at all surprised to find himself tied to a column in the particle transit hub – not entirely burned down, apparently; probably Anna snuck back at some point and put out the fire.

She’s standing in front of him, looking as calm as ever. ‘You’ve seen what Moriarty can do to handchips,’ she says. ‘Easy for him to send out a virus subtly distorting the image. Not by too much, but just enough that when combined with the distance at which it was taken and the unusually unmemorable quality my face happens to have, you wouldn’t know who I was – my height in the image we couldn’t do anything about, unfortunately, too much messing about with scale, Sherlock would have spotted it, but we thought what we did would be enough. But then of course Moriarty had to go and give me an alias that was an anagram of my name. He’s a nightmare that way, always wants to make everything into a game.’ She sighs.

‘Anna Moira Bests,’ John says, tugging experimentally at the ropes and recognising at once that they’ve been done expertly. His hands are tied behind the column, fingers free to move but useless to him. ‘God, we were stupid.’

‘Well, you got sidetracked by the gender issue,’ Anna says. ‘We’d already seen that was a bit of a blind spot of yours, your lack of imagination regarding gender and presentation and so on. And Sherlock takes his cues from you far more than you realise. So there was that, and then the idea behind the anagram, of course, was that the Holmes brothers have a tendency to overlook the obvious. You, to be honest, overlook practically everything, and you’ve just been fixated on Sherlock anyway. Mary was my biggest concern, had to keep her distracted. Unwittingly helped by Soo Lin and Amar, in different ways.’

‘I assume we’re waiting for Sherlock,’ John says, feeling with his fingers to see if there’s any knots within reach that he could pull at, but it quickly proves pointless.

‘I’ve messaged him to let him know you’re here,’ Anna says. ‘I could have knocked him out and taken him here, but frankly I think he’d have caught on faster than you did, and in any case he’ll be much more compliant once he sees the position you’re in.’

‘You wanted Sherlock to come to this planet,’ John realises. ‘You and Moriarty, you’ve wanted it all along.’ He hesitates, then says, ‘Why?’

He’s not expecting an answer, but Anna seems strangely prepared to tell him things. ‘Oh, yeah,’ she says. ‘That’s right. We didn’t want him here till we were ready, of course, so we set him some
games and fed him some false information to distract him from finding out who he was – and, to be honest, to stop Moriarty getting bored, which is a full time job, believe me, and I wasn’t on earth with him to do it directly myself – but now we need him. As a test subject and a backup plan.’

*Test subject.* John really, really doesn’t like the sound of that. As he’s deciding what to say next, Anna answers the question he hasn’t asked: ‘I don’t mind telling you things you want to know. Obviously I’ll kill you if I’ve got to, but I like you and you could be pretty useful, so I’d definitely rather not. I’m hoping if we explain things you’ll see the sense in helping us. Rather not go into too much detail till Sherlock’s here though, or I’ll have to repeat myself – ah. Here we go.’

John shouts a warning as Sherlock enters the hub, but Sherlock locks eyes with him and keeps walking.

‘Get out,’ John insists. ‘She says they’re going to experiment on you.’

‘As if he’d leave you,’ Anna says. ‘There’s a laser pointed at the back of John’s head, Sherlock, and I can trigger it with my handchip, so try to be sensible. Now.’

She touches something on her handchip, and a holographic image of Moriarty flickers to life across from them. He’s smiling broadly, and John feels slightly sick at the sight.

‘I’m so glad you could both join us,’ Moriarty says. ‘Well, join Anna. I’m stuck back on earth, I’m afraid, but I had to pop in and say hello. Is everything set up?’

Anna nods, and Moriarty says, ‘You won’t remember, Sherlock, but we knew each other as children. Never really got on, I’m afraid, but I found you less tiresome than the others. We understood each other, though you never wanted to admit it. I was so glad when I realised you’d be able to play a role in my plans. But then the whole thing has been rather serendipitous.’

‘How so?’ Sherlock asks, eyes darting from John to Anna to Moriarty and back again.

Moriarty smiles again. ‘When I sabotaged the memory modification system and wiped the replacements’ memories, I was acting as a bored child,’ he says. ‘It amused me to think that I could wreck their plan and no one would even know. I had no greater ambition than that. And yet that one childish action has opened the way to – well, everything.’
‘And why is that?’

‘Because what is empty,’ Moriarty says, a sing-song tone entering his voice, ‘can be filled.’
Chapter 36

Sherlock frowns, and then John sees understanding dawn across his face. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘You’re going to give us false memories.’

‘So convenient of humans to implant electronic devices in everybody’s hands,’ Moriarty says, happily. ‘It’s taken me a long time to make it work, but I’ve finally succeeded in altering the memory modification/particle transit combined device so that it can send signals out to handchips. Soon you’ll all have fond memories of your leader, the one whose orders you’ve been waiting for, who you trust absolutely to rule over earth.’

‘I see,’ Sherlock says. ‘We’ll slaughter a number of humans as planned, enslave the others, and use the human army to conquer the Gliesans, all while believing – remembering – ourselves to be fanatically devoted to you. Then you step in and rule both planets.’

‘You do catch on quickly,’ Moriarty says. ‘Saves time. So for extra points, can you guess why you’re here?’

‘You want to test the memory modifier on me first, before applying it to everyone,’ Sherlock says, at once. ‘And if it doesn’t work as you hope, you think you’ll be able to use me to coerce Mycroft into helping you with lesser schemes, although personally I very much doubt it.’

‘Ah, but as things stand, I know Mycroft better than you,’ Moriarty says. ‘I’m not worried about that. Though of course having a grip on the strings of one powerful man would be a bit of a let-down compared to what I’m hoping for. Still, we’d make do. But first, a proposition.’ He glances at Anna.

Sherlock’s hand reaches into his pocket. Moriarty’s hologram narrows its eyes. ‘Got a laser in there?’ he says. ‘Hand out, Sherlock, slowly.’

Sherlock pulls his hand out of his pocket and shows it to Moriarty to demonstrate that he’s not holding anything. Moriarty smiles, and gestures to Anna.

‘We’re giving you a choice,’ Anna explains. ‘I know Moriarty, you see, and I know he’ll get bored to death running an army he can control absolutely. And believe me, no one wants him bored. Besides, there’s things only an independent mind is capable of; we’ll need one or two of those, and the people we’ve conquered may not be enormously enthusiastic about helping us. We need to try
the memory modification out on you, but there’s no reason it should be permanent. We can lift it again, in exchange for a promise of allegiance.’

‘We’ll have to keep John too, of course, to ensure your loyalty,’ Moriarty says, without so much as a glance in John’s direction, ‘but he’ll be allowed almost as much freedom of movement as you. Lots of enemies to fight, lots of chances to see you being brilliant, he’ll love it. And the alternative, obviously, is that we’ll kill him. Not that you’ll be bothered by that; you’ll remember it as an excellent decision of mine. Or – well, it’s an untested thing, of course, it’s possible you’ll still feel all the pain but not understand why.’

Sherlock remains silent. John thinks he can hear a very faint buzzing sound, but he might be imagining it. All he can think of to do is to keep Moriarty and Anna talking.

‘So,’ John says, ‘Let me get this straight. All those years ago, Anna, you appeared right here in this hub. And of course particle transit is instant. So the person who sent Mycroft away, who made it happen, was still here. He could have left, slipped off while you stood and blinked in confusion, or he could have shot you, assuming he had a weapon, but he didn’t do either of those things.’

‘I read her in an instant,’ Moriarty says, nodding. ‘I knew what sort of person she was, and I knew we had to speak.’

‘We understood each other,’ Anna says, very quietly, ‘and he made a convincing case.’

‘Convincing enough for you to betray your planet,’ John says.

Anna makes an exasperated noise. ‘Earth?’ she says. ‘Earth’s already lost, John, humanity just doesn’t know it yet. From the moment the Gliesans launched the afters programme their victory was assured. If anything, Moriarty’s done you a favour; the Gliesans would have killed as many humans as they could, whatever their politicians say. They wanted to wipe you out; he wants to rule.’

‘So you think you’re protecting people,’ John says, disbelievingly.

‘I’m doing what I can,’ Anna says, ‘as I always do.’

John shakes his head, disturbed by her calm certainty. **Keep talking**, he remembers. ‘Then Moriarty
slipped away, and within seconds of that you got Mycroft’s message. Then a guard – Garrideb –
detected that there’d been an unauthorised use of the hub and came and found you, and you did as
Mycroft told you to in his message. From there I guess things went as you told Mycroft, with
Garrideb helping you with stuff, but you were meeting up with Moriarty regularly too. How am I
doing so far?’

‘I can tell you anything you want to know,’ Anna says, impatiently. ‘You don’t have to puzzle it all
out.’

‘Humour me,’ John says. ‘I want to understand how I missed it. Let’s see – I guess I was expecting
Moran to have been on earth his whole life up to the point he was replaced by Moriarty, but then
you said that the Gliesans moved you around between cells a lot, so you were never in one place
for long. That would’ve meant that you could slip off to earth for a while without anyone being the
wiser; Garrideb must have covered for you, told the guards in your sector that you’d moved to
another, maybe even forging paperwork. I guess you told them you were off doing something
connected to Mycroft’s plan, to ending the war? Unless te knew…but my guess would be te didn’t.
I don’t think you tell people much, if you can help it. Anyway, you got to earth – must have
replaced someone, but I suppose Garrideb must have helped with that too, got them to a cell and
blamed a computer error or something for the fact that no one was recorded as having gone the
other way.’ He pauses. ‘And then you got in contact with Catherine Oakshott. Where did she come
into it?’

‘We were trying as many avenues as we could,’ Anna says, with a shrug, ‘so we’d have backup
plans if technology failed us. We thought perhaps we could reach out to individual afters and get
them under our power. A combination of incentive and blackmail, once they realised we could tell
the government what they were up to at any point. But she was the only one to respond.
Fortunately, our primary idea’s working out just fine, so we shouldn’t need the other options
anyway.’

‘And then you went back, swapped places with Moriarty,’ John says. ‘And all the while Mycroft
never guessed your loyalties might not be what he thought they were? He knew you must have
landed in the hub with Moriarty there, but…’

‘Oh, well,’ Anna says, and she smiles faintly, and tugs absently at her hair. ‘It’s funny, with
Mycroft. I mean part of it’s just that he’s not great at accounting for people acting out of character,
his thinks he’s got people mapped out and the idea that Moriarty would have reached out to me,
would have wanted a connection, when that was a thing he’d never wanted before in his life – I
don’t know that would ever occur to Mycroft. I don’t really think that’s why he didn’t guess,
though. See, the thing about him…he’s the Afters Coordinator right, and has his fingers in more of
the UK government’s pies than you can imagine. And he was pretty damn important on this planet
too. And like most government types he likes order and stability and people doing what they’re
told. Except secretly – I dunno if he’s even aware of it – he’s got a soft spot for a certain kind of
underdog. For anybody who’s a bit damaged and desperate and making really bad choices,
especially if they’re young and clever. My theory is they remind him of you.’ She smiles at
Sherlock, an odd, uncomfortable sort of smile, which he doesn’t return. Then she shrugs again. ‘He just liked me,’ she says. ‘Human error. You don’t know how big a weak spot you are for him, Sherlock. You can’t even begin to imagine.’

Can John believe that? He’d hoped, somehow, despite all they know, that Mycroft might turn out to have some masterplan, to be manipulating them into saving the world without any risk or loss. That he knew all along what would happen on this planet. But what Anna’s saying has the ring, unexpectedly, of truth. Mycroft risking drawing attention to himself by giving Sherlock the same surname he chose, refraining from giving them information because it might cause harm to his contact. Mycroft who, after all, had been as alone as Anna had in the moments following their switch.

‘Well,’ John says, out of ways to keep spinning this along, and it doesn’t matter if what he says sounds stupid at this point, ‘we’re going to stop your plan.’

She shakes her head. Moriarty looks amused and says, ‘And how would you go about doing that?’

‘Let’s see,’ Sherlock says. ‘First of all I’d have to have figured out how you altered the memory modification device to send signals to handchips on earth. I’m guessing you’d need to take a handchip whose owner was on earth, remove it from them and bring it near to the machine. The handchip signals would try and find that person, wouldn’t they, and that would allow you to direct the device to send signals to earth. I suppose Anna’s got your handchip here.’

‘Figuring that out wouldn’t do you much good unless you had a handchip from someone on earth yourself,’ Moriarty says, smiling, apparently enjoying watching Sherlock try and struggle through to a solution.

‘No, that’s true,’ Sherlock says, looking troubled. ‘And I’d need an ally on earth, too. Somebody who knew all about handchips and mind control and all about the Gliesan body, the way handchip signals make their way through it. Some sort of psychologist programmer doctor. No one else would be able to change how the signals affected their targets without risking killing them.’

‘Mm, it would take a genius to manage all of those things,’ Moriarty says, ‘but there’s only me, and I’m already on my side. Well, and Mycroft, but technology and healing aren’t areas he’s much interested in. Do go on, though, I’d like you to understand the situation you’re in. And that you really do only have one option.’

‘It is rather impossible,’ Sherlock agrees, his voice shaking slightly, as though he’s trying to sound offhand and failing badly. ‘What next? My genius ally, if I found one, would have to do some
technological wizardry to counteract yours. Except— they’d only have seconds to act, there’d never
be time to write their own program.’ John watches the wheels turn furiously fast in Sherlock’s
mind, fascinated. And then Sherlock says, slowly, ‘The only thing they could do would be to wipe
the memory modification from the system entirely. The afters would get their memories back.’

He’d always hoped, hadn’t he, that as little as they knew, when it came to the crucial moment,
Sherlock would be able to work out the rest? And here they are.

‘At which point they’d slaughter a few thousand humans, take over the governments, send out
suicidal orders to the army and put humankind into such a state as to make them easy prey for a
Gliesan invasion,’ Moriarty says. ‘True, the Gliesan generals wouldn’t be expecting it so soon; that
might provide a moment of respite, but they’d move in soon enough. Bye bye humanity. Come on,
admit it: you’d be better off letting things happen my way, even if you did have a choice.’

‘You have us cornered,’ Sherlock says, quietly. ‘So you know the answer: of course we’ll agree to
your plan, we have no other choice— now. But aren’t you afraid we’ll betray you later?’

‘Neither one of you will, because each of you will be too afraid for the other,’ Moriarty says.
‘Don’t you worry, we’ve taken care of all that. But I don’t suppose you’ll believe me; by all means
agree thinking you’ll be able to worm out of it later. Gives me a bit of excitement to look forward
to; Anna’s right, I do get bored.’

The buzzing gets louder. A light glints out of Sherlock’s pocket. And another hologram flickers on
beside Moriarty’s.

‘Well,’ Irene Adler says, twisting her head to take in Moriarty’s hologram, then Anna, then John
and Sherlock, ‘fancy seeing you here.’

Moriarty stares at her, shocked, and John feels the first stirrings of triumph, mingled though it is
with shock at Sherlock’s realisation about what they’re going to have to do. Sherlock had been sure
Irene would do as she promised, but John had his doubts. ‘Your handchip,’ Moriarty spits a
moment later. He goes on staring, completely still, and then says, ‘That buzzing sound, he was
signalling where you should send the hologram. You pretended to hate him. You knew I was
monitoring the handchips…and he pretended to give the chip to Mycroft, when really…’

‘Why do you think I filled up my handchip with government secrets in the first place?’ Irene says.
‘All you said was cause chaos; did you never wonder why I picked the particular kind that I did? I
knew Mycroft would send Sherlock to get it, and then I could get it into Sherlock’s possession without arousing your suspicions.’ She pauses, and then says, calmly, ‘You shouldn’t have threatened Soo Lin Yao. You really shouldn’t. Sherlock and John, in contrast, said they’d find her and tell me if she was safe. You’ve got to admit that was a better offer. Is she safe?’ she adds, without turning her head.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says.

‘Calm down,’ Anna says to Moriarty. ‘Even Irene Adler couldn’t learn the amount of medical training she’d need to stop us without hurting the afters in a week.’

‘It’s lucky my E.L.I.’s a pathologist then, isn’t it?’ Irene says, and Molly peeks over her shoulder from outside the scope of the hologram.

Moriarty looks furious for a minute; then shrugs, and presses something on his handchip. ‘There,’ he says. ‘I’ve started the process of providing Sherlock with new memories. Shouldn’t take more than ten minutes. Anna, activate your handchip.’

Anna taps something on her palm, and Sherlock winces. ‘You’re – sending signals,’ he gasps. ‘Freezing me in place. In a second I won’t be able to move.’

John wonders for whose benefit Sherlock is announcing this, and then realises a second later as Sherlock moves his arm with evident effort, grabs Irene’s handchip from his pocket, and throws it to John. Sherlock’s aim is excellent, but it’s still a miracle that John manages to catch it with tied hands. He grips it tightly.

‘The method you used to knock him out earlier will have put his handchip right out of action for a few hours, won’t it?’ Sherlock says. ‘You can’t do a thing to him.’

‘I could kill him,’ Anna says, easily, ‘but then you’ll never work with us, and I’m still keen to avoid that.’ She turns to John. ‘You’ve got a few minutes left to activate Irene’s handchip. Which gives me even less time to persuade you not to. If you’ve got any sense, though, that won’t be hard.’

‘How d’you make that out?’ John says, gripping harder. He should activate it now, before she has a chance to say a word. He should…he can’t look at Sherlock. He feels stiff and strange. *Come on,* he tells himself. *Now, do it now.*
‘It’s pretty obvious how you feel about Sherlock,’ Anna says, shrugging. ‘I’d have thought you’d object to killing him.’

‘And you’ll kill him if I activate the handchip,’ John says, sick to the stomach.

‘No,’ Anna says, ‘you will. You’ll remove the Sherlock you know from existence and replace him with someone else entirely who just happens to look the same. How is that not killing him?’

‘But he wants his memories back,’ John says. Despite himself, he can feel her words burrowing into his brain. He needs to activate the handchip, but his hands feel stiffer and heavier with every passing second.

‘Yes, you’d be killing him with his consent,’ Anna says. ‘He’s not the one with the most to lose, though, is he? He won’t care, once it’s happened, but you’ll know exactly what you’ve lost. What we want to do is reversible, but breaking the memory modification altogether – that isn’t. He’ll be gone forever. He signed up for the afters programme prepared to kill humans, to get close to them and then betray them. That’s who he was, and who he will be again if you do this. Everything you have together will be gone.’

John doesn’t know what to say. He finds he’s met her eyes and is staring at her, silent.

‘I know the alternative is unpalatable to you,’ she says. ‘But this isn’t brainwashing, not really. We’re not taking away anyone’s free will, just altering their memories – and only relating to one specific thing. It’s a less brutal form of control than most earth governments go for. And OK, I admit Moriarty might not care very much about whether the people he rules are happy. He’s doing this –‘ her voice goes unexpectedly soft – ‘because he wants loyalty, and he wants to win, just his planet winning was never going to be enough. So he might not care – but I will. I want people to be safe and well and – people matter to me, and organising things well matters to me, and I’ll be good at it, which again, is more than you can say for the rulers you’ve got now. You and Sherlock will get to have all the adventures you could ever dream of, fall more and more in love. The war will be over, and the people of both planets will, to be honest, probably be better off than they were before. Come on – isn’t that better than destroying what matters most to you out of principle? I know it’s counterintuitive. But think of what you’ve got to lose.’

And John does. He can’t help it. He thinks first, for some reason, of Sherlock struck with wonder at his own hands on a violin, of all the years that he had another set of limbs entirely. Perhaps getting his memories back would lead him to lose interest in music, like the other afters, or perhaps his sense memories would return too and his new hands would become confused, slower. John thinks, too – of course he does – of kissing, of running, of their bodies against each other and side
by side, of deductions and declarations and all the things they haven’t said to each other yet. John didn’t know how fast they were running out of time, or perhaps he would have said them, social norms be damned. But it’s too late now.

He looks at Sherlock, though he doesn’t know what he’ll find, and his chest aches as he turns his head, his whole body aches, like he can’t contain whatever it’s trying to feel. He has minutes left to decide, and he feels like all the lives he could have are flashing before his eyes and every one of them hurts to look at.

Sherlock is gazing at him, expressions chasing each other across his face, each harder to read than the last. John wants to ask him what he wants, but what right does Sherlock have to decide the fate of thousands of people? But then, what right does John? And yet he’ll have to.

He thinks of Sherlock spending the rest of his life grasping after knowledge he’ll never get back, of all the people who’ll even forget what’s been taken from them and believe wholeheartedly in the story Moriarty creates in their heads. That image sits in his mind side by side with an image of Sherlock’s eyes brightening as his memories return, smiling as he catches sight of John, turning to Anna and saying, ‘You may as well shoot him now; you can’t use him to control me any more.’

‘John,’ Irene shouts from the hologram, ‘Snap out of it. I knew Sherlock back on Gliese, and Moriarty kindly let me keep my memories. Sherlock didn’t know you then, of course, but if he had…Listen, there’s no version of him who’s ever been that wouldn’t –’

Anna claps her hands together, and Irene’s hologram vanishes. ‘Should’ve done that before,’ Anna says. ‘It won’t stop her helping you if you make the wrong choice, but at least we won’t have to listen to her.’

John locks eyes with Sherlock. He doesn’t know if he can believe what he thinks Irene was trying to say, the enormity of it, and even if he could, what about everyone else? Human beings all over earth who might suddenly watch the affection go out of the eyes of the person in front of them, and then…

‘Whatever happens now,’ Sherlock says, ‘It’s been –‘ His voice seems almost as though it might falter, but then he continues in the same strong, even tone: ‘It’s been the greatest privilege of my life to know you. And yes, I’m aware that I can’t be certain of that, but I’m speaking of probabilities. I find it extraordinarily unlikely that anything happened in the part of my life I don’t remember that I could be more grateful for.’ He inclines his head. ‘So. To the very best of times.’

‘Me too,’ John says. It’s a non-sequitur, inelegant, hopeless, but Sherlock’s expression seems to
crack for a moment anyway, as if John’s got through. John swallows, fighting a wave of emotion that threatens to overwhelm him entirely. ‘To everything we’ve had,’ he tells Sherlock. Then he adds, in a fractured whisper that comes out sounding like a prayer – as if he could make it true by saying it, as if he’s not more afraid than he’s ever been in his life – ‘And to everything still to come.’ His hand, so steady and still it feels frozen in place, crushes against the handchip, pressing down where Sherlock showed him.

A flare of furious light bursts from the handchip. Anna throws up her hand to shield her eyes, and Moriarty, in the hologram, turns away. John, hands tied, is powerless to move, but as he screws up his eyes he feels a large hand press over them, blotting out the worst of the glare.

He tries to push the hand away – he’s got to at least try and see what’s happening through the glare of light – but it only presses harder against his face, hard enough to hurt. ‘Let go,’ John snaps.

‘No,’ he hears, and it’s unmistakably Sherlock’s voice. ‘That’s not going to happen. Stay still, or I’m going to have to hurt you.’

John goes very still. I’m going to have to hurt you sounds repeatedly in his ears, the tone becoming crueller and more mocking as the seconds pass.

He knew this could happen. He made his choice, the only choice he could make. This was always the likeliest result.

And now he’s tied up with a Sherlock who says things like I’m going to have to hurt you pressing a cold hand against him and refusing to let him see.

He tries to think of what he’d do if it were someone other than Sherlock, someone John didn’t know. Because John doesn’t know this person now, does he? But he’s already tried to get out of these knots and couldn’t, so that narrows down his options pretty drastically. He could try and get his handchip on, switch on the laser, but it probably isn’t working again yet and anyway he knows that whatever Sherlock’s become there’s no way John’s going to be able to shoot him.

The light getting through the cracks between Sherlock’s fingers begins to fade, and as it does Sherlock takes his hand away, leaving John blinking.

‘Sherlock,’ he says. It isn’t the cleverest or the most useful thing he could say. He should be working out how to get out of here. But Sherlock’s face is in front of him, achingly familiar, even
the expression is one John knows, and *Sherlock* is the only thing to say.

Sherlock stares at him for a long time, then reaches out a hand and runs it over John’s cheek, very slowly, staring with what looks like wonder. But who knows what different facial expressions mean to Gliesans?

Could John get his laser on and use it to cut through the ropes? Not without the risk of cutting his own hands off, he decides.

He isn’t sure what will happen if he disturbs the balance of this strange, frozen moment. But it doesn’t look like he has much choice. ‘Sherlock,’ he says again, ‘could you untie me?’

Sherlock stares at him for a few more seconds, and then, to John’s surprise, his hands begin fumbling at John’s ropes. The silence is becoming increasingly unnerving.

John rubs as much feeling as he can back into his wrists, then says, carefully, ‘Could you move back so I can stand up?’ Again, Sherlock seems to take a while to process this, and again, he eventually does as John’s asked, standing upright and shuffling a few paces back. John, for the first time since he pressed Irene’s handchip, is able to look around the room.

The hologram’s gone, and so has Anna. That doesn’t surprise him: he assumes she used one of the particle transit machines to escape the second she realised her and Moriarty’s plan had failed, and the absence of her and her handchip is presumably why Sherlock can move again. Moriarty will have made an escape too, although since he’s on earth there’s a chance the police may be able to catch him – if they haven’t all been killed by newly self-aware afters – but John doesn’t have much hope for that. Even if they do, he doesn’t believe a prison moon will hold Moriarty for long, particularly not with Anna free to make a rescue attempt. But that’s something to worry about later. Right now he has an unpredictably altered Sherlock Holmes to try and make sense of.

‘Do you remember me?’ John says.

*That* gets Sherlock’s attention. His eyes widen and he puts a hand on John’s face again, before snatching it back and looking confused. ‘Of course,’ he says.

‘Do you remember earth?’ John asks next, and to this Sherlock just nods.
‘And – before that?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, rubbing at his temple. ‘It’s all – rushing around in my head, I –’ he breaks off, makes an exasperated noise, and walks rapidly towards one of the elaborately patterned, singed walls. Apparently there’s a handle hidden amongst the burn marks and designs because Sherlock grasps at something and part of the wall seems to swing outward. It takes John a moment to realise it’s a cupboard.

‘How did you know that was there?’ he asks Sherlock.

‘It’s labelled,’ Sherlock says, reaching into the cupboard, and John realises that, of course, Sherlock’s got his own language back. The cupboard turns out to contain ink pots and Sherlock opens five or six, dips fingers into them, and starts sweeping them across the floor. He paints a massed whirl of shapes in deep, sombre colours that seem to press into John’s mind even though he doesn’t understand what they mean.

John watches for what could be any amount of time. Sherlock’s muttering to himself while he draws, which must surely be encouraging, a sign that human habits are in as deep as Gliesan ones. He seems to be trying to work something out, but John isn’t sure what. Sherlock could still be working up to killing John, or using a particle transit machine to get back to earth and fulfil his mission. He seems confused right now, as he’s bound to be with all the new memories in his brain, but when he isn’t…possibly, the sensible thing would be for John to leave right now while Sherlock’s otherwise occupied. But leaving Sherlock isn’t an option, or at least not one there’s any chance of John taking. It hasn’t been for a while now. But then, he knew that when he decided to activate the handchip, didn’t he?

And with bright, hard clarity, John thinks: *I don’t care if you’re different. As long as you aren’t gone altogether. As long as some of the you I know is still there. As long as I still matter to you. Even if not as much. Even if not much at all.*

Eventually, Sherlock looks up. His eyes lock on to John’s and stay there. John expects him to say something, but he doesn’t. At last, John says, ‘Have you got your memories sorted a bit now?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock says, rising from where he’s been kneeling on the ground to paint. ‘I’m still…overwhelmed, I suppose. I’ll need to process them further. But I’ve gathered the most important things.’

‘And what are those?’ John asks.
‘I know that I signed up to the afters programme because I couldn’t turn down the chance to see and explore an entirely new planet. I never had any intention of completing my mission – I expected to get bored of that planet too and find a way to get home – but it’s fair to say that I wasn’t particularly distressed at the thought of killing human beings either. In fact I didn’t give the issue much consideration. I know what happens to a body when the bristles of its lower arms are damaged, I know about the three hundred poisons of the jewel flower, which can only grow in infrared light and which produces a different type of toxic spore depending on the intensity of the light and the degree of moisture in the air. I know that I used to think that nothing was more important than puzzles and discoveries and lines of observation and logic, and that after I met you I had to recalculate. I know that for a while, then, nothing was more important than keeping you safe – but you’ve since convinced me it may be just as important not to make you feel trapped or deceived. I know why the streets in this city are mirrored and what the sky bridges are made of. I know I have a brother – that’s the closest word in your language, we share three parents, he has no others but I have two – and I still think he’s insufferable but have to recognise that my response may in part be based on the bitterness I felt when he disappeared to earth without telling anyone he was going and never came back. I know that on my own planet I was prey to constant shadows of the mind, that I was distracted and directionless, that I was well aware of being bored and endlessly frustrated but had no idea I was lonely. I know I got more from two weeks with you and my work as a consulting detective than I’d got from anything in my life. And so –’ he slows for the first time – ‘And so I know what I had, and what I have, and what I want,’ he finishes. ‘Which isn’t what I was expecting to find out. I thought – I wanted to understand my past, who I was. But what I understand most is who I am now, better than I understood before. I’ve confirmed a theory, I suppose.’

John’s body wants to shake – with terror, with relief? – but he doesn’t let it. ‘I was worried,’ he admits, ‘that you…’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock says, and the word pushes John further away from maintaining control because it’s the voice of a deduction, Sherlock as John knows him best, and that could have gone too. ‘You were afraid when – I’m sorry about threatening to hurt you. I can’t describe what it was like. Every thought I’d ever had was wheeling through my mind and the only thing I could catch hold of and know for certain was that I had to protect you. You were crushing your eyes together like you were in pain, and I couldn’t remember if bright light was dangerous for humans or not.’ He takes a half step towards John, but seems to freeze up halfway through.

John takes a half step of his own, but finds himself similarly hesitant, unsure of what Sherlock wants. Sherlock says, ‘My instincts aren’t good, John, they weren’t before and they certainly aren’t any better now. I don’t want to be like my brother, and I promised you I’d stop keeping things from you, making decisions for you. And yes, I told you what Irene had said to me as soon as I could after it happened so we could plan how to stop Moriarty together with her help, and you thought that was progress, but – as I said, everything I’ve remembered has turned out to confirm my understanding of who I am rather than contradict it. I know better than ever now that I am used to being solitary and in control. Reduced to pure instinct, I was prepared to hurt you to keep you safe, to prevent you from doing something I thought was dangerous. I’m always going to have to work to counteract that and sometimes I’ll fail. You thought that getting my memories back might turn me
into someone else, but I... I was afraid it would make me more myself. With all the years I suspected I’d had of – towers, analysis, sky – I thought –‘

He’s struggling slightly with words, John realises, as he did in the first few days after John started teaching him. John wants to help, but can only stay silent and listen. Sherlock finally says, ‘My suspicions about myself were correct, as I said. You are an anomaly in my existence. I am horribly unsuited to intimate relationships. That was true before, because the life I’d had had shaped my personality even though I was unaware of it, but conscious awareness of that will likely make it worse.’ He looks at John. ‘Your worst fears haven’t been realised, but the fact remains that I will not be good for you,’ he says, with calm certainty. ‘I think you must have known that, anyway. I didn’t know; I couldn’t, not without the capacity to fully understand who I am. I have that now.’

John stares. And at last – at long fucking last – knows what he wants to say. Or at least how to figure it out. The feeling roars through him, a kind of relief that’s violently out of proportion to anything else like it he’s ever felt. What did they do to deserve this kind of luck? Will it be like this for everyone? ‘How do you say Sherlock Holmes, you’re a fucking idiot in Gliesan?’ he asks.

‘Uhh,’ Sherlock says, looking surprised at first, but barely for a moment because his eyes are already lighting up at the challenge. ‘Interesting. Tricky. I remember learning the word idiot now, and about swear words. Let’s see – we don’t have a unitary concept of intelligence, so there’s no corresponding insult, but we have ways of expressing ignorance, lack of self-awareness, lack of external observation, poor logic...’

‘The third one,’ John decides.

Sherlock looks offended. ‘Me?’

‘In this instance, yes.’

‘Right,’ Sherlock says. ‘Fine. Well, I’ll have to simplify, to try and express it in terms of signifiers so you can understand, but – you’d draw the person’s face, or a crude sketch of it. You’d use darker colours if what you were saying was important, lighter if it wasn’t. You could put dots of lighter and darker colours around their eyes to indicate that they were failing to observe the importance of what they saw. If you were angry with them, you’d draw it on your own skin, if you were trying to make a point, to get through to them, you’d draw it on their hands; if it was meant to be threatening you might draw it on their neck, so that they’d firstly feel your hands in a vulnerable place and secondly have to look at it in a mirrored street or wall, and so see it reversed, which is slightly off-balancing.’
‘Good,’ John says, ‘Perfect. And how do you say *I love you*?’

Sherlock looks hard at him. ‘Why?’

‘Never mind,’ John decides. ‘There won’t be an exact analogue for that either, will there? And I’m sure you think it’s horrifically imprecise. So just – look, I’m sorry if I get this wrong, but it can’t be worse than trying it in English, so –’

He strips off his shirt, suppressing unexpected giggles at Sherlock’s look of bewilderment. ‘John, what on earth are you doing?’

‘Not on earth,’ John says, which earns him a justified eye roll.

‘No, we’re not,’ Sherlock says. ‘We’re on a planet which is at war with your planet, having just stopped Moriarty from taking over the galaxy but at the possible cost of unleashing a bloodbath on earth. I just threatened to hurt you. I’m really not sure why you’re stripping.’

‘Wait and see,’ John says. ‘I know we need to go home – back to earth, I mean – but this is important too. Pass me the ink.’

John writes *Sherlock Holmes* over his own chest, taking care to paint in the direction of his heart. He uses dark colours, and then draws eyes that look as much like Sherlock’s as he can manage (which isn’t much) around the words, surrounding each eye with dots in alternating light and dark colours. He paints a few strokes that go first towards one of his sides, then the other, over the eyes, in the brightest colour he can find, which is a sort of deep blue that can’t really be described as neon, but never mind. Then he looks at Sherlock, who’s been watching him closely, brow furrowed.
'You drew on yourself,' Sherlock says, looking worried. 'And...towards the heart? So –.'

'I don’t know Gliesan,' John reminds him. 'This isn’t Gliesan, it’s a nonsensical fusion of Gliesan and English and a sort of transliterated English. You, Gliesans, don’t have names, except that you, Sherlock, do. The heart might be linked to aggression in Gliesan, but it means other things in English. I –' he has to swallow. 'I won’t explain it to you, because it’s all horrifically sentimental and you must understand anyway, I hope you do. I wanted to try and find a halfway point, especially since I’ve never managed to say it all in my own language. You are so catastrophically wrong if you think that who you are is bad for me, you have never been more wrong about anything in your life, I don’t care if I don’t know about most of your life, I know that’s true, and I had to try and explain that. So if you think you get this at all, then – yes. Um. Do that.’ Because Sherlock’s taking his own shirt off, and now they’re standing opposite each other, exposed.

'John,' Sherlock says, ‘What this means…’ He trails off, seemingly unable to find the words.

'You know what I mean?’ John says, and there’s a terrible second when John thinks he’s going to have to find another way to explain, but then Sherlock nods, and John believes him.

So John crosses the room and puts his arms around Sherlock and pulls them together, as carefully as he can, so that the image on John’s skin leaves an echo of itself on Sherlock’s. ‘I want you to tell me everything,’ John whispers. ‘Everything that’s happened to you, all the things you know. I want all of it.’

‘That would take weeks,’ Sherlock says, staring at him.

John laughs. ‘I wasn’t suggesting you tell it all in one go,’ he says. ‘I want you to tell me over tea in the mornings and on the sofa in the evenings and on benches after we collapse there running from criminals. It won’t take weeks, it’ll take years.’ Then Sherlock draws in breath and John kisses him as he does, and hopes that says anything the other gesture couldn’t.

When they finally break apart John asks, ‘Do Gliesans ever do this? Paint on themselves and then have it go onto the other person –’

‘Er,’ Sherlock says, and looks uncomfortable. ‘There’s a sort of – it could perhaps be best described as similar to a wedding or partnership ceremony –’

‘Oh God, don’t tell me,’ John says, starting to laugh, and then Sherlock begins laughing too. The
two of them, half-stripped in an empty burned out room with a bunch of machines, holding hands and giggling. It’s ridiculous. It makes John’s chest sore in a way he never wants to stop. But they’ve got things to do. ‘So now what?’ he asks Sherlock.

Sherlock sobers immediately. ‘We find our way back to the camp,’ he says. ‘We find Soo Lin, tell her everything. And then…’ He casts a troubled look at the nearest particle transit machine, then looks back to John. ‘Then we go home.’
Sherlock, thank God, turns out to remember most of the details of the route from the particle transit hub to the camp, and is able to figure out the rest.

‘Anna almost convinced you,’ Sherlock remarks as they walk. ‘You weren’t sure, for a moment.’

‘For a moment, yeah,’ John admits. ‘But I didn’t have the right to let them control people’s memories. The Gliesans’ minds should never have been wiped in the first place. Even if we come back to earth and find…’ He can’t finish. ‘I don’t know. I suppose I won’t be so sure I’ve made the right decision then. But I don’t know what else I could have done.’

‘Nothing,’ Sherlock says. ‘They left you with no good choices, John, but you did make the right one, of course you did. They would have sucked the galaxy dry between them. Besides, Mycroft believed that the afters have made enough connections on earth to abandon their mission. And loathe as I am to say it, my brother has an aggravating habit of being right about everything.’

He missed Anna, though, didn’t he? John thinks, troubled, but he only says, ‘I hope to God he’s right this time,’ and squeezes Sherlock’s hand. Then they’re quiet again until they reach the base, where Sherlock hammers loudly on the door until it’s opened by Soo Lin, who looks shocked. John realises she probably didn’t even know they were gone.

‘How did you get out?’ she says. ‘Have you seen Anna?’

John and Sherlock exchange glances. ‘We should go to the strategy tent,’ John says. ‘Bring Mary and Amar too. We need to tell you something.’

*  

No one expresses any doubt, for which John is grateful. He’d half expected Soo Lin to refuse to believe in Anna’s betrayal. It would have been understandable, but she accepts it at once. ‘I suppose it makes sense,’ she muses. ‘The four of us were the only ones who could get in and out of the base whenever we wanted. And Irene…’ she shakes her head. ‘That was the name te picked when te – or maybe I should say she, I don’t know – started rep training, and anyway your description of her is unmistakable…But when she went to earth I thought she didn’t care at all.’
‘She went to earth because she cared,’ Sherlock says. ‘She stumbled onto what they were doing – not all of it, not the details, but she had some idea, and they wanted her gone; they also realised she could be useful to them. Moriarty told her that if she didn’t help him he’d reveal the fact that you were planning a rebellion to the Gliesan authorities, and they’d execute you. So she went to earth to cause chaos and distract Mycroft at a crucial point. Anna – or Moran – had come to earth and returned again; Garrideb helped her to cover that up, though I think he believed she was helping her with some secret plan involving Mycroft; I don’t think he knew anything about Moriarty. Anna must have told him that she couldn’t even tell you. Anyway, once Anna came back to Gliese she needed to set herself up amongst the uprising, since she’d have the easiest access to me when I arrived that way, and with their plan so close to realisation she and Moriarty didn’t want to take any chances. So they found a way to kill several birds with one stone: keep Irene, who’d discovered some of what they were up to, in line, get her to earth and safely away from the place where their plan was to reach its final stage, and keep Mycroft’s focus away from Gliese 581g.’

‘Irene didn’t tell me any of this,’ Soo Lin says.

‘She couldn’t; she had no way of doing it without Moriarty finding out,’ Sherlock says. ‘Instead she went to earth, caused trouble as she’d been told to, but then she came to our flat and slipped a note into my hand which read I need your help. I spoke to her on her own website – the only place we could speak without Moriarty monitoring us – and she told me that she was helping Moriarty under duress. She said that she wouldn’t tell me what the afters were or where we were from because I had to come to the realisation slowly on my own or it would break me. I tried to persuade her otherwise, insistent that her fears were absurd, but she wouldn’t be swayed. She did say, however, that she believed Mycroft would send me to the place the afters programme had originated from soon, and that I would find you there. She said that if John and I agreed to find you and confirm that you were safe, she’d give us something that would allow us to stop Moriarty. She explained that she’d been investigating Moriarty for a while before he came to earth and eventually caught him trying something with a particle transit machine and a human handchip. She wasn’t sure what his plan was, but once he came to earth she was sure that it would need one person on earth, and their handchip with another person on Gliese. She explained that she had a plan for me to get her handchip without Moriarty suspecting anything.’

‘He explained the conversation to me,’ John says, ‘after first putting a temporary block to stop Moriarty monitoring our handchips; we could keep it there for brief periods without arousing suspicion. Then he removed the block and we played out a pretence of tricking Irene and stealing her handchip; afterwards I made sure to say loudly and clearly with my handchip near my mouth that Irene must hate Sherlock now. It was vital Moriarty didn’t realise we were working together.’

‘Moriarty believed we gave the handchip to Mycroft, but we never did,’ Sherlock says. ‘On the way to the particle transit facility I took a detour and went to speak to Irene’s E.L.I., Molly, about the part she would need to play, having set up the block around my handchip again first. I was fairly sure, in any case, that Moriarty would be monitoring Mary and John’s progress towards the facility at that point rather than focusing on me.’
‘I just – I can’t believe Anna’s Moran,’ Mary says, wrapping her arms around herself. Then, in a small voice, ‘I liked her. I know that’s a stupid thing to say. But I really did.’ It hurts to hear it said, even though John knew already that this would be hard on her.

‘She got away?’ Soo Lin says, and John nods.

‘So what now?’ Amar asks, echoing John’s thoughts from earlier.

‘I suppose we have to find out what damage has been done on earth,’ Soo Lin says. She looks grave and sad, and John wishes he could say something to make this better, although he does note that her quiet, repressed joy at the revelations about Irene seemed noticeably greater than her distress about Anna. That could be because she’s accustomed to hiding her sadness, but John hopes it’s because her feelings for Anna hadn’t had time to grow that strong yet. She continues: ‘Not me, my place is here, much as I would like to see –’ She swallows, and suddenly there’s emotion pooling in her face, an extraordinary well of it. It’s pushed back a moment later as she continues, more or less steadily, ‘I would like to see Irene. But the uprising is more important than ever now, and someone has to explain to everyone where Anna’s gone. In particular, when Garrideb gets back from their mission I will have to be the one to tell them. If te wasn’t in on it, that will be…hard. Te’s lost almost everything to this war. Anna was almost all te had left that te cared about. I suppose she used that fact to her advantage. In the same way as Moriarty used her loneliness to his advantage, I guess.’ She gives a deep, sharp-edged sigh. ‘But you three must go, and John’s sister – and Amar, I assume you’ll go with Mary.’

‘I’m sorry –’ Amar starts, but Soo Lin waves this away.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. She’s your daughter, and you’ve been apart for too long.’ She stands, and extends her hand. ‘I hope we meet again,’ she says. ‘I don’t know if that’s particularly likely, but either way – I wish you luck.’

John shakes her hand, and the others follow suit. Mary holds it for a long time, and something wordless seems to pass between them. Then John says, ‘Good luck to you too,’ and she smiles at him, and holds open the tent flap for them to leave.

There’s one further shock in store, though, when they find Harry, asleep on her pallet, and John wakes her to tell her: ‘The good news is we can leave. The bad news is I’m not quite sure what we’ll find on earth.’

He tells her – not quite all of it, but as much as he can – in hushed tones so that the people around them don’t hear. When he’s finished, though, she smiles at him, drops a feather-light kiss on the
top of his head, and says, ‘I’ve managed to be some use here. And Soo Lin’s right, we need to do everything we can to increase the likelihood of a peace treaty. I’m staying.’

John stares at her, and says, ‘But –’ and she cuts him off. ‘You need to go,’ she says, and then she hugs him tight, not something they ever really do, and says, ‘I’ll see you really soon. I promise.’

She won’t let him say a word, shaking her head every time he tries, and in the end there’s nothing he can do but nod to show her she’s won. Then she lets him say, awkward, overwhelmed: ‘I – goodbye then. I mean. For now. Just for now.’

‘Just for now,’ she agrees, and they hug again. Then Sherlock, who’s stood silently nearby while John and Harry have talked, smiles at her and shakes her hand, and Mary hugs her, and the four of them walk away towards the camp exit.

The return to the particle transit hub is silent. Mary worries at her lip, Sherlock strides ahead, Amar stares at the patterns on the walls and John stares at Sherlock’s back. He can’t quite process Harry’s decision to stay with the prisoners, the strange determination on her face, oddly familiar to him. He’s rounded three corners before he realises where he’s seen it before: reflected in the gleaming side of Mary’s spaceship, moments before he climbed into it for each scouting trip. That thought keeps him from utter horror at the idea of leaving her here in danger. Because perhaps she needs it.

It feels like it takes a long time to get back to the hub. Once there, Sherlock sets the coordinates on the particle transit machines, and they settle themselves in place. John wants to say something but doesn’t know what, and in the end Sherlock says ‘Now’ and John touches the button at once. *Please let there be something left for us to come back to,* he thinks as his finger comes down. *Please –*

‘–catastrophically attractive, of course. Oh, hello.’

It takes John a minute to understand what he’s seeing: they’re back in the particle transit hub they left what feels like a lifetime ago but can’t actually have been further back than a week. Mycroft is standing there, looking as neat and calm as ever, and beside him are Irene and Molly.

‘We thought we’d come and meet you,’ Mycroft says. ‘Welcome you back. Ms Adler has been explaining your plan to me. I suppose I can’t very well object to your decision not to mention said plan to me, although – well, never mind. That can wait. My priority is, must be, to apologise for my unforgiveable oversight regarding Anna Bests, as Ms Adler’s description of the person she saw in the hub with you leaves me little doubt that –‘
‘Yes, yes,’ Sherlock says. ‘What’s happening out there?’

‘I have an avia waiting outside,’ Mycroft says, after a moment. ‘Come and I’ll show you.’

*

Anthea’s driving. John supposes this is all very top secret and an actual driver wouldn’t be allowed to come along. She nods to them as they get in, but doesn’t say anything. Then she flies them smoothly over the city, and John leans out of the window to see what sort of state his planet is in.

He isn’t sure what he expected. Afters walking through the streets with laser guns, killing any human in their path? There’s nothing like that; the roads they fly over are fairly empty, with a few people walking along as normal. Anthea dips lower to allow them to look through people’s windows, and if there have been betrayals this is where John will see them. He takes Sherlock’s hand.

In the first window they look through there are two women. ‘What’s wrong?’ one is saying, reaching for her. ‘Please talk to me.’

‘I’m afraid of what you’ll say,’ the other says. ‘And I don’t even know if this is real.’

Anthea soars away, and then swoops down near another window, where there are two men and a woman. ‘Are you sure?’ one of the men is saying, staring at the other man in shock, as is the woman.

They fly past window after window, John still grasping Sherlock’s hand, and watch events unfold. At first they see shock and questioning almost everywhere, but then the stories begin to diverge. Some afters leave partway through questioning to seek out others and find out who else this has happened to; some stay. Some humans are furious, others anxious; a few seem almost relieved. They don’t see any afters immediately turn on the humans around them, but as they fly, Mycroft tells them that there’s a reason for that. ‘As you know, I’ve been keeping fairly careful tabs on the afters,’ he says. ‘As soon as it happened my people rounded up those afters who became immediately violent and are currently holding them in cells, although clearly that is a very short term solution. So far in the United Kingdom two humans have been injured and none killed. But we must prepare ourselves for the possibility that there will have been less care taken elsewhere. Nevertheless, it does appear that only an extremely small percentage of afters have chosen to immediately carry out their mission. What may happen in the future is harder to say. I still have
hopes that the human prisoners on Gliese 581g will succeed in reaching a spot of importance – I believe even now they are striking out for a series of bridges that surround the Chamber of the People. If they have captured them by the time our ambassadors tell the Gliesans their scheme has failed, I think the chances of negotiation are good. They can’t fight an internal uprising and a war at the same time, not if their primary strategy for winning the war has fallen apart.’

‘And if the war doesn’t end,’ John says, ‘what happens then? Some afters might want to carry out their mission, and some humans…’

‘Yes,’ Mycroft says. ‘If the war continues, I suspect things will become very difficult for all afters, whether they have any violent intentions or not. I will of course work against that, but should I become too vocal a supporter of freedom and legal protection for afters someone may choose to investigate my past, and if they are clever enough to discover what you discovered I will lose my capacity to act at all. I think it is almost certain that the afters would ultimately be interned. But believe me, I will do everything in my power to ensure that the war does not continue.’

John nods, and leans back on the seat. He’s exhausted. Back in the particle transit hub on Gliese 581g, it felt like they’d won. They’d stopped Moriarty, got Sherlock’s memories back without losing who he was…but John realises now that the hardest fight may still be ahead of him.

Still. He looks round at the occupants of the avia, and smiles. He’s got Mary and, against everything he expected, he’s got Sherlock. And he’s never been one to back away from a hard fight anyway.

Sherlock’s looking at him with an expression John still doesn’t fully understand. I’ve got time to learn how to read it, he thinks. He’s not going anywhere, and if he does I’m going with him. I’ve got all the time in the world.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Posted chapter 37 and this at the same time, so make sure you read the former first :)

Mary, her head pillowed on Soo Lin’s lap, mumbles, ‘How are the numbers going? I don’t think I want to look.’

‘Still our way,’ Soo Lin says, stroking her hair.

‘That looks comfortable,’ Irene says to Molly, which makes Harry grin.

Molly smiles and pushes a flick of hair behind her ear, though it immediately escapes and returns to its original position. ‘That a hint?’ she says. ‘You look pretty comfortable where you are. In fact I might just –‘ and she flops down, resting her own head against Irene’s leg.

‘I don’t think any of you are taking this seriously enough, you know,’ John says.

‘Why on earth,’ Irene says, stretched out languorous and flat, grass stems pushing up through her hair, her ankles hooked over Soo Lin’s bare feet, one hand stroking Molly’s cheek and the other Mary’s arm, ‘would we ever want to take something seriously?’

‘The lap-pillow concept seems like an excellent idea, actually,’ Sherlock says. John grins and wraps an arm around him, letting Sherlock lean on his chest, and Sherlock concedes that this isn’t too bad either.

Relaxed as everyone is making themselves out to be, though, their eyes repeatedly flick back to the projection of Sherlock’s handchip screen hovering in front of them, where a newsblog is scrolling, live-reporting: ’38 for, 39 for, 16 against, 40 for, 17 against, 41 for –‘

‘What if it fails?’ Harry says, the thought the rest of them have chosen not to voice, to ignore in favour of pretending to be happy and comfortable. That’s why they’ve come to a countryside pocket to hear this: they want to pretend it’s just a day out, that they’re here to enjoy themselves. But perhaps it’s better to have the worst possibilities out in the open.
‘It won’t,’ Mary says. ‘Mycroft would have known, he’d have warned us. But if it does –’

‘If it does,’ John says, ‘we keep fighting, keep campaigning.’

Soo Lin is quiet. She, like most of the former Gliesan prisoners, has deeply mixed feelings about the peace movement. She’s fought for it harder than most, but gets no happiness from that. Her current expression reminds John of the way she looked all the time when he first knew her, when she was leading an uprising and trying to keep herself and her people alive.

Thankfully, the expression is rare these days. She’s now the head of a commission to educate humans about Gliesan history and culture, and, if the numbers tallying up on the handchip screen go the way everyone here hopes they do, she’s all ready to set up a permanent exhibit of Gliesan historical artefacts in the British Museum. There, John suspects, violence may re-enter her life; there are bound to be people who don’t agree with that idea, and perhaps it is too soon. But the Gliesans have been living amongst humankind for years, as it turns out, and there are enough people who believe that matters more than the reason they were here in the first place that maybe something more than angry tolerance between species might be possible. John can hope, anyway.

They all can, and right now, in this countryside pocket, they’re doing it so hard it hurts. The numbers are going their way but they all know it could turn at any minute. John chews on his lip, and strokes Sherlock’s hair, and tries not to think about what might happen otherwise, about afters being locked up or executed as spies –

He looks down to see Sherlock looking up at him, and realises he knows this one. If Sherlock has to run, he’ll run, and John will go with him.

And so he watches the numbers change on the screen with the knot in his chest an entirely secondary feeling to the weight of Sherlock’s head so close to it, with the calm that comes when he knows his path, whatever happens, and they wait without saying a word.

And then suddenly, after minutes and hours and months of waiting, it’s all over.

The peace proposal has passed with a majority of…

John doesn’t read the rest. He’s too busy hauling Sherlock up, Sherlock twisting in his hands to face him, and John wraps him tight in his arms and buries his head in his neck, and their bodies are
tangled and confused and the grass rasps against John’s ankles and the sun beats down and the words are there frozen on the screen and Sherlock is safe, no one is going to try and take him away from John but if they ever do then let them come, John’s ready to fight for what he has but maybe he isn’t going to have to, maybe they can just –

Sherlock’s handchip lets out the particular pattern of beeps he’s assigned to Lestrade, and he tears himself away to look at the message.

‘Lestrade looked for us at the flat,’ he says. ‘Ms Hudson told him where we were; apparently he’s on his way. He wants to ask us something.’

John nods, and then looks at Mary. He wonders how she’ll feel now. Of course she wanted peace as much as any of them, but the army was her life. He isn’t sure what she’ll do now, and by her expression, nor is she. Admittedly there’s been a ceasefire for months while the peace negotiations dragged on, but a few months off isn’t at all the same thing as never being able to go back. John knows only too well what that feels like.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Molly says. ‘I don’t think I actually thought it was going to pass.’

‘So,’ Harry says, sitting back, ‘now what?’

Again she says what the rest of them have chosen to avoid saying. Some of them have clear paths ahead. Soo Lin has her commission, Irene her website – now minus the blackmail, but still as successful as ever. Harry has her shop, and is as happy as John’s ever known her to be. Who knows how long that will last, but there’s no denying she came back from Gliese 581g different, though John finds it hard to say exactly how.

The rest of them…well, they’ll have to figure out what they want, where to go next. And that certainly includes John. After they got back from Gliese, it didn’t take him long to realise that he didn’t want to live with anyone but Sherlock. The thought of taking on another student was completely unappealing. So he quit his job and began spending his time on cases with Sherlock instead. Which he loves utterly, but he can’t deny that he misses working, the sense of purpose and value he got from it, and he’s going to need something in his life beside Sherlock and cases, however much he adores both. If only there were something that appealed to him even slightly.

‘Hey,’ Lestrade says, strolling across towards them from the direction of the nearest tubes entrance. ‘There you all are. You must be happy.’
'We are,' Irene says, smiling at him.

'Me too,' Lestrade says. 'And not just because only an idiot would want the war to go on. I’ve got an offer for you. Well,’ he adds, apologetically, ‘for some of you.’

‘Yes?’ Sherlock says, looking alert and interested, and God, John loves him.

‘As your brother hoped, the money that was being spent on the war effort is now going to be directed into exploration missions to find new habitable planets. Small fleets of spaceships will set off looking for planets we – and the Gliesans – could settle. Because these missions will be long, people will be allowed to take their families with them, and there’ll be shops and restaurants and everything else people want in a place they could be living in for a couple of years. There’ll be whole communities living on these fleets. And where you have communities you have crime, and where you have crime –'

‘The government will want police,’ Sherlock finishes. ‘I take it your team’s been assigned to an exploration mission?’

‘Yes,’ Lestrade says. ‘And we want you there. We’ve got no one like you; we need you. And I think it’ll be right up your street – endless new things to discover.’

‘Mm,’ Sherlock says. ‘And I assume you wouldn’t do something so pointless as to ask me without including John in the invitation?’

‘Ha,’ Lestrade says. ‘No, I know better than that. There’s going to be a small force protecting the fleet, and we’ll need doctors too. John and Mary, you’re both more than welcome. I know you might need some time to think about it –’

‘Nope,’ Mary says, sitting bolt upright. ‘No, I ‘m definitely coming.’ John smiles. He knows that in reality she’ll fret a little more over leaving than she’s letting on – she’s spent the past months flitting between countries, spending as much time with her family as possible as they’ve adjusted to the shock impact of her dad’s return. To go out into space and away from them again won’t be easy, John knows. But he also knows that the prospect of danger and adventure and exploration when she’d expected stagnation is a lifeline for her, and she was never likely to refuse.

Lestrade laughs, and then adds to Molly in a would be offhand tone, ‘We’re looking for a pathologist too, if you’re interested.’ John notes with interest that there’s an almost indiscernible
blush on his face. Lestrade’s met Molly a number of times before, but John’s never paid close attention to their interactions; perhaps he should have.

Molly hesitates, and looks round at Mary, Soo Lin and Irene. ‘We’ll have to talk about it,’ she tells him.

Irene sits up gracefully. ‘We’ll miss you like hell,’ she says, ‘but you’ve got to go. You’ll get to be a pathologist again but with spaceship camaraderie instead of on your own in a lab. Come on, don’t be so bloody selfless. Plus…’ She raises her eyebrows and looks meaningfully at Lestrade.

Molly blushes, and then says, firmly, ‘We still all need to talk about it.’ She glances at Lestrade. ‘A conditional yes?’

‘Brilliant,’ Lestrade says, looking positively thrilled. ‘Just let me know in a few days. And you two?’

Sherlock looks up at John. ‘Could be dangerous,’ he says, starting to smile.

‘Yeah,’ John agrees. ‘There could be anything out there. And since Moriarty escaped, I think we can be fairly sure he and Anna will come after us.’

‘While we’re solving crimes in space,’ Sherlock muses.

‘You, me, a city on spaceships, a criminal genius out for our blood, and the whole galaxy to explore,’ John says.

Lestrade says, ‘Are you planning on answering at any point, because –’

‘People in confined, unfamiliar conditions,’ Sherlock says. ‘Think of all the new tensions that’ll arise, all the new kinds of crimes there might be.’

John snorts and shakes his head. ‘You’re appalling.’
‘Never mind that,’ Sherlock says. ‘The game is on, John. In space.’

‘You haven’t actually said yes yet,’ Lestrade reminds them. ‘Just thought I’d mention.’

‘He has to be able to take his violin,’ John says, businesslike.

‘There’ll be noise restrictions between certain hours,’ Lestrade says.

‘Which we both know he’ll ignore,’ John says.

‘No experiments,’ Lestrade counters.

‘Lots of experiments,’ Sherlock says.

‘None with body parts,’ Lestrade says.

‘Lots with body parts,’ Sherlock says, happily. ‘But don’t worry, I’ll bring my own supplies. I’ve taken plenty from the morgue.’

‘Well, that’s a load off my mind,’ Lestrade says. Molly giggles, Irene ruffles Molly’s hair, and Lestrade looks slightly embarrassed again, but pleased.

‘Does the spaceship have a name?’ John asks.

‘Not yet,’ Lestrade says. ‘They’re all going to be christened at a big ceremony to celebrate the start of the exploration project. At the moment they’re just being referred to by serial number – from memory, I think we’d be on #1895. Now for God’s sake, can I have an actual straight answer?’

Sherlock tilts his head further back against John’s shoulder in order to look up at him. Their eyes lock. And John thinks – can’t help but think – of the last few months. Of knowing more and more with each passing day how much he needed to be with Sherlock, going on knowing it more long after he’d thought he couldn’t feel it any harder, and all the while aware of everything that could rip them apart.
It’s been, in many ways, the strangest and most transformative few months of his life. He’s had to try and come to terms with what his time in the army means to him now, and it’s still difficult and shifting, still hard to think about, but it’s beginning to settle at last. He’s fretted over whether Sherlock will want to return to his home planet and what it would be like living there.

But there have been other things, too. The moment when John expressed his concern about living on Gliese and Sherlock, wide-eyed, said, ‘You haven’t even considered the possibility that you wouldn’t come with me,’ and John realised that after everything Sherlock still hadn’t known that was no longer an option. Until now, because at that particular moment it was clear Sherlock couldn’t find a way to disbelieve it any longer.

There was the day they went to buy Sherlock a violin, and Sherlock lifted it and it was as though his hands had been built or grown for no other purpose but this, and afterwards John kissed them and brought them down to Sherlock’s sides and pressed them there and felt so lucky he hardly knew how to begin thinking of it.

There’s been Irene, Soo Lin, Mary and Molly, their friendships and courtships which John doesn’t really know the workings of but can see making them happy. John was never a man with many friends or lasting relationships but somehow the chaos of the last months has left his life full of precious debris, things he never asked for but would find it hard, now, to imagine living without.

There have been cases, moments when John’s seen Sherlock truly alive and as he was meant to be, calling on knowledge from his past and his present and the connections that no one else has thought to make, on seeing the things that other people miss and drawing it through the corridors of logic that line his extraordinary mind. John getting to watch him, ten steps behind, running to keep up, but Sherlock always turning back to pull him onwards, the two of them collapsing with laughter at crime scenes and in corridors, in murderers’ basements and countryside pockets and police avias and at home, at the flat Mycroft agreed to let them buy from the government. John suspects the monthly payments are lower than they should be, but hasn’t raised too much of a fuss. It’s where he and Sherlock belong.

Or it was. But maybe staying in one place all the time isn’t what they’re cut out for. And the thought of leaving doesn’t hurt, not when John knows that home will be waiting for them when they’re ready to return.

‘Solving crimes in space,’ John repeats, loving the feel of the words in his mouth. ‘Seriously, what could possibly be better than that?’

‘I hope you’re not expecting me to start spouting sentimental drivel and say something like solving
crimes in space with you,’ Sherlock says.

‘You just said it,’ John says, grinning. ‘You disguised it by throwing some extra words around it, but we both know –’

‘Stop,’ Sherlock says, hurriedly. ‘Lestrade, yes, we’re coming, if you hadn’t figured that out already, though I’m sure even you –’

‘Yeah, fine, don’t make me want to punch you before we even leave, you’ll get so bored if you’ve already used up ways to bait me,’ Lestrade says, but he’s smiling. ‘Come by later and we’ll sort out the details.’ He nods to the others and sets off back towards the tubes entrance.

Once he’s well out of sight, Mary makes a high pitched noise and thumps her hands on the ground. ‘Wow,’ she says. ‘Oh, wow. This is going to be –’

Amazing, John thinks, and looks at Sherlock. He never could have imagined they’d end up here. Perhaps the worst is behind them and if not – if Moriarty and Anna Bests come after them with a plan more vicious than anything they tried before – then John feels ready to face it. The galaxy is vaster than he could ever comprehend and fuller of extraordinary things, and the most extraordinary of all is right here beside him, heart, improbably, in John’s hands.

‘Why wait?’ Sherlock says, jumping to his feet and dragging John up. ‘Let’s go after Lestrade now.’

That’s how it’ll be, John realises. That’s the only way for them. John always behind Sherlock but Sherlock always holding onto him, pulling him along, John watching his back. John holds Sherlock’s name in his head and hand in his hand and they both step forward. John’s feet meet the ground, the grass of the planet he knows, the grass that cuts through the sky which blurs up and away into space, up to stars and planets and a vast mess of a universe full of black holes and explosions and gathering light. Sherlock’s hand is warm and the sky is cold, and they could go anywhere, anywhere at all in the bleak miles of airless dark and tiny pockets where creatures crawl in tiny teeming masses and try to make the universe into something they can understand. It won’t stay in John’s head, he doesn’t even know how to begin contemplating it. But it doesn’t matter. They could be going anywhere, there could be any kind of danger coming for them, he loves Sherlock and Sherlock loves him and neither of them will ever be able to name a fraction of the galaxies inside the other’s head and neither of them has a clue what’s coming next and John wouldn’t have it any other way, there is no other way it could be.

He lets Sherlock pull him along through the cold sky, the hands Sherlock wasn’t born with but are
now as much part of him as any cell in his body gripping John tight. The sun is bright above them and there are a thousand different angles they might come to see it from. John’s going to get to look at Sherlock and love him the same way in a thousand different corners of the universe, and Sherlock will look back and love John in a slightly different way each time, and they’ll never quite meet in the middle but they’ll fill the space between with every warm thing they have in them.

They could go anywhere. John has no way of imagining what they’ll see. But he knows that somewhere, breathing a new kind of air or hovering over a planet made of gases that circulate with an unfamiliar music or standing amongst silver grass the height of skyscrapers or gazing at columns made of water or at a wonder John can’t even begin to invent he’ll turn to Sherlock, and look into all the nameless colours in his eyes, and say, ‘Extraordinary,’ and Sherlock will know just what he means.

Works inspired by this: [Cover Art for Names for the Galaxy by evadne] by Dorchester, [Podfic] Names for the Galaxy by consulting_smartass

Please [drop by the archive and comment] to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!