All the Best and Brightest Creatures
by wordstrings

Summary

Sherlock sent Jim Moriarty to prison for killing Carl Powers at age ten. This is the story of the consequences.
Sherlock is ten years old when he solves the Carl Powers case.

How the police had failed to notice the missing trainers is beyond him, outrages him in fact, but he convinces the force, at long length and by means of near-constant harassment, to pay heed. His telephone calls are relentless, the quality of his letter writing light years beyond his age, the frequency with which he turns up at New Scotland Yard absolutely astonishing and probably illegal. The faces of the police officers when he appears reflect a wide spectrum of amusement, irritation, grudging respect, and fury. But Sherlock can't be deterred by the doubters. Sherlock sees things, really sees them, and it's difficult to explain that to the people who marvel and who sneer at it. Some of the officers are gruff, sipping their coffees and shooing him away as if he were a stray cat, and some are openly red-faced and hostile and some condescending and some pudgy and tired and kind, but none of them understand that he has investigated the matter and he knows Powers was murdered. He knows.

He knows it somewhere based hard and deep in his chest, somewhere that feels like the keystone of an arch.

He tells the policemen and policewomen again and again to find the trainers, and some listen, and some don't. And finally, at last, after weeks of hounding via mail and telephone calls and personal visits, they bring in a boy of Sherlock's age for questioning when the shoes are spotted by a classmate sitting in a school locker assigned to an Irish lad with sad, bright eyes and dark hair and a grin of incarnate evil, and then Sherlock goes home once more to the townhouse in Pall Mall.

The foyer is very very very long, and far too placid.

No one is here.

Well. His parents are here.

Someone is droning on in a low tone through a door about damned bloody Socialists, and Sherlock sighs. His father, he realizes, will not care that justice has been served. He will not care that a killer, and a very young killer at that, is off the streets. His father will wonder how Sherlock got to London again, dull boring why god tedious dull duuuuuuuulllllllllllll, because it's never a challenge to get to London.

It's only a challenge to stay there. Which is a shame, because Sherlock absolutely adores London.

Later, after they've discovered he has materialized again, Sherlock is summoned to dinner, which he eats with Mummy as she sips something beautifully golden in a small crystal glass, refilled exactly eight times. But Sherlock is no longer mystified by his mother's glamour (she really is very glamorous) or her intelligence (it isn't as if she uses it to show off, and isn't that the point?) or her beauty (she looks just like Sherlock, he realizes, without at the same time realizing that he is beautiful himself). None of that matters like it used to matter when he was little--when Sherlock was seven, for instance, or when Sherlock was eight. The silverware is too flat now, next to the bright frantic depth of the lights of London beyond, the sirens and the headlamps and the tall tall buildings, and Mycroft is off at school.

"His name was James Moriarty," Sherlock brags. "He killed Carl Powers with poisoned shoes, and
I brought him to justice. He'll be pronounced guilty, I know it."

"You're quite the little marvel, my darling," Mummy answers, and her voice has gone soft from the drink she sips from the crystal.

"They'd never have solved it if not for me."

"How marvelous. What will you tackle next?"

He has no idea. In fact, Sherlock has nothing to do. *Again."

At night, he turns on his side, rustling soft sheets, and stares out the window of his third story bedroom in the townhouse. He dreams of blood and death and beautiful sacrifices. He dreams of the pristine lines of scientific rigour and the heady chaos of human behavior.

He dreams of peace and hell.

Both of those already live in his head, anyhow. It's only a matter of time before he encounters them for real, he supposes.

He cannot wait for it to happen. Adventure cannot arrive quickly enough.

Sherlock is eleven when Jim Moriarty is sentenced to a very long stint in juvenile prison. A few days later, in mid-March, he receives a letter.

*Dearest Sherlock,*

*I've been talking to the police about you. They're very impressed. So am I! I'm a huge fan. I'm going to have a lot of time to think about you now, and that's what I'll be doing, thinking about you. I'm rather a pip when it comes to thinking. I'll think of you all through the day, and all through the night. I'll be thinking about you tied to a bed while I skin you with a fish knife, all in long lovely strips, and then I'll salt them and feed them to you to keep you alive. When we run out of your skin, I'll start feeding you bits of muscle I slice off, but if you find it too tough raw and don't like it, I might make a concession and let you snack on your own fat! Delicious!*

*What a lark it will be!*

*Love,*

*Jim*

Shuddering, Sherlock sends the letter to the Yard detectives. He doesn't hear back from them. And Sherlock goes on with his life.

In another part of England, a boy named Mike Stamford makes the last minute decision to join his mum for a trip to the seaside. He hadn't planned on doing much of anything that weekend, but when she proposes the journey on a whim, he sees no reason not to agree. He loves his mum, and nowhere do they feel more close than when combing the beach for shells. In a tragic misfortune that is ultimately blamed on the intoxicated driver of a large truck, she loses control of the vehicle when the truck driver swerves into her lane, and the pair crash into a tree.
Mike, who unbeknownst to his mother had unfastened his lap belt, is killed instantly. His mother survives to be haunted by the tragedy.

Sherlock Holmes, of course, never so much as hears these strangers' names.

Sherlock is sixteen years old when he realizes that something is wrong with him.

He is sitting in a study in the country house, the room full of light and full of air, the windows open and the breeze tugging at the pale curtains, bending over a chemistry set he received upon his twelfth birthday. It is four o'clock in the afternoon, and he is unaware that his self-perception is about to take a sharp turn. Beyond, along the portrait-hung corridors of the family's estate, he can hear the bustling of busy feet. Every summer, the Holmes family takes in guests of a certain high station, and every summer, Sherlock divides his time between ignoring their presence and ruthlessly deducing their secret lives. He has grown accustomed to removing his mind to a place of clarity and distance, treating distractions with no more fuss and bother than a waterfowl would grant to the rain that swells the shores of their little lake.

Sherlock bends further over his beakers and retorts, bowlike lips pursed with concentration as his slender fingers trace the words in his textbook. He can identify this salt, he knows he can. It is only a matter of focus and patience.

The door creaks open and the source of the scuffling enters. Reginald Musgrave is a quiet boy and an arch one. Sherlock likes him to the extent that he doesn't actively dislike him, and Sherlock actively dislikes a great many people. Sometimes he likes Reginald even more than that, and the thought of the ways in which Reg is pleasant and courteous and not dull always brings a soft curl of warmth to the region of his heart.

Reginald has fair hair and a high brow, and for some reason he is shutting the door behind him.

"Still at it, then?" Reg wonders. "You'll make yourself cross-eyed."

"But I'll get a first in chemistry when I try for one."

"Course you will," Reg laughs. "You're brilliant."

Brushing his dark hair from his eyes with a delicate wrist, Sherlock nods. He is brilliant. Reg has grown taller this summer, they both have, springing up like weeds, and all traces of childish fat have abandoned him. It seems to have found its way to Mycroft's midriff by accident. Sherlock finds this endlessly amusing, and his brother does not, which makes it all the more delicious.

Reg has appeared at Sherlock's elbow as if by magic. Odd. Sherlock is generally quite keen when it comes to the relative movement of bodies through space.

"Why've you shut the door?" Sherlock wonders, not really wondering. The salts are nearly ready. Their secrets are almost laid bare.

"It's all right, you know," Reg tells him. There is a husky quality to his voice that wasn't present previously. Has never been there previously.

Sherlock glances up. The sun has burned golden streaks in Reggie's lank hair, and the button-down he's wearing under the woolen jumper is loose at the collar. Sherlock can see the barest dusting of
fine down there, like the feathers on a gosling. Reggie has always been a terrible clothes horse, but it's getting worse of late. The boys had used to spend hours fashioning costumes for impromptu Shakespeare plays and the odd pirate drama, memories that fit Sherlock like a favourite pair of oft-worn trousers. Reggie is uncomplicated without being dense, and in Sherlock's experience, that is worth something incalculable.

"What's all right?" Sherlock asks.

Reggie reaches out and traces his fingertips along Sherlock's stark jawline.

"That you're different. It's all right. I am too, you see."

Swallowing, Sherlock wonders briefly how Reg could possibly know such a thing. The other boys at school are all elbows and hormones, sweaty and sticky and mindless, humping warm objects as if their lives depended on regular emissions, and Sherlock can't fathom a bit of it. But this seems to be the topic that Reg is broaching. How extraordinary. Sherlock has awoken to questionable bedsheets once or twice, but he hasn't the smallest desire to insert any part of himself into any damp, confined space, and if Reg is similarly sexless, then god bless him for a true mate. When Sherlock tries to think of anything more distasteful than the scene he interrupted down by the stables last spring, that catering girl his parents had hired for their party mashing her face into the crotch of one of their horrible houseguests, he can't help but shudder.

The Reg leans over and kisses him. It isn't unpleasant. Or even difficult. It's warm, and breathy, and a bit intimate, and rather nice, like being complimented. But Sherlock starts backward in surprise all the same.

Smiling in a self-satisfied fashion, Reg reaches down and cups a palm over Sherlock's trouser front.

"No," Sherlock, exclaims softly, batting the hand away.

"What's the problem?"

"That's--no," Sherlock repeats, struggling to catch up to the conversation and failing miserably because he has absolutely zero practice at that task. He is generally miles and miles ahead.

Reg adopts a gentle look. Sherlock has seen it before, on days when Sherlock was sulking, or on days when his head started hurting his heart.

"There's no harm in being gay. Like I said, I'm the same."

"But I don't want to," Sherlock protests. His heart is hammering.

"Don't tell me you're above it or something."

"Of course I'm not."

"Well, then? You like me. I know you like me."

That's true. They like each other. Sherlock swallows. Perhaps Reg is entirely correct, perhaps something should happen, something slimy and embarrassing, because he likes Reggie so much.

That is the very worst notion Sherlock can think of.

Reggie cocks a fond eyebrow at him.

"But--" Sherlock whispers. He is backing away and it feels better, it feels a million times better, he
can breathe, he--

"I won't hurt you."

"I know you won't."

"Then don't be a prude."

"I'm not. And I do like you, I just--"

"Come back here."

"I think...I think, I think I don't like it," Sherlock stammers.

Reggie's eyes narrow. They're blue and rather striking, and Sherlock swallows, staring back in mounting panic. Sherlock doesn't have a great many friends. Sherlock has a brother who's growing more boring by the day and a distant mother who drinks and a father who sleeps with the help, and Reg has always been willing to traipse along moonlit paths in the dead of night, and to bury treasures, and to draw pirate maps, and to forge secret vows sealed with blood on their palms. Reg is important.

"I thought I meant something to you," Reg bites out.

"You do."

"No, I don't. Not if..."

Biting his lip where Reg just kissed him, Sherlock thinks hard. There must be a way of solving this. There must. There is a way of solving everything. And Sherlock, though he is very young, suspects already that he might be a genius.

"I don't want to with you because I don't want to with anyone," Sherlock explains.

"Come off it," Reg snorts. "Everyone wants to with someone. And I know for a fact you don't like girls. Wait, do you like girls?"

"No."

"So you like boys."

"No."

"What, you expect me to believe you're some kind of robot or something?"

"Of course I'm not--"

"Don't you ever touch yourself?"

"I...well, sometimes, but I don't particularly like it."

"Don't like it?" Reggie's eyebrows are ballooning upward in disbelief. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why wouldn't you like it?"

"It's all just...it's messy, and complicated, and--"

"Sherlock, I know you like being independent and all, and yes you're a neat freak, but you're not
some kind of goddamned android. Granted, you're the only bloke I know with a sock index, but--"

"My heart beats too fast, and it's uncomfortable."

"That's completely ridiculous."

"And I don't know what to think about, and--"

"Fucking," Reg says, exasperated. "When people have a wank, they think about fucking. I think about fucking you."

A terrible silence falls.

"I'm sorry," Sherlock whispers.

Reg shakes his head and turns away.

"You said it was all right that I was different," Sherlock pleads.

Reginald shoves his fists in his pockets. He's verging on handsome these days and Sherlock is too observant not to know it, but suddenly he wants the old Reg back. He wishes they were still eight, sharpening sticks into arrows and stringing bows with kitchen twine, tripping over each other and laughing. Things were simple then, and when Reggie looked at Sherlock, Sherlock felt like a king. Now he feels like one of his own dissection subjects, flayed out and pinned to a board.

"Well, I was wrong, wasn't I?" Reg snaps, and Sherlock understands that he has insulted his only friend somehow. "You're a right freak."

After Reg storms out, Sherlock wonders whether a cloud has passed over the sun through the window, or if his perception has changed due to the sheer ghastliness of their altercation. He goes back to the process of identifying the salts, but his fingers are trembling and there's an ache in his chest that he's never experienced before. When he positively identifies the bisulfate of baryta, Sherlock can barely bring himself to care.

Sherlock later discovers that this whole shagging business can get him other things he wants—and that if he chooses partners carefully enough, whether or not he comes never even enters into their heads.

Cocaine, he reflects as he watches the traffic lights sweep past in the darkness beyond his little window in Montague Street, is a wonderful substance. Good cocaine, the kind he likes, and pure morphine, the kind he likes very much indeed, are rather a drain on his finances, however, and living by one's wits by popping up unwanted at crime scenes is proving less immediately lucrative than he had hoped. And this is the reason that this fellow named Grant is in his bed. Grant is a thin ginger man with freckles on his chest, and he is a complete tit, but rather a well off one, and he brought Sherlock's favourite drugs along with him when Sherlock indicated via text that his urges would at last be seen to. He is asleep on his side, snoring lightly. Sherlock can see the individual hairs of his red stubble when a car goes by and the headlamps shine through.

Sherlock hates him.
He hates that now his room smells like sweat and humans. He hates that Grant wears t-shirts with bands on them Grant doesn't actually listen to. He hates that his arse feels like this when he moves. He hates how easy it was to hide the fact that he wasn't even aroused. He loves that he didn't come, he only does when alone and every other month or so, just when he has to, but he hates Grant for not caring. He hates himself. He hates Grant.

He suspects he might hate being alive. There is nothing for him in this world other than crime scenes, and there hasn't been a crime scene in days. If he isn't careful, if he doesn't dose himself carefully, the pain will come back, that feeling that the world has ground to a stop on its axis and nothing will ever be all right again and no one cares that it won't be all right except for Sherlock.

This bed is far too crowded and he has never felt more alone.

Next time, Sherlock thinks exhaustedly, I'll use my mouth and pretend that turns me on and then I won't even have to take my kit off. That will be easier.

Next time.

Despite Sherlock's plans, next time Grant wants the same thing again, and so he grits his teeth and doesn't whimper and he thinks about star systems expanding, thinks about the entropy of rivers and ways to deduce Niagara Falls from a single drop of water.

Sherlock is thirty-four when he falls hopelessly in love at first sight.

He is running after a suspect through the streets of London, a cold-blooded killer by the name of Abernetty, and the thrill that courses through his veins is better than any drug. Of course, he'll need the drugs to counteract the black reaction that will set in when the adventure is over and life is grey again, will need the cocaine or the morphine which he can now afford to buy himself, but for now, he is alive. He is godlike in his speed, he is invincible. His coat billows behind him as he leaps over a fence surrounding a construction site. He and Abernetty left Scotland Yard in the dust five minutes ago, and that is fine by Sherlock, though he regrets a bit that Lestrade was nearly mowed down by a Jeep following Sherlock's wild dive into traffic, and if Sherlock loses his man, weeks of work will have been in vain.

The sky has never been bluer, and his legs have never felt so strong.

Sherlock can see Abernetty ten yards ahead, dodging brick piles and buckets and iron beams. His face is thin and mean, and his brown hair is balding at the crown of his head. The autumn breeze ruffles his blue windbreaker. Abernetty darts around a wheelbarrow stained with dried cement and nearly falls.

Sherlock can taste victory in the fucking air.

Over another fence, out of the construction site, and Abernetty is careening into Hyde Park. The green of the trees is electric, the blood pounding in Sherlock's ears is symphonic, the delight he takes in each long stride out of all proportion. The trees pass in a blur. The sun is setting over London. They are attracting stares now. A man selling peanuts watches them streak past. Abernetty is on a collision course with a small man walking down the path with a cane, every slow step a seeming struggle.
"Stop that man!" Sherlock shouts.

Instantly, the limping fellow stands up straighter. He tackles Abernetty to the ground in a way that Sherlock can only describe as *artful*. Before anyone quite knows what is happening, Abernetty's chest is grinding against the pebbles as he thrashes, mouth practically frothing with curses. The little man has both Abernetty's arms pinned behind his back and doesn't even seem to be breathing hard.

"All right, all right, settle down," the little man says mildly to Sherlock's prey.

Sherlock slows and stops before the small man, gasping. The small man looks up, dark blue eyes alight. He has dirty blond hair and a fascinating face--round and weathered, but handsome. He wears a black jacket with a patch of leather on the shoulder, as if he is used to shouldering rifles. His lips are quite thin, his grip on Abernetty steady as a rock.

"This a mate of yours, I take it?" he quips.

"You've been in the Middle East, I perceive," Sherlock pants.

The man frowns, but he doesn't look displeased. "How did..."

"Your wrists. Well, and the military hold you're using on that killer under your knee."

"He's a killer?"

"On eight counts, yes. Afghanistan or Iraq?"

"Afghanistan."

The little man looks intrigued. Lestrade staggers up, clutching at his side, silvery hair mussed and his shoes spattered with mud. "You're under arrest," he bluntly says to Abernetty, who snarls as Lestrade pulls out a pair of handcuffs. "And Sherlock, no matter what barmy adrenaline addiction you're suffering from, you can't just expect civilians to tackle bloodthirsty killers. It's not cricket."

"I don't mind," the stranger says.

"He's not a civilian," Sherlock says.

"Well, I am now."

Lestrade hauls the spluttering Abernetty to his feet and passes him off to Donovan, who can run incredibly fast in heels and has just joined them. The Yarders lead him off in the direction of the squad car that has pulled up to the edge of the park. Sherlock holds out his hand to help the little man up. He forgets Abernetty entirely. The man's left hand is warm and calloused in places that mean he is extremely practiced at firing a gun. The man's grip is sure, but when he gets to his feet, he leans a little. Sherlock bends down and picks up the cane. He hands it to him.

"Ta," the little man says. He smiles. It's a curious smile. "Are you a plainclothesman?"

Sherlock scoffs, disgusted. "Wrong. I'm a consulting detective."

"A detective. Interesting."

"No, a *consulting* detective. I've a turn for both observation and deduction, which led me to create a trade of my own. Here in London we have lots of government detectives and lots of private ones. When they're at fault, or when people are at the end of their wits, or the Yard is out of its
depth, which is always, they come to me. I'm the last court of appeal in criminal detection. I take private clients, too. When people are in trouble about something and want a little enlightening, I listen to their story, they listen to my comments, and I pocket my fee. Now and again a case turns up which is a little more complex, and then I have to bustle about and see things with my own eyes. Those are the best sort of cases. I have a lot of special knowledge which I apply to problems, and that facilitates matters."

Sherlock belatedly grows aware that he is babbling terribly and shuts his mouth. The small man is smiling in bemusement. The smile looks very nice on him. His teeth are white. He has forgotten his injury and stopped leaning on the cane. Psychosomatic, then. Interesting.

Everything about this man is interesting.

"So this was the, er. Bustling sort of case, then?"

"Precisely."

"Does bustling usually involve tackling murderers?"

"Sometimes."

"Happens often?"

"Not often enough, but yes."

"What else do you consider bustling? Car chases, gunfights, that sort of thing?"

"Yes."

"Sounds dangerous."

"It is dangerous."

"Lots of special knowledge. So you went to consulting detection school then," he remarks. "Didn't know that existed."

"No, I studied in a great many areas, all hand-selected and tailored to further my career. I invented the job--I'm the only one in the world like me."

"Now, that I can believe."

Sherlock smiles, overwhelmed with delight. There is something contradictory and compelling about this man. He returns Sherlock's stare with both lightness and gravity. The fact that Sherlock is staring in the first place is...unfortunate, he realizes. A lot of people are put off by his stare. Stupid people, sheeplike people. This ex-soldier doesn't seem to mind the scrutiny, though, which is odd in and of itself. That's marvelous. Sherlock realizes that the thought of the small man being put off by him is absolutely unbearable. But he has already babbled, and stared, and the small man is still here.

"Well, cheers, mate," the little man says, holding out a hand. "Best of luck--"

"Dinner?"

"Excuse me?"

*Think.* Sherlock feels panic mount in his chest at the thought of losing this very small, very strange
"I have to thank you," he says. "For tackling Abernetty. You didn't have to do that, and it was...it was good. So I would like to thank you for assisting me in my work by taking you to dinner and paying for the meal."

_You sound like a fucking robot_, Sherlock thinks in despair.

The small man chuckles. The small man finds him _laughable_. God, it's mortifying. The sun is nearly down, and the lights have come on in the park, glittering through the trees. A couple on a quilted blanket a little distance away lie on their backs with their fingers entwined, watching the stars come out. Sherlock's heart is pounding painfully, and he hasn't got his breath back yet, and nothing makes sense anymore. He wants to know everything about this person. Sherlock wants to start with the day he was born and then read forward like a book, a page at a time, day by day, until he understands Afghanistan and the limp and the perfect small smile.

"I don't even know your name," the little man says.

"Sherlock Holmes."

"John Watson," he replies. He sticks out his hand again and Sherlock shakes it. He likes the feel of their palms together. It makes sense, like a puzzle piece fitting.

"Hungry?" Sherlock breathes.

_Please please please._

John Watson grins. "Starving."
They go to Angelo's, because it's near Sherlock's flat and Sherlock is adored by Angelo, and John Watson should be exposed to as many people who admire Sherlock as is possible in the shortest possible amount of time.

Then maybe it will rub off on John.

Sherlock, he assures himself, does not desire this end out of whimsy or the last fumes of an incredible adrenaline high. John seems like a practical person, an excellent, useful, sturdy sort of person, and he is intriguing. Sherlock tells himself that he is being entirely selfish at the moment, which is admittedly in character, and that he imagines John might be good at crimesolving, as he is already very good at collaring killers. And Sherlock is definitely not dragging this John person around because of the way John looks up at him through his eyelashes. Wondering and vaguely amused.

Angelo fusses over Sherlock and deposits the pair at the usual window table where Sherlock can watch the passersby and make deductions about them. Their host then brings a candle, because he thinks it's a date, even though Sherlock never goes on dates. The point of dates is to get laid, and Sherlock does not want any homo sapiens in the immediate vicinity of his pants. But when Angelo lights the candle and John, despite denying that they are on a date, allows it remain there with only a resigned tilt of his head, Sherlock comprehends that there might possibly be other reasons for dating. Reasons like conducting conversations, or trying to learn more about a person, or discussing the details of a new case, or having an excuse to stare at the face of the man sitting opposite.

When Sherlock realizes he is still staring for the love of god, he opens the menu.

"Order anything you like, he meant what he said, he never charges me," Sherlock says loftily.

You sound like a complete ponce, he thinks next, shutting the menu and sliding it in despair a few inches away along the table.

"Nice way to thank you for clearing his name."

"I only cleared it a bit."

You already said that when Angelo was here, Sherlock thinks, and wishes the table would swallow him whole. How do normal people carry out dates? These cretins with their normal sex drives and their tiny little reptilian brains, how do they manage? Is the ability to date inborn for normal people, the way wanting to take each other's clothes off is? Is this a date? It won't end in sex, but is it a date anyhow? What comes next, then? Compliments, perhaps, Sherlock decides. People enjoy being given compliments.

"You're quite deft at tackling larger men to the ground," he says.

You just called him short. If not small. You are the biggest moron in the Commonwealth. Your lack of sexual interest is a Darwinian measure against your breeding, so that the species won't be tainted by your inferior DNA.

John Watson only smiles. "Played rugby as a boy, if you can believe it."

Sherlock remembers how to breathe. "It seemed to come naturally to you. It surprised me because
I expected you to ignore me. That was extraordinary."

John shrugs. He's wearing a thick cream-coloured jumper, and the shade darkens his hair to something deeper than gold, warmer than brown. "It's not the maddest thing I've ever done."

"No. You invaded Afghanistan."

"I invaded it a bit," John corrects, still smiling.

Angelo comes back to the table with focaccia in a basket and a rose in a vase. He leaves both next to the olive oil, winking broadly, as if he knows exactly what is going to occur later and approves wholeheartedly. Sherlock longs to die. But John doesn't seem to mind.

"What were you doing if not invading?" Sherlock inquires.

"Ah. Trying to save people's lives, mostly. Occasionally I was even successful. I'm a doctor."

"An army doctor," Sherlock repeats, awed. 

_You sound like you were just bashed in the head with a shovel_, he realizes in despair. _Why would anyone so fascinating as a killer-healer continue on in your company?_ And it is truly fascinating, this development. John Watson, apparently, is not merely small and quick and strong and droll and friendly and bright and beautiful. He is also brave and intelligent and thrillseeking and selfless and altruistic and dark and fierce and morally complicated. Possibly, he is perfection.

"So you were saving lives while men were shooting at you," Sherlock continues. "Then what happened?"

"Got shot."

"But not in the leg."

"No. Wait, how did you know that?" John reaches for a piece of bread.

"You don't always remember your leg is in pain. If the injury were to your leg, you'd feel it constantly."

"Instead of feeling magical imaginary phantom leg pain, yes," John agrees, and his voice is bitter. Sherlock reaches for his own slice of bread simply for something to do even though he has never felt less hungry. He's grateful for the fact that his fingers are steady. What in hell has happened to his aloof sense of calm? The buzz and hum of the restaurant is too loud in his ears. Angelo reappears, rubbing his hands together like a gourmand.

"Go on and order, I'm not hungry," Sherlock says.

"Really?" John asks, surprised. "Um. Right, then. What do you recommend?"

"The bolognese."

"Fine by me." He nods to Angelo. "Sure you're not peckish?"

Normal people eat while other people are eating to prevent them from feeling self-conscious about eating, Sherlock realizes and mentally slaps himself several more times. "Two of the bolognese, and a bottle of the Dolcetto," he orders.
When Angelo disappears again, Sherlock resolves not to open his mouth until he's sure he can avoid inserting his foot in it. But John seems to have forgot the leg pain conversation and looks quite at ease again. He pours oil onto his plate and shoves a torn piece of bread around in it, entirely relaxed once more. It's as if the tension had never happened. Sherlock can't imagine how the smaller man has accomplished the shift in such a short period of time. It seems he took his anger and simply shut it off with a switch.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" John asks affably.

_Not this conversation_, Sherlock begs the universe. _Not now, not so soon._ It always, _always_ ends with someone being disappointed in him. _Always._

"No, not really my area," Sherlock manages.

"Oh. Right. Do you have a boyfriend, then? Which is fine, by the way."

"I know it's fine," Sherlock snaps, feeling panic well up in his chest like water filling a car that has careened off a bridge.

"So you're unattached. Just like me."

Drawing a breath, Sherlock dives in.

"John, while I am flattered by your interest, I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and that this dinner was intended as thanks and as an overture of gratitude on my part toward the person who stopped a vile assassin in the middle of Hyde Park and at a moment's notice without thought of reward, in the interests of public service, and that--"

"Hey," John interrupts gently. "Sherlock--can I call you Sherlock? It's fine. Really. It's...it's all fine. I have no issues with tackling people who have tackling coming to them, all right? It's fine. Haven't tackled in ages, and it was a right treat. Thanks for the dinner, though. You don't owe me anything, certainly not any explanations."

Sherlock stares down his new acquaintance for a moment as the terror recedes. Apparently it isn't enough for the detective to sound like an idiot. He also has to sound like a nervous, braying coward. That is just perfect, that is _fantastic._

"What's the matter?" John prods.

"Most people don't say that," Sherlock whispers.

"What do most people say?"

He shakes his head, forcing his usual neutral expression onto his face. He is not about to answer that question.

_They say "freak," or "you just haven't met the right person," or "you were probably raped as a child and repressed the memory," or “your hormones need fixing,” or "you don't have to lie to me just because you're not attracted to me,” or "wow, you must be really kinky to not want to talk about it that much." Then they stare at me like I'm in a display case. They're the ones who can't listen, but I'm the one who feels like a wristwatch in a shop window. Made of plastic and batteries and there to be pointed at and then walked away from as the time ticks on._

_They say "that must be unbearably lonely."_
And then they leave.

"Never mind," John says. And he seems to mean it, that the topic is now closed. He leans back and crosses his arms in a way that reminds Sherlock of sitting before a cozy fireside. "Tell me what observation and deduction are all about. I've been in the market for a new hobby."

After dinner, which for the most part sails smoothly following the arrival of pasta and wine, though Sherlock only picks at his in the most disinterested fashion, he leaves five quid on the table for Angelo and puts his coat on. John looks well fed and satisfied about it, and when they reach the door, Sherlock opens it for him. The hour is late enough now that the streets have largely cleared. The night is fine, but the September air nips. Sherlock's flat is only a few blocks away, and the thought of returning to the experiment over the rate at which lye deterioration alters human cartilage is suddenly much less appealing than it was when he left the house this morning. Now he will never see John Watson again. John will return to the locum work he mentioned to Sherlock, and Sherlock will go back to solving crimes and abusing drugs recreationally, and when he dies one day, no one will notice until the flat begins to smell.

"Well, it was nice meeting you. And weird. Weird, but nice." John offers his hand. "Take care of your--"

"Come back to mine for coffee," Sherlock blurts out.

John blinks. His hand is still in the air, and he lowers it. He shifts his feet. "I, um. That's. Okay. Well, full disclosure, I think you should know that the answer on my part would be yes theoretically, but earlier, you said--"

"Coffee means coffee," Sherlock says, his mind racing. "Because you deserve to know who you tackled. I have the file and extensive notes. I can tell you how I solved it, and you'll have a more complete picture of the case, and that will prevent you from feeling any residual guilt over it, when you see who you helped to capture."

"I don't feel guilty now," John points out reasonably. And he's right, he doesn't appear guilty in the slightest. "I trust you."

"Why?"

"I honestly have no idea."

"You don't have to trust me, you can see for yourself. The case was an extremely engaging one."

"Lots of bustling?"

Sherlock cannot tell whether he's being mocked or not. This is disturbing. He suspects so, but not maliciously--the doctor is smirking without trying to hide the expression, checking the time on an incongruously expensive cell phone.

"Are you mocking me?"

"A wee bit."

"Most people don't dare."

"Most people aren't me."

"I noticed. Come over, it's a three minute walk. You want to, I can tell."
"How?"

Sherlock lifts a finger in a gesture meaning wait and goes back into the restaurant. It was a gamble, but if nothing is ventured, then nothing will be gained. When he reaches the table, which has already been cleared and reset, he grips the lightweight silver cane where it still sits propped against the wall in the shadows and closes his eyes for a moment.

*Let this one stay for only a bit longer*, he thinks. Prays, perhaps, though he doesn't know to whom. *I'm good for him. Let me keep him for a little while. Please. Then when I'm not enough, I promise to let him go.*

When he reappears with the cane in hand, John raises his eyebrows and then he laughs. Sherlock throws it in the air and John catches it easily, twirling it like a baton. The street lights glint off of it as the scattered cars drive by.

"That's embarrassing," John says.

"Why?"

"Bloody fucking leg," he sighs under his breath, and then he smiles at Sherlock. "I like coffee."

"This flat is brilliant," John says, admiring.

Sherlock knows it is. He can barely afford to live there even with Mrs. Hudson's significant discount, but one likes to have space to think and whenever he's short on rent, he finds new ways to steal from Mycroft. It's worth his ghastly older brother's irate phone calls to live in Westminster. Besides, if you hate 90% of the people who ever enter your flat, the flat itself ought to be tolerable, he reasons.

Sherlock sweeps his coat and suit jacket off and hangs them, then neatly pulls John's black coat from his shoulders, taking an instant to breathe the doctor's particular scent. The flat is in Baker Street and it's technically too big for Sherlock, who keeps books and disguises in the upstairs bedroom and little else. That's a bit of a waste, really. But it's comfortably cluttered on the first floor, with its black and white damask paper and its mountain of chemistry equipment and Sherlock's friend the skull. The skull is the best mate Sherlock has boasted in years. It never asks questions and never develops touchy hands. The skull lacks hands entirely, so the subject never comes up. Sherlock puts his palms on his hips and swivels, appraising.

"I'd used to live in Montague Street in a hellhole," he confesses. "This is much nicer."

"It suits you."

"Yes."

John drops his cane against the side of the armchair facing the windows. He smiles. Sherlock's heart performs a small flip, though he cannot fathom why that should be.
"I'll make coffee. Black? I don't know that I have milk or cream." Sherlock buries his head in the fridge, where two horses' hooves and a small jar of toes confront him. "Bollocks. I have Bailey's, though, somewhere, I think. And sugar. I do have sugar. Or whiskey." Switching the coffee maker on, Sherlock tries to focus, as he himself is entirely uninterested in coffee. "Oh. What I don't have is decaffeinated coffee. If you like I can pop down to Speedy's and--"

"Regular is fine. Black is fine." John has joined Sherlock in the kitchen, glancing casually about. "You learn to take what you can get overseas. Anyway, it won't matter, I can fall asleep on command practically."

"Because of medical school or the Afghan War?"

"Yes." John smiles again, more tightly. "It's the staying asleep that's a challenge."

"You have post-traumatic stress disorder," Sherlock conjectures. "I can see it clear as day. Intermittent tremor in your left hand, phantom leg pain, probably trust issues, nightmares, likely a sense of unreality in civilian situations. Classic PTSD, perhaps including a sort of dreamlike state wherein you're not sure the tedium is real, the mundanity of it all, though real or not it haunts you anyhow. When you tackled that killer, you were perfectly calm. So stress doesn't trigger it, and violence in a civilian setting doesn't either, but inaction does. Boredom. Sleep. Rest. Fascinating. The war changed you, but it didn't break you. In a sense, you might even miss it. The death, the heightened circumstances, the stakes at constantly high levels. You became inured to horror and there's no real coming back from that. So you look at that life, your armed services life, as better than your new one even if that's irrational by most standards, considering you probably watched your friends die. And it isn't that you're glad they suffered, of course, but you want to be somewhere you can stop them suffering. The trauma you survived works in reverse here--danger feels like normalcy. You're terrified of calm."

John's mouth drops open and works for a moment before he closes it again. His blue eyes have darkened nearly to black. John pulls a hand over his neck, rubbing his nape.

"Wow," John says evenly.

"You're not offended?"

"Do you want me to be?" John asks pointedly, leaning forward against the kitchen table.

Sherlock would very much like to answer that question and finds that he can only watch himself standing there silent in steel-coloured shirtsleeves, facing down an army doctor he suspects has killed a number of combatants. Said doctor is either shocked or angry, and Sherlock wants to crawl down the drain if it's the latter. He will live in Bazalgette's sewer with the other vermin. But he cannot find the words. Post-traumatic stress disorder was clearly a poor choice of topic, and Sherlock has zero tact. This isn't generally a problem, well, yes, occasionally it's a problem, not that he cares what mouth-breathing semiconscious idiots think of him, not that he cares that he's universally hated except for a very few individuals, not that any of that matters, he can manage alone after all, can't he, he manages fine, but if he offends John Watson, John Watson will go away, and that is an unbearable outcome.

"You don't," John muses, straightening up again. "Christ. You really don't, do you? You just talk at people, and whatever comes out, that mess is for them to deal with. Over and over again, like playing twenty-one, until you finally lay down too high a card and bust. What happens when you bust, as a general thing?"

Sherlock reflects. "People leave, or they cry. Or occasionally punch me in the face."
"I can see why that would seem their best option."

"I'm not much cop at self-censoring," Sherlock admits. "I don't see the point of it. But you haven't done any of those things."

"I haven't been served my coffee yet."

A tiny spark of hope bursts into life.

"You really aren't angry?"

"It'd be pretty fucking cheap of me if I was, seeing as I suspect it's all true."

Sherlock barks a laugh, which is completely and utterly inappropriate, but he discovers to his shock that John is laughing too. John is twisting his face to the side, laughing fit to burst, and it is possibly the best thing Sherlock Holmes has ever seen in his life. John looks ten years younger, his sides shaking and his lined eyes scrunching up and his posture gone all awry as if he's on a ship's deck, they're both mauling pirates on a ship's deck, they're swaying in a salt breeze on the forecastle of a privateer having just cannonaded a slaver and rescued all its captives and seized all its gold and frankly it's...

Frankly, it's beautiful.

Sherlock finds that he has stopped laughing.

John stops too, more slowly.

"What's this?" he says, and his voice has changed.

Sherlock glances down at John's line of sight.

Oh.

John is reading the latest letter, as it happens, and as it happens, this particular letter is rather bad even by comparison to the other 261. Sherlock has been receiving them almost monthly since he was around eleven years old. He doesn't like them, doesn't like the wreckage of his superior emotional balance they always, always cause, even though he does also feel a honing of the mental steel he wields when he receives a new missive--an almost painful sharpening of his wits as if against a grinding stone when his eyes follow the mad letters.

These particular letters read:

_Dearest Sherlock,_

_I'll be free in a week! Aren't you excited? We've made so many plans together over the years, I can't wait for some serious face time._

_There were so many moments, precious moments to me--moments like the other day when someone threatened me and I only kicked him in the bollocks a few times rather than beating him to death; a moment when a shower got frisky, just a touch on the crude side if you follow me, and I didn't much like where the flirting was going, I had a headache you understand, and I stabbed him in the eye with a pen (he claimed afterward he'd done it to himself and was mentally unfit to remain, what a dear little thing, soooooo clever!), and even when his mental health appeal failed I still let him live, though he didn't much want to by the time I was through, if you know what I mean; moments when every face I saw looked like your face, that oh so gorgeous face I found when you were in the_
papers last year for that liquor distributor case with the smuggler, Vamberry I think was his name (you're amazing, do you know that?), and I just stare at your picture and think about how I haven't yet burned those sweet sweet lips off with a curling iron.

I count the days, dearie darling duck,

Jim

Reaching toward the paper, John pulls it closer.

"Who the fuck wrote this," he growls.

"I sent him to prison when I was ten," Sherlock answers softly.

John looks furious. It's a very quiet fury. He seems a bit smaller now, but in the way a lion on the prowl would Slink through tall grass. It's shockingly easy to picture him pouncing on something and tearing it apart. Sherlock is delighted at this new John, but rather baffled by him. Why should this letter make him angry? Granted, it's sick. But it has nothing to do with John.

John's left hand opens and shuts a few times, as if he's testing it. But every trace of the tremor has vanished.

"Tell me," he says.

Sherlock launches into a recital of the Carl Powers case, the trainers and the single-minded campaign he waged. He isn't really listening to himself, he's told this story too many times, but John is rapt. Sherlock supposes that's because Jim Moriarty's crime was exceedingly clever, for a man let alone a little boy, and so he slows the tale down to include a bit more detail and colour than usual. Small memories like the way he felt when he saw New Scotland Yard for the first time, that he'd always imagined it would look like a fortress, gloomy and hulking and wonderful, and that instead it looked like a banking firm, and something about that was disappointing. Then he explains that Moriarty quite rightly blames Sherlock for his lost childhood and plans to cut his ear off and send it packed in salt in a box to Mummy. Sherlock has learned to be dispassionate about all this, and so he speaks quite calmly.

"And the police have what, they've done nothing?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Well, he has the right to write letters."

"But not to harrass you."

"Obviously. But they invariably contain useful information. He reveals himself a little more to me every time, so on balance I'd prefer to have them. For instance, he was in maximum security for a period, for running an extortion operation from the inside with allies who'd been paroled, but from this I can infer that he's out among the living again. Useful. He's expanded his network while incarcerated to the point that a man would prefer to lie about stabbing himself in the face than implicate the true perpetrator. Again, useful. He knows what I look like. Useful."

John nods. "I didn't think of it that way. Stupid of me."

"Yes, but most people are stupid," Sherlock agrees.

John coughs to cover another laugh. He shakes his head. "This seems serious, Sherlock. Very serious. As in, you know. Deadly serious."
Sherlock recalls being twenty-three, on the occasion he tried heroin for the first time, while still taking desultory but crimesolving-relevant courses at uni. It was just before Christmas but after finals. His classmates had thrown a massive blowout at which he was treated like a ghost, a sort of ignore-the-problem-and-it-will-go-away technique they'd developed after discovering he was very pretty but not interested, and very sharp but not willing to help them cheat when they sat for exams, and very isolated but ready at the drop of a hat to explain who was shagging who while they sat at breakfast. He'd stood there in the middle of the party, music thumping in his ears, a man and an island, and by a series of deductions he'd determined who had the best drugs and might be willing to barter them. Giving a memorably distasteful and unhygienic blow job in a memorably trashed bathroom had led to the happy circumstance of Sherlock getting astronomically high after they'd all left. And when he'd noticed a Moriarty letter in the little pile of mail in his new digs, and the fact that it had taken his enemy less than a month to discover that Sherlock had moved off campus to Montague Street and address the note accordingly, the drug-muddled panic had been so terrible he'd suspected that Moriarty wouldn't have to kill him after all, because the heart attack would finish him first.

On that occasion, Moriarty had wanted to chop Sherlock's arms and legs off with a cleaver and then keep him on life support until he was 90.

"Serious, yes," Sherlock sighs. "Hand me your phone."

John's brows twitch. "Why?"

"Because my phone is across the room in my coat pocket."

John looks a bit exasperated but hands it over. He has a brother with a drinking problem, recently divorced. Interesting. Sherlock quickly types Another one. SH to Mycroft, as Mycroft tediously insists he do every time, which task he has been putting off since this morning. Then he goes into John's contact list and adds Sherlock Holmes with his mobile number, hoping fervently that he won't be interrupted and that John won't notice what he's doing. He is successful. It is something akin to a test whether or not there is a God, and something akin to betting on roulette, and something akin to a desperate measure. Closing down the screen, he passes the phone back to John.

"Shit, look at the time," John mutters. "I really have to go now, all right? Thanks for having me, and for dinner. And for telling me about that creep. It's been a very interesting day, but I have to work in the morning."

"Dull," Sherlock scoffs.

"Yeah, but I'm poor," John chuckles. He heads back into the sitting room for his cane. "And I want at least six hours of sleep, and I'm all the way across London from you."

"Sleeping is boring."

"Not when I do it," John says, and once again a dark undertone has crept into his speech. "Trust me."

Sherlock follows John to the door after he dons his coat. This time when they shake hands, John doesn't smile. He chews his lip. His nearness and the imminent loss of it pull at Sherlock in a physical way, like gravity or magnetism, as if they each give off opposite charges or as if John's density is far, far more vast than his true size. Sherlock suspects a little of both is at work.

"Watch out for yourself, okay?" John says. "I mean it. You're... That's just not a good letter, not
at all. Keep an eye on your flank for me."

John leaves, and Sherlock shuts the door and locks up for the night. He then slides down it with his back against the wood, sighing, until he is sitting on the floor.

Silence.

As usual.

Nothing to be done about it, unless he gets up and faffs about on his Strad.

Silence is to be expected.

Still.

His flat is a flat again. For a very brief while, his flat was like a snow globe, shaken and swirling with sparkling flakes, everything different and everything brighter.

*Which is it tonight,* Sherlock thinks tiredly, letting his head list back, *morphine or cocaine?*

Since falling in with Lestrade, he has to be more careful. But he manages to hide it, though the dosage is sometimes insufficient to his purposes and the highs are only effective after he's made himself stop for a week or more. Every morning he thinks about drugs and every morning he manages not to do them, in case a crime comes up that needs solving. But by the time the day is through, the silence in his flat is too much to be born stoically.

*Ping.*

Standing, Sherlock reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out his phone. The text is from an unknown number.

*Nice touch. They broke the mold when they made you, eh?*

The universe expands and then contracts, a Big Bang sensation of hurtling through space and then returning to a simple flat in Baker Street with a Union Jack pillow and wide front windows and cigarettes stashed away in the toe end of a Persian slipper.

"Oh," Sherlock breathes.

*Shattered it, rather. SH*

The answer comes six minutes later and Sherlock discovers he has been standing perfectly still staring at his mobile in his hand during the entire period.

*Well, you need any tackling done, you know where to reach me.*

Sherlock peers at the barely veiled suggestion, his heart in his throat. It's too good to be real. No one wants to spend time with him voluntarily. Well, maybe Molly, but then Molly is mad. He's still staring when his phone chimes again.

*Though I suppose you do fine on your own generally. Anyway, cheers for the pasta, mate. Glad to be of use.*

"No, no, no, no," Sherlock hisses, typing furiously.

*A trusty companion is always of use. SH*
This time Sherlock paces his way through the waiting period, fingers rubbing manically at his hair.

*I'm meant to blog for my therapy. It's usually rubbish, but today's will be slightly better than complete crap. What do you think of bloggers? Are they of use?*

The thought of John writing about their day is quaint but wonderful, like a diary or a memorandum book.

*Even more so. SH*

Sherlock sets off for the bedroom with his mobile. He's pulling a soft sleeping shirt over his head when ping goes the phone and he nearly strangles himself to death trying to reach it while his arms are only half through the sleeves.

*Really? Most people just whinge on about how they hate their jobs and post pictures of their food. My last post was about my laundry.*

*It's useful for crimesolving when people archive their entire lives online. Why your laundry? Was it stolen? SH*

*Nope, nothing so exciting as a crime, it just was dirty and I wrote that down to get my therapist Ella off my bloody back. Nothing ever happens to me.*

Although it is irrational, Sherlock feels a surge of bitter jealousy, because this Ella person is paid money by the Crown to talk with John Watson on a regular basis, even though she is clearly an idiot, and that is so very very very unfair.

*But today you happened to Abernetty. Rather hard, in fact. SH*

*I did happen to him. My wrist is a bit sore.*

*Worth it? SH*

Sherlock curls up with his phone on the sofa, nowhere near ready or willing to sleep. He pretends that the answer to this question doesn't have his stomach tied in knots. But when the mobile finally buzzes in his hand, he almost can't bring himself to read the message.

*Oh god, yes.*

Smiling, Sherlock wriggles his toes and stretches into a lazier curve.

*Let's have dinner. SH*

*What, hungry already after the two entire bites of pasta you consumed?*

*I'm not hungry. Let's have dinner. SH*

*That makes no sense. But sure. Later in the week, maybe. Text me.*

It's a signal to shut up, which Sherlock recognizes, but he has no desire to be alone again.

*Tell me about the war. SH*

*What, now?*

*Yes. You aren't otherwise occupied, you're on a bus. SH*
Why do you keep writing your initials? And how did you know that?

Yawning, Sherlock flops over so he's facing the back of the sofa, which is always nicer, like being in a cave.

_Precision. You said you were poor, thus you don't have a car and it is equally unlikely you can afford the high cost of cabs and you're texting me, so you aren't on the Underground._ SH

A few minutes pass before John responds, minutes spent begging the universe not to allow him to feel offended over being called _poor_ quite so bluntly, even if John did it first. Sometimes, Sherlock remembers, people say things about themselves that are untrue, hoping to be contradicted. But John doesn't seem like the type.

_That's amazing._

Reaching out, Sherlock runs his finger over the letters. Why do they make him feel like this, like his chest is tight and his heart hurts?

_Elementary._ SH

More minutes pass, achingly slow.

_The war was hot, dirty, and violent._

They text for another hour. Sometimes John doesn't respond for a few minutes and Sherlock despairs, sometimes the answer comes right away, answers about guns and hand grenades and Americans and bleeding out and insurgents and chemical weapons and what enteric fever feels like to the point where Sherlock thinks he can smell the sand of the desert from here. And all thanks to a series of brief text messages. It's marvelous. More than marvelous. Something deeper.

Finally John sends this message:

_I'm home now. Going to bed. Read a book or something._

_What book do you suggest? _SH

He snugs himself further into the cushions and awaits John's reply. It doesn't come, however, and he feels his eyelids closing, so he allows himself to drift away inside the silence, having entirely forgotten about both morphine and cocaine, phone tucked in his hand up by his neck.

It's late the next morning, when Sherlock awakes, that he realizes very possibly he has a mere week to live, and he never made John coffee.
Sherlock Holmes wakes up with the complicated sensation that he'd managed a truly memorable, first-or-second-week-of-using cocaine high, when in fact the substance only delivers a warm buzz when he's shooting up frequently and a giddy upswoop when he isn't, but without a dry mouth or a sore head or muscles that want to twitch right off his bones and out the door. Uncurling himself slowly, he stretches. At some point he pulled a blanket off the arm of the sofa and he's got himself twisted. As he untangles his limbs, his mobile drops to the floor and Sherlock remembers.

John Watson.

John Watson was here in this flat.

Sleep-mussed and eager, he reaches down and checks the screen. There are no new messages.

Sighing, Sherlock falls back onto the cushion he was using for a pillow.

Soon enough, being the man he is, Sherlock has hatched a scheme.

It takes him roughly ten minutes of searching, by means of finding John's blog (John's right--nothing happens to him, but John has definitely happened to Sherlock, as hard as he'd happened to Abernetty) and then searching medical directories and cross-checking to guarantee his data is accurate, to find out where John works part-time clinic hours. He also, with only a little more trouble, finds John's mailing address (a postal box) and the full name and biography of his therapist Ella. John's name comes up readily enough in newspapers, but they're other John Watsons--divorce cases and low-level politicos and men on the street stopped for quotes.

After a shower, a thorough tooth brushing, a shave, and a visit to his closet and sock index, Sherlock looks himself over in his bedroom mirror. His appearance, he knows, is striking, though he possesses very few frames of reference for fully grasping the repercussions of his tall, dark, and handsome mien in others. He knows he is memorable, and that being memorable often gets him what he wants, and he uses this tool as he uses every other at his disposal--dispassionately. While he isn't specifically thinking, John will like me better well groomed, he does know when regarded with an eye to mathematical averages, I obtain better results in my efforts when coiffed. He pats down curls which never want to go anywhere but in his face, but that's a battle he lost years ago.

His phone rings. Sherlock is already grinning when he sees that it is Mycroft and the glad expression shifts instantly to a scowl.

"What?" he answers.

"Your telephone etiquette leaves much to be desired," his terribly smug elder brother intones.

"What do you want?"

"What I always want. I am concerned for your safety. I worry about you, Sherlock. Constantly."

When Sherlock was eleven years old and began receiving the letters, Mycroft was already away at school. Sherlock, who had the distant admiration of his mother and the cool indifference of his father, had felt a wild rage at the perceived abandonment. Mycroft had been essential, had taught him to observe the smallest things, had explained the importance of trifles, had praised him with
candour and rebuked him with honesty, and had ceased paying any attention to Sherlock whatsoever when his life had begun to revolve around the uniformed dullards at his boarding school. Sherlock had loathed each and every imaginary stranger who was callously stealing Mycroft's focus, and had loathed Mycroft for betraying him still more. There was no one in the world like him and like Mycroft, and that was all well and good when they were together, but when they were apart, it hurt terribly. There were no friends who could fill the void, and as he grew older, and more certain of his difference from all the others, he felt like exploding with petulance for every week that passed being ignored by his first and only hero.

Then the Moriarty letters began, however, and suddenly Mycroft was all concern. He insisted upon being sent photocopies, tracked Moriarty's activities behind bars with admirable alacrity. It felt a bit like having his brother back, even if Sherlock never forgave the years when Mycroft had cared more about debate clubs and elementary physics and his horrible schoolmates than about his sibling.

Mycroft's anxiety on Sherlock's behalf always makes the detective want to push back against it for some reason, to see if he can shove it aside, or if Mycroft truly is worried over him. Mycroft is one of very few people who think of Sherlock in any other terminology than freak, and so Sherlock is constantly testing him. It's contrary, he knows, but the habit is fixed and Sherlock has very little interest in self-improvement. He is extraordinary, and that is enough.

"Fine, I'll scan it in a minute," Sherlock sighs. "You're wasting my time."

"Anything of use to us?" Mycroft replies mildly.

"No. Well, he knows what I look like. He's going to burn my lips off with a curling iron now."

He says it because he suspects Mycroft does love him, and this will provoke a reaction. He is aware of the fact, but can't recall when the desire for affection became the desire to startle his irritatingly unflappable sibling. Once, when Sherlock was seven, he cut his arm rather badly in an adventure up a tree on their estate, and the look on fourteen-year-old Mycroft's face when he saw the blood streaming down his wrist upon returning to the house made the concept of injury almost desirable.

"He will doubtless be most disappointed when that does not happen," Mycroft answers in a pinched tone.

"Possibly not. Possibly he'll go back to the plan of sewing them closed and feeding me intravenously forever."

"That will not happen either."

"How do you know it won't happen?"

"I won't let it happen."

"Thank you for reminding me of your omniscience. So refreshing. Go away."

"I have booked you on a transatlantic flight to New York in a week's time," Mycroft says smoothly.

"No."

"That is not an effective argument."

"I've told you a hundred times, I'm not running. If he can find my digs from gaol, he can find me in
America."

"France?"

"C'est le même principe, mais j'aime bien Paris à l'automne. Non."

"Come and stay with me in Pall Mall, then."

This is actually tempting. It is so very tempting, in fact, that Sherlock's instant reply is, "Sod off."

Mycroft's flat in Pall Mall is a few blocks away from the Diogenes Club, and is tastefully masculine in a way that screams old money at the top of its lungs. It's full of books and periodicals and old whiskey and leather furnishings. The last time Sherlock was there, he was recovering from Overdose Number Two, and the entire flat was permeated with Mycroft's disappointment. Sherlock had been aching so terribly, inside and out, that he'd wanted nothing more than a safe hole in which to cry his eyes out. Instead, he had polished mahogany desks and muted chandeliers and his brother's sad disapproval, which felt worst of all, and he'd had to be brave and stoic about everything and keep from whimpering every time his eyes opened because that would only make Mycroft's glances more frequent and more freighted with meaning. But through it all, the shivers and the pains and the overwhelming greyness of the world, he had felt protected. Staying there after Moriarty's release would mean a measure of safety and comfort that Sherlock cannot bring himself to trust.

"Just as you please," Mycroft sighs. "I will ask again in a few days' time. Who did you entertain at your flat last night?"

Sherlock is well aware that Mycroft employs CCTV to keep a constant watch over him, but that does not make the invasion of privacy any less annoying. Still more annoying is the fact that Sherlock has occasionally felt so lonesome in his quiet rooms that he has looked out over Baker Street and the awareness of his brother's unseen presence has been the only force stopping him from falling in graceful silence out the window. That fact is rather maddening.

"Must you be so glib about violating my autonomy?" Sherlock snaps.

"I see no reason to be otherwise. Do you?"

"It's really so pleasant, living in my own personal nanny state."

"If anyone ever needed a nanny, it would be you, brother dear."

"I'll leave the windows open tonight, shall I, so you can fly in with your carpetbag."

"I ask again, and will continue asking, who was your guest?"

"An army doctor," Sherlock answers with a certain degree of pride he cannot suppress. "He tackled a killer for me."

"In an unplanned incident?"

"Yes."

"Extraordinary."

"Yes."

"You have, of course, realized the possibility that Moriarty may wish to set one of his confederates
in your path prior to his release."

"Yes."

"And you will treat this new stranger with all appropriate caution while I determine what I can about his background?"

"Yes," Sherlock growls.

"What is the gentleman's name, then?"

"John Watson," says Sherlock Holmes, and feels a strange surge of glee at the words on his tongue.

"Excellent. Come round for dinner at my club tonight?"

"Goodbye, Mycroft," Sherlock says, and rings off.

Sherlock puts his mobile in his pocket and turns out the lights in his flat. He has more important matters to attend to than chatting with his infuriating brother. And in a week’s time...well, in a week’s time, he will deal with what he must, and that is that. Scanning the letter and emailing it to Mycroft takes two minutes, and then he closes his laptop down. He is checking his wallet for cab fare when Mycroft texts him.

*What a charming missive. I will stop at nothing, you realize. MH*

The thought is strangely comforting, a warm feeling like being huddled inside his coat, and Sherlock, after tapping out a tart reply, deletes his response and says nothing.

The clinic where John works, Sherlock reflects when he arrives there, is boring. It is so boring that he promptly decides he hates it. John Watson does not belong here, in this drab three-story clinic with the potted plants and the concrete benches and the very shiny windows. John Watson ought to have a gun in his hand and the steely glint of danger in his dark blue eyes. Sherlock is puzzled by the exact colour of John's eyes, as the sun had been setting when they met the day before and the light afterward was artificial, but he is reasonably sure that in daylight, today for example, they will be the colour of the mixing bowl in the kitchen of their country estate.

Digging into his pockets for the pack he retrieved from the toe of the Persian slipper, Sherlock lights a cigarette. The taste is acrid and wonderful, and he realizes with a hint of relief as the nicotine floods his system that he has forgotten to eat again. Never mind. Perhaps John will want lunch. People wander in and out of the clinic, none visibly ill but all wearing the resigned look of going about unpleasant business. They are uninteresting. They should not be taking up John Watson's time in this manner.

Sherlock removes his overcoat and straightens the material of the white doctor's coat with the official-looking ID badge clipped to it that he has selected for the occasion.

He takes a last drag. Tossing the cigarette into a metal bin after crushing the end into its lid, Sherlock marches into the clinic.
A pretty fair-haired woman wearing the sort of romantically cut blouse that indicates she wishes to be thought artistic is chatting with the receptionist. She holds a clipboard to her chest and laughs, showing pearly teeth. Bypassing the desk with complete confidence, Sherlock walks through the door leading to the examination rooms.

He pauses to listen, hanging his Belstaff on the tall crossbar of a medical scale. The murmurs of various voices reach him. Stepping quietly down the beige hallway, Sherlock reaches a closed door behind which Dr. John Watson is declaiming something in soothing tones. Opening the door, he steps inside and shuts it behind him.

Immediately, life ceases to be dull.

John, also wearing a white coat, is cleaning the stump of a man's severed thumb. The flesh has been well cauterized, but the wound is still raw and fresh and rather spongy. The patient is around twenty-five years old, wearing a heather grey tweed suit with the jacket folded beside him on the exam table, with a pale, masculine face and an expression of stoic good humour (chemically induced, no doubt) which turns to curiosity when he glances up at Sherlock. John, upon turning around, drops his jaw in astonishment.

"Colleague of yours?" asks the patient, whose name, Sherlock can see on the chart sitting next to the sink, is Victor Hatherly.

"Acquaintance. Erm. I--what are you doing here?" John stammers.

"What happened to your thumb?" Sherlock asks Hatherly, impressed by the wound. "It was done with a very heavy and sharp instrument."

"A cleaver, no less," Hatherly replies.

"By accident?"

"No."

"A murderous attack," Sherlock says, utterly delighted. Of course John would happen to be the only doctor in this awful place who isn't listening to weak coughs or prescribing meds for sinus ailments.

*John Watson, Sherlock thinks, is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Please don't let him send me away yet.*

"You can't stay here," says John firmly.

"The police are on their way," Hatherly adds. "I'll have to tell them all about it. But between us, if not for the proof of the missing thumb, I don't think anyone would believe a bloody word I said."


"Who are you?"

"Sherlock Holmes," says John, sounding equal parts amused, amazed, and exasperated. "He was just leaving."

"Sherlock Holmes!" exclaims Hatherly. "I've heard of you. You're that detective bloke, the child wonder. A savant. Solved your first case at age ten. I'd be happy to consult you too."
After a quiet knock, the pretty doctor from the lobby sticks her head in the room. "The Met just arrived," she reports, and then notices Sherlock. "Excuse me, but who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Friend of John's, consulting on Mr. Hatherly's case," Sherlock answers readily.

"Medical colleague," John corrects, "from, um, Saint Bart's. And he isn't staying. He's about to shove off, in fact. Sorry about all this, Sarah."

"My expertise will be of great value to your patient, and thus it would be idiotic for you to refuse to bring me in," Sherlock attempts.

"Would it, now." John taps his pen against Victor Hatherly's chart meaningfully.

"It would."

*Want me to stay, want me to stay, want me to stay*, Sherlock begs in his head.

"I was almost crushed to death in a shrinking room," Hatherly says conversationally. He really must be high as a kite.

"Oh, how horrid," the woman called Sarah gasps.

"Fantastic," Sherlock exclaims.

John smiles and then quickly smotheres the expression. It is astonishing, because Sherlock had imagined that John Watson could not grow any more perfect than he has already proven, but the intoxicating combination of *John* and *new case* is almost alarming in its intensity. John cannot throw him out, he simply cannot, the severed thumb is too delicious. Sherlock wants to deduce everything about Hatherly's assault and rattle off the details for John while executing an abstruse chemical analysis, playing a virtuoso solo violin performance, and winning a boxing match simultaneously. Sherlock adores showing off, and he has never wanted to preen as much as he does in front of this man. If he were a peacock, he realizes, he'd be fanning his plumage in a blinding display of vanity. He regrets the fact that his coat is out in the corridor and he cannot pop the collar up. He looks more dramatic that way. Perhaps if they leave together, he will have another opportunity. John, meanwhile, with his lovely lined face and his wry blue eyes, is licking his lips in mild dismay.

Inspector Bradstreet of the Yard appears behind Sarah. Bradstreet, who is known to Sherlock, is far from the worst person who could have arrived. She is severely professional without being rigid, and there is a look of acceptance in her steady brown eyes when Sherlock appears. Her short-cropped blonde hair lays neatly against her skull, and she wears a well-cut suit with a frilly violet blouse beneath that informs Sherlock she has a date planned after her shift. "All right, Mr. Holmes," she says, nodding coolly. "Didn't know you'd been called in. Nice coat."

"I've just been engaged," Sherlock explains.

"He thinks he has," John amends with a concerned look at Hatherly.

"I don't mind him, he's a cult celebrity," Hatherly observes. "Boy genius private eye. How cool is that? Really impressive."

"Extremely impressive," Sherlock agrees.

"Oi, his head doesn't need to get any bigger," says Bradstreet.
"The perfume you're wearing doesn't need to be applied to every one of your erogenous zones in order to be smelled from twenty yards off," Sherlock shoots back. "And why the notion of your breasts smelling like musk rose would be considered appealing is entirely beyond me."

"You want to work with me, you keep the breast remarks to a minimum," Bradstreet says evenly.

"If you want to work with me, and you do if you aren't stupid, which you are not, you'll shut up and we'll both listen to this man's story."

"Sherlock Holmes just said I wasn't stupid," Bradstreet drawls. She pulls out a small notepad and pen. "I'm going to have that fucking framed and hung over my bed."

"At least there plenty of people would see it."

"Modern women just baffle your patrician little mind, don't they," Bradstreet answers, completely unaffected. "My healthy sex life is none of your business."

"Are we going to talk about the case, ever, or stay on the unbearable topic of your love affairs?"

"They aren't love affairs, they're sex affairs, and I didn't bring it up. It's a hundred percent your call, Mr. Hatherly, I can stand this tosser if you can."

Sarah looks from one to the other of them with an expression of doelike wonder. John leans back, crossing his arms with his thin eyebrows raised. Bradstreet waits, expectant. Sherlock stands practically on tiptoe in his dress shoes, heart pounding loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

"Just as I was about to leave work yesterday, a man arrived with a business card that said his name was Colonel Lysander Stark," Hatherly begins eagerly.

Dizzy with triumph, Sherlock sheds the white coat and risks a glance at John as Hatherly continues. John quirks his narrow-lipped mouth at the edges in an awed, rueful smile, shakes his head with the resignation to fate that Sherlock thinks must have brought him out of Afghanistan with his wits intact, and settles in to listen as he carefully cleans and bandages the wound before him. He wears look of complete absorption when he listens, Sherlock has noticed, and documented, and admired. But despite his apparent focus on Hatherly, John angles his head in a way that Sherlock hypothesizes might suggest, if he is very lucky, if he is the luckiest man in the universe, that he is still thinking about Sherlock. Sherlock wants nothing more than for John to be thinking about him, and about nothing but him, for the rest of his probably short and violently terminated existence.

Thank you, Sherlock says to the nothing in particular that he speaks to when most people would be talking to God, for giving me a whole case with him before it's too late.

"That was cracking mad," John laughs that night, sitting in a taxi on their way back from the burned-down counterfeiter's digs. "Like something out of, I dunno, a Poe story. Incredible."
Sherlock, after deducing that Hatherly had been driven in circles by his strange clients, had gathered from the young man's tale that the coining gang he'd been waiting for a chance to pounce upon had fairly fallen into his lap. Between the completeness of Hatherly's wonderfully bizarre story and other indications he had been gathering for some time about missing machinists, he'd had little difficulty in convincing Bradstreet, who was really quite competent if potent-smelling, that the attackers were more centrally located than she'd at first imagined. They'd discovered a hulk of charred Victorian architecture which had romantically survived the Blitz but lost out to an electrical fire caused by the hubris involved in using an ancient relic of a shrinking room to dispatch Hatherly. It had once upon a time been employed to extract fuller's earth.

John is right. It was cracking, cracking mad, and it was glorious, and now it's over, Sherlock thinks glumly.

They are heading back to John's digs in the cab because John said half in jest that Sherlock owed him for dragging him out after only half his clinic hours and Sherlock had readily agreed in order to keep John for another half hour. John was deeply confused when Sherlock entered the cab after him, but he hadn't questioned it. Sherlock counts the neighbourhoods as they carry John further and further from Baker Street with a feeling that is disturbingly close to anguish. Battersea, Clapham, Brixton, all pass in a glow of electric light and darkened windows, cobbled streets and paved ones, petrol stations and fast food restaurants, neon and darkness, street after street, corner after corner, hateful, just hateful, all of it, because it means losing John again.

Sherlock is very aware of John's body next to him in the cab, which is peculiar. He wants to tuck his head under John's neck and breathe him. He wants to trace his small wrists with his fingertips. He wants to rub his palms along John's naked ribcage and count the bones underneath. He wants to know what he tastes like. He wants to curl up, just he and this small army doctor, under a pile of blankets, and whisper secrets to each other all through the long and cold night. He wants to feel his pulse throb under his skin.

_Fucking hell_, Sherlock thinks, realizing belatedly that he is in a very great deal of trouble.

"You okay?" John asks when the silence has stretched on too long.

Sherlock shrugs. "I always have a bit of a reaction when a case is over."

John nods. "Coming down from the high, eh?"

Sherlock sighs at the all too apt metaphor. "Something like that."

"What were you doing in my office in the first place?"

"I wanted to see you. You never texted me what to read."

"Ah. Okay. That was really, um. Weird. Yep, weird."

"Was it?"

"Bet your life."

"I'm an eccentric person."

"You can say that again," John chuckles. "An eccentric person who is also a master of disguise."

"It's only a matter of hiding in plain sight. A doctor's coat, a police cap, it makes no difference. People don't really see each other. Or they do see, but they fail to observe. I both see and observe,
"You seem to have a number of natural advantages," John says softly.

Sherlock's throat tightens. He swallows. It doesn't work, so he swallows again. He is going to go home, and he is going to pick cocaine tonight, because cocaine is for remembering and morphine is for forgetting, and he is going to be tortured to death in a week and never have the chance to watch John Watson grow old, assuming John would even let him, which is a snowball's chance in hell, but he never wants to forget a single second of the time they have spent together. It hasn't been enough. They ought to share everything, he knows it, even if he doesn't know why.

"You still haven't told me what to read," Sherlock says, small and quiet.

"Start with Poe, then," John says with a bright smile. "He's right up your street."

The cab pulls up to a terribly shabby block of flats. With a lead ball in his stomach, Sherlock climbs out and pays the cabbie. John follows after on small, silent feet.

Suddenly the thought of Baker Street without John is worse than any torture Moriarty has ever dreamed up for Sherlock.

"Thanks," he says to the cabbie, waving him off.

John stares up in surprise. "Sherlock, you don't live here."

"I know. Let's have dinner."

"Are you actually hungry this time?"

"No. Let's have dinner."

It isn't what he wants to say. What he wants to say is when I'm dying, and it's going to be excruciating, I know it, I'll think of your face and nothing but your face, your face when you admire me and when I surprise you, and it'll have been worth it, being afraid and alone for most of my life, because I got to meet you.

John rubs at his neck and flexes his left hand. He watches as the cab drives off. He seems to want to ask a question, but finally he laughs.

"I made lasagna day before yesterday, and that's always better as leftovers," he says, pulling out his keys. "Come on inside."

Sherlock follows John into his flat, pulse thundering and nostrils flaring with excitement. It's off a central corridor on the ground floor, and when John flicks on the light switch, Sherlock takes in his surroundings with a sweep of his all-seeing eyes.

"Your flat is awful," he says.

"Ta," John says cheerfully, toeing off his shoes.

It isn't that it's awful precisely, but it's very small and blank. It's a half kitchen with a studio bedroom, just a bed and a dresser and a desk and a little table with an Army logo mug sitting on it, and presumably the loo is through the only door. The place is neat and clean, but completely impersonal. It looks as if John moved in with his clothes and a few books and decided to forget about it. There are no pictures of loved ones or posters of girls or decorative pillows. It's the flat of
someone who is marking time. It reminds Sherlock vividly, like a slap in the face, of his Montague Street lodgings, before Mrs. Hudson decided he was too thin and told him that he was moving into Baker Street whether he liked it or not. The bed is military-neat, the kitchen spotless, the entire effect heartbreaking. John goes to the stove and switches it on, pulling a small tray of lasagna from the fridge.

Sherlock realizes, to his own surprise, that this time he is actually rather ravenous. His phone buzzes and he pulls it from his pocket.

_I warned you to wait until I had thoroughly researched him._ MH

"Who's that?" John asks absently.


_Mind your own fucking business._ SH

John busies himself, pulling down two of his four plates and putting the kettle on to boil as the casserole warms. He is economical with his movements in a way that endears him to Sherlock still further. After shedding his coat and hanging the doctor's disguise by the door, Sherlock takes a seat at the table. John walks over with two water glasses with splashes of whiskey in them.

"Tea will be a few minutes. Cheers," he says, lifting his glass and swallowing.

Sherlock watches, rapt. John's mouth is remarkably expressive, and his entire face shifts when he smiles. Sherlock remembers kissing Reggie when they were young, and how it had felt (before the panic set in) like being wanted, and that it was gentle and easy and nothing like sex whatsoever, more like a gift or a sweet sad song, and then recalls how seconds afterward Reggie had hated him. And had never stopped hating him, probably hated him to this very day. Then he recalls other people, mostly strangers, inside him or in his hands, and how there hadn't been any kissing, he'd made sure of it, and that at least, if they hadn't loved him like Reggie might have done, they hadn't hated him either, and that in a sense was better, because it hurt in a different, less all-encompassing way.

_Kissing John_, Sherlock decides, _is a terrible idea, even if for a moment it would be beautiful._

"Penny for your thoughts, wonder sleuth," John says, sitting down across from Sherlock.

"My flat is much nicer than yours," he says, sipping the whiskey. It's not terribly expensive, but it's good quality.

"Now you're being an arse about it," John huffs.

"No, I mean there's an extra room and you could..." Sherlock abruptly stops. "It's just that. I mean, you work closer to Baker Street than here. And I can barely afford my rent. So, I thought. Not if you...never mind. But my flat is..."

"Is nice," John finishes. He sounds shocked again. Sherlock commences inwardly kicking himself. "Christ. What is this? We just met, and tonight you burst into my workplace and then followed me home and are sitting in my chair. Now you're asking me to what, move in with you? What is going on here?"

"I'm not dangerous," Sherlock says quickly, feeling as if he's been slapped.

"Yes, you are," John avers with conviction.
"Not in that way."

"Yes," John counters. He takes another sip of whiskey. "You are."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't, but we've known each other for about twenty-four hours and you've completely invaded my life. I can't get my head around you. And you don't know a thing about me."

*That doesn't make me any less in love with you,* Sherlock thinks despairingly. His phone chimes again.

*Everything to do with you is my business, and this is reckless and unsafe behavior. Do not allow that man any liberties with your personal information. Please display a shred of self-preservation.*

MH

Sherlock grinds his teeth and clicks his screen off again.

"I mean, I have to wonder if you're entirely sane," John remarks, but it sounds teasing and there's no venom in the statement.

"We don't know," Sherlock responds dully. "I was never diagnosed, though I was scheduled to be tested. Probably not."

Sherlock's father, when the detective was ten years old, had in a fit of pique demanded that his younger son be given a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation by a child case specialist. This was due to the fact that Sherlock, he recalls perfectly well, was distant and aloof and unmanageable and brilliant and obsessive and calculating and wild. Then Sherlock solved the Carl Powers case and his father, when bragging about the widely publicized event with his rich friends, decided that word of a comprehensive psych exam would tarnish his son's new elite media reputation, and had cancelled the appointment two days before he was due at a mental health center in London. Sherlock's father forgot about his celebrity son when the news cycles were finished. But Sherlock has always wondered, if he'd walked through the doors of the clinic that day, what the expert might have said.

"Hey," John says, touching Sherlock's trousered leg with his toe.

"Hmm," Sherlock grunts, rubbing at his closed eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because that was not very nice of me."

Sherlock's eyes are aching when he opens them again. John looks...he looks very intent. He's searching Sherlock's face for signs of weakness, and then all at once Sherlock can't do this anymore. He risked too much too quickly, and as always happens someone has been put off, but this time the someone is John. Twenty-four hours, he said. So little time. It was inevitable, though, wasn't it? If it's possible to feel more mortified, Sherlock can't imagine how.

"I have to leave. The, um. Text I just received," he says, getting to his feet. "Sorry. It can't be helped. Thank you for the drink."

John regards him with a curious but reserved stare. He's calculating something, but he asked a
question, didn't he, and Sherlock can't answer it, he's probably completely insane but unaware of what type, so John will probably never move in or curl up with Sherlock on the sofa or accidentally drink from the same glass of water or make Sherlock tea. But that's not surprising.

"I didn't mean to be a prat," John says. "But I was, and now I regret it. So don't leave on my account. You might be the most interesting person I've ever met. And I invaded Afghanistan."

It's getting cold outside, so Sherlock dons the doctor's coat and his overcoat as well. It's easier than carrying it. He wants to say something, but you're all I have in the world doesn't seem appropriate after all that. The night outside is starless, and the trees losing their leaves. There aren't any cabs on this street. He'll walk until he finds something.

"I'd be angry at me too," John reflects. "But I wish you wouldn't go."

"Thank you for the thumb case," Sherlock manages to say steadily in the face of this bald lie. "Good night."

Sherlock is halfway across the street from John's horrible blank flat when he receives a new message from Mycroft. It says:

Thank you. MH

The sleuth continues stalking the roads in the general direction of cabs, trying not to feel heartbroken when he suspects his heart might in fact be a bit cracked. He doesn't name the streets in his head as he usually does, and he doesn't deduce the lives of the odd pedestrians, and he tries not to think about morphine. When the phone pings twenty minutes later, after Sherlock is nearly back to Wandsworth Road, he comes close to throwing it into the scant midnight traffic. But when he opens the message, it's from John and is fairly lengthy for a text.

I'm dangerous, too. I like that about you. And I don't think you're crazy, but I do know that I'm crazy. And I think if you don't forgive me, it'll be really fucking painful for some weird reason. So I hope you do. Let me know.

Sherlock stops under a street lamp and reads the message over and over again. It's clear enough, but he can't believe it. He leans his back against the cold metal pole and just breathes for a moment or two, holding the mobile against his chest and the message in his mind. He doesn't deserve this sort of consideration, which is why he generally isn't granted it.

He spends three more minutes coming up with a response and then settles on:

Let's have dinner. SH
The following day, Sherlock meets his dealer in a cafe and replenishes supplies. Shinwell Johnson is the sweaty, loudmouthed local type of everyman, with cunning black eyes and a way of babbling that compels people to underestimate him. Johnson does this on purpose, Sherlock is certain. He's very useful for traveling in circles where Sherlock's public school accent will not allow him to tread. He's low level enough in the black market not to be ruthless. He is clever and practical and self-serving without being malicious. And he's also very useful for obtaining illegal drugs. Johnson, huge and veiny and scarlet-faced, sits across from Sherlock at a plastic table sipping a caramel-flavoured coffeelike beverage Sherlock paid for. Sherlock is grateful that capitalizing on his childhood fame has led to a few lucrative cases of late. If he had to have sex with Shinwell Johnson, he thinks he might possibly die all the sooner.

"Plans tonight, mate?" Johnson asks, scratching idly at his meaty thigh.

"Dinner," Sherlock replies.

"Cor, finally met a bird, then?" Johnson belches contentedly. He is wearing a Manchester United jersey with questionable patches of moisture at the underarms. "Or a bloke, no offense, same difference, meaning no insult either way and all that, times is progressing and so on and so forth and et cetera, thank you very much, strike me down if I wouldn't say so to me own late mum."

"I don't know that it's like that. But he's a doctor," Sherlock reports. A small smile tents his lips. "An army doctor."

"Blimey," Johnson says, and whistles. "Ain't that a peach. Sherlock Holmes, smitten by the arrow of Cupid himself, if it ain't written all over that alien mug of yours I'm the Pope, always provided you don't mind my pointing it out and all, goes without saying, no discomfort intended."

Sherlock considers being embarrassed and decides he's too far gone for anything of the kind.

The night before, after texting John about dinner, they had continued to exchange messages while Sherlock was in the cab he flagged down and while Sherlock was tidying his flat just in case John ever returned to it and while Sherlock was pressing a little metal needle into his arm after sterilizing the skin and carefully measuring out half his usual dose of 7% solution. He'd already felt aglow, after all, and simply wanted to celebrate it properly. It would have been morphine if John hadn't texted another apology, one Sherlock actually believed, and he knows it. But it's only cocaine, which is fine, he tells himself, and less than usual, so isn't that fine? It's wonderful. It ought to be fine. He's fine. Better than fine, he still has John. A bit of celebratory cocaine is...well, it's fine. Afterward he'd read back through the exchange over and over, lying on his back in his dark bedroom with the screen glowing whitely against his pale chest.

Thanks awfully, I'd hate to lose a new friend because I called him a crazy stalker. That's simply not on.

I couldn't even tell you for certain it wasn't true, so I don't blame you. SH

That's big of you. It's just that my life is really dull. You saw.

Severed thumbs are not dull. SH
"I've had more fun in the last two days since god knows when."

This particular text message was the one responsible for the sensation of painfully sharp red and white and purple fireworks exploding in Sherlock's chest like the flaming midnight constellations at New Year's. It occurred briefly to Sherlock that he had never been happy before, if this is what happiness felt like. And he couldn't think of a better word for it, but it struck him as slightly melancholy that he had to reach the age of thirty-four before experiencing the sensation. He then spent five fraught minutes trying to decide whether or not to revise his next message and then decisively pressed SEND.

Are you going to live with me, then? SH

Slow down, there, tiger.

Why? SH

Because you give simultaneously the clearest and most mixed signals of anyone I've ever met, for starters.

Living with me would be eminently practical. SH

It would be nuts, is what it would be. But I'm glad you're not holding a grudge over my saying so.

Holding grudges is impractical when they are against self-interest. SH

I make a fucking amazing lasagna. If I weren't such a complete prick, you'd be enjoying it. I certainly am.

Make it up to me. Tomorrow. SH

Where you like and when you like.

Come to Baker Street at seven. SH

Fine. See you there.

Why did you say you didn't think I was crazy, but you knew you were? SH

Sherlock, go to sleep. Or read Poe or something. Good night.

Reading with any concentration when there were so many text messages to stare at sounded absurd, and so Sherlock had drifted off to sleep as his mobile battery was dying a slow death from overuse.

"Regarding the transaction at hand," Johnson says, pulling Sherlock from his reverie. "Begging your pardon and preferring the topic of true love, you know that to be gospel, may I never breathe another breath in peace if I don't mean that with all due sincerity, giving as I do not a single fuck about business and fascinated as I am by human relations."

"Oh, of course." Sherlock passes him folded bills under the table. They never meet in the same generic cafe twice, so he is discreet without being paranoid.

"It's just that I don't think we ought to be doing business," Johnson says, even as he accepts the money in his fleshy hand.

"Excuse me?"
"It's your brain, and all," Johnson answers him. He coughs, and the sound is wet and thick. "Most of my clients, and my condolences to your sophisticated sensibilities for what I am about to express here, are complete fucks. They are small people who waste their own time and skin and health, meaning them no disrespect, and you, Mr. Holmes, are a man of considerable talents, a man who self-medicates for specific reasons and purposes, and I pray to the lord that you don't have another purveyor of the same materials, if you know what I mean, because your intake doesn't seem to be escalating, but if I thought that it was, and apologies for invading your privacy, I'd disappear, because you are a unique specimen, as I know for a fact from our other many dealings in the London underworld, make no effort to deny it, you are a credit to the race and a force for good, as we both know, and it would be a sodding crime for you to destroy that buggering beautiful brain of yours, all due contrition for the personal nature of the remark."

Sherlock can think of nothing whatsoever to say in response to this, and so he settles on staring, wide-eyed. The harried lunch customers mill past them, lugging heavy leather shoulder bags and paying for salads and prawn sandwiches and hot teas. Attempting to recall the last time he was actually stricken dumb, Sherlock draws another blank.

"That's a weight off my mind," Johnson concludes, passing Sherlock a carton of what appears to be takeaway. "Indulge in good health, Mr. Holmes, and always a pleasure to see you. Enjoy your date. That doctor fellow is one lucky sod."

Sherlock and John don't end up going to dinner at all.

John climbs the steps of 221B at a very brisk pace that evening, an aggressive pace, a hostile stomp really, from what Sherlock can hear of it, and then bangs the parlour door open without knocking. Sherlock, who is finishing checking his website for new cases while he awaits John's arrival, looks up in considerable startlement. The doctor seems to be both baffled and angry. But how could he be angry already? He just arrived, and Sherlock hasn't texted him in hours. That was incredibly difficult, in fact. John ought to be proud of him, not miffed at him.

"Are you, um." John says. Then he stops, shaking his head. He paces in a small circle. "Okay, maybe this is kind of, I dunno. An unfair remark to make when we've only just met each other, following some sort of high-speed foot chase, whatever, and the tackling the murderer bit, which I still can't quite believe happened, by the way. But is it even physically possible to get rid of you if I wanted to? Because since you came along, my existence has taken a serious turn for the crazy, and you need to tell me why I was kidnapped this afternoon."

"Kidnapped?" Sherlock repeats, hopping to his feet with alacrity.

"A black car pulled up, and I was driven to some sort of office facility, and there was this woman who kept messing with her Blackberry, and I was told it had to do with checkups on veterans of foreign wars who had been trusted with sensitive tactical information, and great, that's all true
about the sensitive tactical shite, but see, Sherlock, veterans of foreign wars don't generally get plucked from the street on their way out of a clinic on a perfectly normal Thursday, and then submit to a friendly little interrogation regarding their service record conducted by a mysterious man with an umbrella who looks like he stepped out of the Thatcher administration, and then after being dropped back at their flat, discover after very thoroughly searching the place that their phone is tapped. That is not a fucking--that is not normal. That is bizarre, and disconcerting, and maybe I'm leaping to conclusions here, but I blame you for it, Sherlock Holmes. Your fault. You. So. Do you mind telling--"

"I have a horridly overprotective git for an elder brother," Sherlock replies hastily. "Don't let it affect your opinion of me."

John blinks twice. "Excuse me?"

"I also have a mortal enemy who wants to take my skin and cure it for a coat. Don't let it affect your opinion of me."

Silence descends while John processes this. He shoves his hands in his pockets, swaying. "Okay, you showed me that letter and told me the story and I get that part, it's. Rampantly insane, but clear. It makes sense. No, fuck that, nothing about you makes any sense at all. But are you telling me that simply because I had dinner with you one time, your brother, whoever he is--"

"A twat. By the name of Mycroft Holmes. The umbrella one you mentioned, that was him."

"Let me get this straight. He thought I might be a threat to you for some reason, and figured the best way to settle that question was to tap my phone and abduct me?"

"He's a man with very little perception of the concept of personal boundaries."

"That runs in the family," John remarks, though he sounds less upset now.

Sherlock cocks his head as he peers down at John. And yes, perhaps he is standing a bit too close to the doctor, and yes, it's possible that the gaze he's leveling at John would be too intense for most people, and yes, he can feel the remaining space between them like a physical weight, as if they had been tied together and pressure was being exerted on the line, a rope knotted to their chests and an anchor weighing it down, and yes, that is highly unusual, and now John is smiling a bit, staring open and blue-eyed back at Sherlock as if it's fine to be kidnapped on any given day just so long as a reasonable explanation is forthcoming when asked for.

"People aren't like this," John says thoughtfully. "They don't have overprotective brothers who kidnap and obsessed psychopaths who write repulsive threats."

"What do they have, then?"

"People they like, people they don't like. Co-workers. Friends."

"Sounds tedious."

"It is tedious, actually."

"Am I a person you like or dislike, then?"

"There's no liking or disliking you, I think there's just surviving you," John laughs.

Sherlock wills himself not to wince at this, to maintain his usual air of marble calm, and finds it
rather easier than it should be. Instead, he smiles at the fan of laugh lines framing John's mouth. John reaches up and taps Sherlock in the middle of the chest, just below where his shirt is unbuttoned at the collar. Sherlock feels the touch lance through him, hot and sweet and molten.

"No more kidnapping," John says flatly. "It's rude."

"I'll let him know," Sherlock answers softly. "After I kill him. You're not angry?"

"Nope. It's nice your brother cares about you. I almost took him out at the knees, but, you know. It's fine now. I get why he's concerned."

They fall quiet again. Sherlock has no idea what is happening to him, but just at the moment he wants nothing more in the entire world than to get on his knees and push his face into the blue striped shirt John is wearing and live there forever, just breathing, maybe with John's small hands covering his head as if in blessing. Maybe John wouldn't mind.

Maybe, though, that is not a socially acceptable next move.

John's tongue darts out over his slender lips.

Maybe that would be fine after all.

This is the moment when a banker by the name of Alexander Holder bursts into 221B and starts beating his own head against Sherlock's ornate damask wallpaper in a manner that is terribly alarming. John, who is turning out to be extremely useful, wrestles him into the leather armchair and then suggests a drink and a few minutes of quiet, calm breathing before Holder consults Sherlock on whatever he is there to consult about. Holder sits with a heaving chest, fighting his emotion.

"For the love of god, compose yourself," Sherlock snaps. He is entirely unsure whether he's delighted by this development or disappointed he'll never know what happened next, before Holder's arrival.

"You think I'm insane," Holder gasps.

"Yes."

"Hey, he's probably in some serious trouble here," John points out.

"So much trouble I think I really might be unhinged," Holder whimpers.

"Yes," Sherlock agrees for the second time.

"Cut it out," John says to Sherlock, meaning it. "Look, I'm a doctor, all right, mate? You're just in shock, is all. Sherlock, you have a blanket somewhere?"

"For him?" Sherlock scoffs.

Rolling his eyes, John yanks an afghan off the other chair and puts it around Holder's neck. "This will help with the shaking. Just stay put right here, you're in good hands now, and take a sec to pull yourself together, okay?"

Sighing in impatience, Sherlock throws himself on the sofa. But watching them, John resting his hand lightly against Holder's pudgy wrist as he takes his pulse and then assures him that it's fine, everything's fine, Sherlock becomes aware that he never wants to investigate a case again in the
absence of this very small person with the very large presence.

_Surprising, Sherlock thinks, that someone so small could mean so much so quickly._

Then something still more surprising happens.

Their new client suspects his son of having stolen a priceless antique, but Sherlock quickly discovers the real culprit is a ghastly society type by the name of George Burnwell, a nightclub owner whose debts are as scandalous as the ages of the young women he prefers in bed. They trace Burnwell to one of his racier establishments that night, a fetish club where people of various interesting proclivities engage private rooms for scenes. And Sherlock, upon confronting his man (and inadvertently the sixteen year old girl on her knees before him with the elaborate ropes binding her thin arms to her nude torso), finds himself staring at the business end of the sort of riot control cudgel used by police in third world countries. Whether Burnwell had planned to beat his companion with it is unclear, but Sherlock knows a sadist when he sees one, and the situation reeks of danger to him.

"You're fucking dead, the pair of you, you pieces of shit," Burnwell growls, tucking himself back into his pants. "I own this place. It's completely soundproofed. They'll never so much as hear you two scream."

"I wouldn't," John Watson says calmly.

And he is holding a gun in his hand.

It is a quantum shift in reality. Sherlock feels his mind palace shift as if tectonic plates had moved.

The girl with the complicated bindings shrieks at this point, while Burnwell makes a sharp lunge for Sherlock. It is ill-advised. John suddenly has the barrel of the gun pressed against the club owner's brow in the sort of lightning-fast move Sherlock isn't even entirely clear that he saw at all. And Sherlock is very good at seeing things.

"I have zero issue with shooting you in self-defense or in Sherlock's defense, so you had better back the fuck down before you start to worry me," John growls. "This is not a situation that will end well for you."

Sherlock whips his phone from his pocket and texts the Yard before going to the girl, who is now attempting to make herself invisible in the corner. "It's all right," he says, though he isn't certain that's true quite yet. All that he is certain of is that John Watson is now covering their prey with a deadly weapon held in very steady hands, and that is both marvelous and a bit mind-blowing.

"Are you meant to have that?" Sherlock inquires, glancing back over his shoulder to where John is standing guard.

"Well. I don't know that I'd say yes to that question," John muses, smiling.

"Do you always bring deadly weapons to dinner?"

"I don't see any dinner here," John says mildly. "Um. Do you?"

Sherlock grins as wide as ever he can.

"It was after the kidnapping," John explains. "I put it in my coat when I came over. Not to shoot you, mind. Just. I told you. I'm uncomfortable with kidnapping."
But you're comfortable with sex clubs, guns, and death threats, Sherlock thinks. You are a tiny little god.

After the girl is taken care of, bundled into John's coat until she retrieves her clothing, and after Burnwell is in custody, Sherlock and John walk in the general direction of Baker Street. Night has fallen, and the streets are quiet. The lamps glow hot and yellow like the feeling pressing against Sherlock's chest. It's their third night together in a row, and their third solved case, and Sherlock hopes that there is something magical about that, about the power of trinities and the possibility that John might be induced to stay. He can't stop thinking about earlier, about the gun that John wielded so expertly and the way he said *in Sherlock's defense* like it mattered to him somehow.

"Your cane is gone," Sherlock remarks. The fall wind is ruffling John's hair. Sherlock is desperate to touch it, to feel it smooth and silken under his fingertips, so he settles on conversation with John as the next best distraction.

John laughs lowly. "Erm. Yep. That's true. Not been bothering me much the past few days. Been distracted by an utter madman who keeps texting me at all hours. And you look pretty stupid walking around with a cane you're not using, thus." He waves his hand.

"Do you mind the texting?"

"No. It's just a bit, ha. Relentless. Why are you so interested?"

"Don't be an idiot. Because you're interesting."

"Okay, well, idiot remark aside, no one else thinks that, but I appreciate the thought and it's returned, so. Cheers."

"You don't limp when I'm around because my life is dangerous," Sherlock muses. "Elegant."

"I'm not elegant."

"Yes, you are. Why are you sleeping with your boss?"

John pulls his head back to look at Sherlock, then barks out a laugh with an appalled look on his face. "So. Wildly inappropriate, and true, and what the fuck, Sherlock. First off, how did you know that?"


He thinks of Dr. Sarah Sawyer and her clear eyes, the way they wondered at everything, and thinks of her resting her hand on the small of John's back while he's slowly pushing in and out of her, and feels mildly ill. Sherlock has never been with a woman, mostly because he assumes they consider an erect cock an essential portion of the proceedings and that isn't going to happen, but Sarah's gender isn't the source of his revulsion. Women are never to be entirely trusted, not even the best of them, but he does his utmost to treat them no worse than he treats anyone else. No, the terrible thought, the really awful one, is of both of them naked and John pushing in and pulling out, gentle and eager, and her hand on his back, the small sweet spot above his arse, and John smiling down at her as she moans, and not thinking about Sherlock at all.


Sherlock shrugs up his coat collar and huddles further into it as they walk. "You were apologizing for my unexpected presence at the clinic, and you were trying to placate her, which ordinarily would mean showing extra deference, easy as calling your boss Dr. Sawyer, but you didn't, you
called her Sarah instead, because you thought that was more likely to have a calming effect, which means you're intimate enough for that tack to be effective."

"Amazing," John says. And he sounds entirely sincere.

"She's not good enough for you."

"Sherlock, that's ridiculous, you've spent all of five minutes with her."

"I can tell. You haven't answered my question."

"I--was there a question?"

"Why are you sleeping with her? You aren't in love with her, you didn't look for her reactions when Hatherly was telling his story."

John sighs and rubs at his temples. They continue walking. The night sky is blanketed, so Sherlock cannot see the stars. They are important to him in ways he doesn't understand, but mostly he wants to look up and see them with John at his side, and discover if the experience is any better. He imagines it would be. Small chance of happening anytime soon in London's climate. Still.

"In that case, I'm sleeping with my boss because my boss is nice and she's very pretty and having sex is, um. Fun. Sure, why not? Fun."

"Nice people," Sherlock sneers, voice dripping with disdain. "I loathe nice people. It's just another way of saying dull people. Nine times out of ten, niceness and timidity are conflated into the same thing. Nice people are frightened followers who would rather be miserable than unpopular. They are a waste of air."

"I can kind of see what you mean by that, which by the way scares me shitless, but that's only the first reason. So, because sex is fun. And because I am just a, um, terribly lonely person, so it's good for me."

John is walking with his face averted and his hands in his jacket pockets, but Sherlock is too riveted by this statement to let it pass unexamined. So he waits until John glances back at him, a bit shamefaced and with the same piqued, weary expression he wore when he told Sherlock about the magical imaginary leg pain. It turns his mouth down at the corners. The fact that he's suppressing whatever feelings he might be experiencing, tamping them down with ruthless efficiency, makes the vaguely frustrated look still more painful. Sherlock wonders, if he set his lips over John's, whether that would make any difference. Because he wants to. And he would want it to be for John, not for himself at all, he realizes to his own surprise.

"I didn't mean to lay that on you, sorry," John says.

"It's fine," Sherlock says at once. "And you should know, you're not a nice person. You're a good person. They're different things."

John stops walking. He looks at the pavement, then up at Sherlock, and the expression on his face is unlike anything Sherlock has ever seen before. He seems moved, but not in a significantly altered way--his eyes are simply that much deeper, and his mouth is simply that much more calm, and his face is simply that much kinder.

"That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me," he tells Sherlock.

Then he sees a cab coming down the street and he waves a hand, and miraculously, the cab is free
and it stops and John Watson, MD steps into it. Sherlock understands that he has crossed another line somehow, because John sounds almost shaken, but he doesn't know which line, or in what way, and the sudden departure is downright panic-inducing. Whatever relationship they have is so far based on grotesquely awkward honesty and accidental adventure, and Sherlock knows these must seem tenuous assets at best.

"Don't go," Sherlock says, and his urgency makes him sound as cold and harsh as he ever does.

"I work tomorrow," John says, and it isn't cheerful, and it isn't angry, and Sherlock has no idea whatsoever where he stands.

"You can't afford cabs," Sherlock attempts.

John casts a long, unreadable look over Sherlock's face before shutting the cab door.

The cab drives off.

When Sherlock arrives back at Baker Street, he picks cocaine again, for later of course, he'll only fill the syringe now, he doesn't need it now, after all, of course he doesn't, he doesn't need the drugs at all, they only help, but cocaine is the decision, because despite the pain in his guts, he wants to remember. And then his phone goes ping and Sherlock acts against all sense and sets the sterile needle right down on the coffee table where it could be contaminated, because this is John, and John is the only thing that matters now. Which is sort of a relief, when he is honest with himself.

But it's only his brother Mycroft, who says:

*The doctor has been cleared for cautious interaction, though I would prefer him to have left the tap on his phone and I disallow you to reveal more to him than you already have.* MH

Sherlock’s thumbs fairly fly over the keys.

*Go straight to hell and do not send a postcard.* SH

Staring at his mobile, Sherlock silently wills John to text, because anything Sherlock could possibly say at this point might land him in further trouble. Nothing happens.

Nothing happens for exactly an hour and a half, which Sherlock alternately spends scraping at his fiddle and refreshing the homepage on John's blog.

Nothing happens for an hour longer. By now, it's well and truly past midnight.

Sherlock snarls something incoherent and sends the union jack pillow crashing into his floor lamp.

Upping the cocaine dosage to levels that will actually get Sherlock bloody high is the work of two more minutes. But he has plenty from Shinwell Johnson now, and he can always get more elsewhere if he has to, now that Johnson has imposed rules and decided that Sherlock's brain is...something or other, whatever he said, Sherlock has already deleted that conversation, he can't be expected to keep drivel like that, his brain is his business, and that's what the cocaine and the morphine are for, anyhow, what an idiot Shinwell has turned out to be, they are for Sherlock's brain, because how can people who don't do drugs sit alone on a sofa staring at a damn skull resting under a mirror next to the letter jackknifed to the mantelpiece and endure the fucking loneliness that is raging in his bones how can they stand it how how without cocaine or morphine or gin or cigarettes or heroin or valium or oxy how can they all the people who do endure this sort of thing sober it isn't as if Mrs. Hudson is even here at the moment she's visiting her sister at the
seaside and all right maybe demanding she make him tea downstairs and then grudgingly allowing her to invite him to have a chat at her little table and to sit with him and allowing her to pat his hand like she always does would be something under most circumstances that is true but it would not making a fucking dent this time no not in this empty solitude like a gaping coffin not in this pulling pushing squeezing crushing...

BANG BANG BANG

Sherlock lurches awake with a feeling in his head like he's scraped his brains out with a dull trowel. Light is streaming through his curtains. Those weren't bangs, he suspects, they were only knocks, but fuck if he can tell the difference.

"Ugh," he moans eventually, rolling himself off the sofa.

The knocks come again. They sound like cannon blasts.

Staggering to his feet, Sherlock heads for the door. It is so very, very far away.

BANG BANG BANG.

When Sherlock gets the door open, his first thought--and it is one he thinks with the deepest urgency and conviction--is why the fucking sodding fuck did you just open this fucking door.

John smiles tentatively at him and steps inside. He doesn't look as if he slept at all well. "Hey there. I didn't think you'd mind if I just popped round to say..." He trails off. "God, Sherlock, are you all right?"

Sherlock spends a split second wondering what his voice will sound like and whether he ought to turn John around by the compact shoulders and push him out. It becomes a split second too long when John, who is studying him with grave concern, gets to his left arm and Sherlock recalls he's wearing only a grey t-shirt.

Sherlock winces his eyes shut and then opens them again. John is still there. His face has turned to stone.

"Oh, fuck no," John growls, stepping more fully inside 221B and slamming the door closed behind him.
Chapter 5

Sherlock discovers over the next quarter of an hour as he sits at his experiments table in the kitchen, to his mingled fascination and chagrin, that John Watson knows a tremendous number of swear words. Also that he can alternately mutter them and snap them at nothing without discernible lessening of their severe impact. Also that John's expression when furious differs from his expression when exasperated. When merely annoyed, as Sherlock has already discovered multiple times, John's face looks rumpled and put-upon, but in this instance--which for all Sherlock knows is the last time he'll ever see the man again--John is almost smiling with the power of his anger, his slender lips tilting up as if daring Sherlock to top this mistake, just daring him to, as if he were even capable of a more massive cock-up than this one.

Sherlock is very likely capable of a more massive cock-up, he believes, but he doesn't mention it to the little thundercloud in his kitchen as John boils water in the teapot whilst rifling through the emergency aid kit he dug up from the cupboard in the loo without even asking permission.

Meanwhile, it was stupid, oh how stupid it was it was it was, so very mindless, to even attempt to get as high as you'd used to, Sherlock thinks miserably. Because now his head has been caved in with a tire iron and his bones have developed a fire ant infestation. If he could melt through the floorboards, he imagines he'd take that step and dissolve entirely.

And it's all his own fault, too, for being so careless. Sherlock knows chemistry, he knows he's incapable of getting that high without a crash, he's a bloody scientist, he's supposed to be precise, he adores precision in fact, and he deliberately ignored the likely outcome in favour of a temporary solution to a problem. So what if it had been too quiet? It's always too quiet here.

And John came back after all. But that doesn't matter now.

John will be leaving soon. Probably for good.

John pours steaming water over two tea bags Sherlock can't remember telling him where to find because it probably didn't happen and then taps his fingers against the countertop a few times, sighing. Then he goes back to the part where he snatches up Sherlock's wrist without asking and counts in his head while he glares bloody murder at the second hand of the clock. Sherlock doesn't have to ask him why, not that John has spoken directly to him yet: Sherlock's heart has been racing a hundred meter dash ever since he awoke. It's typical of his crashes and therefore dull. Uncomfortable nevertheless. John doesn't need to worry over it, but the sleuth doesn't dare to attempt the first actual exchange of words on this subject.

He stares despairingly at the picture--it doesn't seem at all real--of his white wrist in John's darker hands, with the tiny puncture wound up on his inner elbow. John cleaned the drop of dried blood away with the hot water and a flannel as the first order of business. Even before the tea preparations. Sherlock isn't remotely certain why.

If John is angry and soon to be gone forever and wants tea, well then, all the more reason he should have tea.

Sherlock studies the small mark himself, curious but expressionless. He doesn't often look at his arm unless he's making direct use of it. He uses a perfectly sharp and new disposable needle every single time, and alternates where he injects it, occasionally even takes a respite from the needles
entirely in favour of pills or powder still more carefully measured, because he once saw a man outside of a nightclub sitting in a cardboard box whose forearm was as full of red-edged craters as the surface of Mars, and one cannot be a consulting detective in such a state. Such a state is...repellent, in any event. Sherlock *isn't like that, he simply isn't like that, he isn't, they are nothing alike, he is a chemist*. So Sherlock is very hygienic. Still. Despite the feathery blue veins and the lack of track marks, it is...disturbing. Countless little healed-over indentations, as if raindrops had fallen on clean white sand.

"You and I," John says after dropping Sherlock's wrist for the third time, "are now going to have a very fucking direct conversation."

Sherlock's heart sinks still further into the ground. John's tone is even, but brooks no argument, in the way that tanks driving along flat desert surfaces with their heavy artillery loaded and ready to blast people to dust are also quite even-keeled. John goes to the mugs of tea and removes the bags, bringing them back to the table. Steam rises in Sherlock's face. It's rather nauseating. John, despite having tea now, doesn't sit down. He stops before Sherlock, taller for once because the detective is seated, and begins his assault.

*Goodbye,* he is going to say, *and good luck,* thinks Sherlock.

"This is a regular thing, I take it."

Leaning back a bit, away from the steam, Sherlock fights the exhaustion and the dread that are urging him to just lock himself in his bedroom in the dark for all time and be done with the rest of it. "That isn't a question," he rasps.

"No," says John, more slowly though no less firm, "it's not, because this is a conversation, I said, Sherlock, and while I'm your doctor at the sodding moment because you clearly need one and I am here, I'm not going to bully your life story out of you any more than I would any other patient."

"Oh, grand, a *doctor* conversation," Sherlock snaps viciously. "How good of you to do pro bono work, not to mention house calls. I've had all my jabs, more than my share in fact as you can see, I'm allergic to penicillin, I don't have a venereal disease, and I'll happily endorse your application to join Doctors Without Borders. Here I thought your interest was, oh I don't know, *idle curiosity.* How rude of me."

"No again, you complete twat," John growls, now sitting on the table and pulling the first aid box nearer. "No, fucking no, Sherlock Holmes. It is not idle bloody curiosity. I don't know what the fuck you want from me, but this is *not idle curiosity,* not after the last few days of whatever the hell this has been. I said doctor and patient because--you know, you're right, fuck that, you don't even understand what the bounds of professional propriety and confidentiality are anyhow, you're like a teenager with his own culture of one, so let's get to brass tacks."

"Must we?"

"Yes. How long has this been going on?"

"Long enough."

"Answer me."

"Why does it matter?"

"Because if you don't agree to talk with me, even if it's just to say you won't or can't answer the question because it's too private, I am at. You know. A loss to say what I'm doing here."
The dark at the edges of Sherlock's fuzzy vision becomes solid black when his eyes fall shut. Then there are starbursts and pinpricks from spectres in his retinas and the blood pulsing in his shivering eyelids and the aching world in his head explodes into a kaleidoscope of red and green and violet. John's warm hand registers again on his left arm, but higher up this time, a warning perhaps, a second before a cotton ball soaked in what smells like iodine passes over his pricked skin. This is ridiculous. This is what weakness looks like, what pity does too, and despite the softness of the touch, maybe even because of it, Sherlock can't remember anything so painful.

This is worse than overdosing. At least overdosing is dangerous instead of pathetic.

"Over ten years, give or take, off and on, presently strictly monitored," Sherlock manages. It emerges as a croak.

"Except for last night, it wasn't," John says, and there is something else there under the steel, something sad.

"Why are you doing this, Doctor?"

"Because it's my job. Why did you start?"

"Why did your brother start drinking?" Sherlock snarls.

He hears another quick, angry sigh being heaved. "Okay, we deal with your magical powers and the fact that completely gobsmacked me later. At least you know...well, at least you can assume that I know something about this. About...self-medication, substance abuse, functioning addiction, recreation, partying, coping, whatever you want to call it. And I don't have a brother."

"Yes, you do. I've seen your phone."

"That makes no sense. And I have a sister named Harry, Sherlock, and a very fucking short fuse right now."

Groaning, Sherlock slumps onto his right hand, elbow propped against the table. He risks a look at John and the business of the moment again. The doctor is taping a little piece of gauze to the wound. It makes Sherlock want to scream it wasn't supposed to be you who covered it, I'd have covered it, Jesus, I never never wanted you to see that, I'd have covered any part of me that was ugly and now it's too late, you're not meant to hide that away, it ought to have been me.

"There's always something. Pretty sight, isn't it," Sherlock whispers.

John darts a glance at him, passing his tongue over his mouth. "It isn't pretty, no. It's not ugly either."

"Of course it is, don't be inane."

"It's a piece of you."

"You don't really believe that."

"Not about my own scars, no."

"That's so illogical as to be completely senseless."

"So is life, in case you hadn't noticed that yet."

Humming, Sherlock closes his eyes again. John's hands are gone now. He's finished, packing up
the medical kit. His hands were a nice distraction, if only for the time being. Sherlock hears John's footsteps leaving and then coming back into the kitchen. He's probably departing now. That's a pity. They would have had a few more days together if not for this, maybe even another adventure, before Moriarty came and the world ended.

"Drink the tea. It's cooled enough now."

"Ugh."

"Drink the fucking tea before I put it down your throat. And use it to take these. And then answer my previous goddamn question."

Sherlock's eyes open and his spine straightens before he can stop himself. John is standing there with a pair of innocuous nonprescription painkiller and fever reducers and an expression that could knock a grown man dead. Scooping the pills from John's hand with long, shaking fingers, Sherlock swallows them dry and then takes a sip of the tea because in for a penny, etc. And if John kills him, at least he probably won't torture him first.

"Talk," John says.

Sherlock clears his throat, as if that's going to make any difference. It doesn't. "I started because my mind is a jet propulsion engine, just building and building and building pressure continually, and without the work, without the mental exultation, it feels as if it's going to explode like a space shuttle strapped to the tarmac after the countdown has ended. People aren't always supplying me with the necessary problems and cryptograms. The work is everything I have. Without it...I hate--"

"Sherlock stops, swallowing hard. He covers the violent wave of rage at his life with a brief coughing fit. "Your next question is about drug safety and needle sharing and yes, I'm always safe, and no, I would never dream of it, that's disgusting. My life is no different than someone who uses sleeping pills or mood-altering anti-depressants."

John sits on the table again, sipping his own tea. "Which are also dangerous, like any controlled substance, and should be regulated by a medical professional. Though that was a great try at rationalization. Unbelievable. You're a classic case, you realize. Okay. I have a very big problem with this, my problem with this is on a global fucking scale, Sherlock, but I'm trying to understand. What substances are we talking about here?"

"Cocaine, almost always. Morphine occasionally."

"Fucking hell, Sherlock," John says through clenched teeth. "Christ, you utter, utter prick. Do you know what you could do to yourself playing with street drugs like this? What happens if the supply is tainted? I just. This blows my fucking mind. Do you chemically test every new batch personally? What if it's laced with something, Sherlock? What if it's stronger than it ought to be and you overdose? What if it's whipped up by some thug in a mobile home who doesn't know what he's doing and you suffer the consequences? As is extremely likely. What if, and bear in mind I don't bring this up with most people, god knows, one of your enemies gets ahold of it and laces it with poison? What if some back alley batch of coke irrevocably affects your brain? Your brain is...I've never seen anything like it, Sherlock, it's extraordinary. Your brain is how you work, it's who you are. It's. How could you possibly risk that, whatever the rush?"

Sherlock laughs, which hurts his throat horridly and forces him to stop. "You sound like my dealer. Or I think you do. I deleted the conversation, but that was the gist of it."

John's eyes turn to blue steel points. "Excuse me?"
"He doesn't like it either." Sherlock glances over at where he sent his floor lamp crashing last night, at where it's still askew on the rug, and realizes that there is more evidence here for John of a wild binge than he had assumed. "My dealer. We work together when I need inside information in certain circles. I only dose myself when I'm lethally bored, but he...he still wants me to stop."

They fall quiet. John drinks tea, and Sherlock drinks tea, and John thinks, while Sherlock remembers the first time. He'd just solved a case, in London, a case he'd badgered the Yard into letting him consult over, because it was marvelous, a locked room and an obscure motive and a thrilling chase, all the wonderful things that mattered most to him. He'd gone back to uni aglow at the solution and his own audacity, feeling at his best and brightest, marched onto the campus, and stared around him at the quiet walks and the tree branches and the other bustling students and the lonesome open sky, and he'd realized that although he'd been in all the city papers that morning, BOY GENIUS DOES IT AGAIN, not a single soul in his courses would either notice, care, or speak of it. They were presently walking past him, pretending he was invisible. He'd smoked two cigarettes, scored a bag of coke from a weedy punk who pretended to be absorbed by medieval studies when he was really absorbed with arcane combinations of hallucinogens, and after that felt a good deal more cheerful.

"You're telling me you don't use when you're working?" John asks quietly. "Ever?"

"Is this the best time to make me repeat myself?" Sherlock sneers. "Or are there more dirty secrets, sorry medical history, that you want from me?"

"Fuck with me right now and I will call nine nine nine and suggest a drugs bust."

"You wouldn't. You'd decimate my career."

John raises his eyebrows. "Watch me. Careers can be rebuilt."

"You are..." Sherlock breathes. He shakes his head. The tea is nearly gone, so he finishes it. It has settled his stomach, if only a little. "I can't get your limits."

John smirks softly. "They're...what was the word you used to describe yourself, the old-fashioned one? Eccentric. I'm eccentric. Answer the question."

"Yes," Sherlock sighs. "I'm saying I don't use when I'm working. Ever."

"So your addiction is psychological rather than chemical."

"It's not an addiction, I've stopped plenty of times. But if by psychological you mean when my brain is tearing itself to pieces, yes."

"And you only fuck with your brain like it's a chemistry set during the down times."

"Brains are chemistry sets, you ought to have learned that in med school if you had one of your own. And I'm an excellent chemist."

"You're also a drug addict."

"That..." Sherlock drops his shoulders and tilts his head back. He pulls in a deep breath. "That I am willing to concede, if it means something to you. Even if it means nothing to me."

John nods. Sherlock starts shivering again. It comes in waves, the feeling of being hollowed out and set afire with currents all at once, and it's getting worse before it gets better. He's done this before, and oh how he loathes himself in this state. A tiny dose of cocaine would help, but...no,
John would clearly object to that procedure. His mind palace is still there, but all the lights are out, the hallways empty and dark, the paintings turned toward the walls, refusing to give him any meaningful input. Where normally the palace is full of light and life, a museum of living memories, ghosts are wailing and scratching at the walls.

"Here," John says. He retrieved Sherlock's dressing gown, apparently. "Come on, up." He pulls Sherlock up by the elbows and before he knows it, the robe is around him, as deftly tugged on as any professional nurse could do and better than most. John pulls the lapels tighter over his shoulders and then slides an arm around Sherlock's waist. "You're for bed. Though I'm not through with this little talk yet. Where's your room?"

"Sofa is fine."

"What did I just say about fucking with me?"

"That way," Sherlock says, fighting a hysterical urge to giggle. "My bedroom is that way."

The progress is slow but efficient. And Sherlock's bedroom, though he uses it but sporadically, isn't far. John switches the light on, glances about, and then yanks the bedcovers down with his free hand. The burning weakness in Sherlock's legs means that he would rather collapse there than collapse on John and humiliate himself further, so he goes without further protest. Anyway, a binge like this will take at least a day to wear off. God, how idiotic. Sherlock is a man of such habitual orderliness that he could physically slap himself. Nothing like this was supposed to happen. Curling up on his side, Sherlock reaches up and runs a hand through his hair. The harmless little pills John carried are starting to make the static between his ears less loud, though he can't stop trembling.

"Next question," Sherlock prompts hoarsely.

John tugs the blanket up over him and then sits on it, smoothing the edge down. He looks terrible, Sherlock realizes once more. As if he spent the night arguing with someone or waiting for a dire phone call or propped in a plastic hospital chair. John breathes in, a calming breath, looking around himself at the periodic table and Sherlock's martial arts certificate. He half smiles upon seeing that, then looks down at Sherlock once more. Sherlock wonders if he understands what it means.

"Earlier, when you were comparing your mind to a jet engine, you were about to say you hate something. You hate what?"

Sherlock nods toward his sitting room, wriggling and freeing his upper body from the covers. He curves his arms up by his head and settles back down. "The dull routine of existence."

"Your life? You've got to be kidding me. The child prodigy detective's life is dull?"

_No, but it's rather a sucking void without the cases to fill it, and then you were there and then gone and you're not to blame for this, I am, only me, but the contrast was extremely unsettling._

"Well, there's the trouble with genius." Sherlock touches the tape on his arm idly beneath the blue silk, wondering how long it would stay on its own if he tried to leave it there forever. "It needs an audience. Why did you come back this morning? You left. I offended you again, and you left. I didn't mean to. I can't understand why you're still here. Why are you doctoring me when you don't even like me?"

John shakes his head at once, strongly. He looks to be struggling with something for a long,
pained moment before he speaks. "Sherlock, this...this sort of thing. The overindulgence, binge, whatever. Is it..."

"I've answered enough questions to get one back in trade," Sherlock hisses.

"I'm trying! Christ, Sherlock. What I'm trying to say is if in any way I...contributed to your...oh, fuck me, there is no way to say this. You're a grown man, so am I, we make our choices, we deal with the results. End of story. I'd never want to patronize you. Or assume a false sense of responsibility. What I came to say this morning is that I think the way I left might have been hurtful, I've been bollocking things at bloody ramming speed lately, and if it was hurtful, I'm sorry. I'm not saying you're fragile. But I'm a complete head case just now. I'm sorry for taking a taxi with no explanation after a moment that was...it was nice, yeah? That was not your fault."

Sherlock peers up in utter bewilderment. John doesn't seem to want to meet his eyes. Then he realizes that he's avoiding eye contact and angles a look down at him. The blue pools are very dark today. The sleuth can barely make out the doctor's pupils.

"You left because I was nice?" he repeats incredulously.

"No, you twit," John retorts. "I cannot believe I have to explain this to you. Look, full disclosure, all right? Cards on the table. I pulled an illegal firearm on a man for you, we can get through this fireside chat, right? So I'm going to be honest right now."

Nodding, Sherlock studies John's face, his uncertain but determined lips and his world-weary eyes. John waits another moment before speaking, but then he plunges in with confidence.

"I told you I was lonely and you told me I was a good person and not a nice one and I jumped in a cab just in time to have a panic attack, not because of you, Sherlock, okay, not because of you, or not because you made a mistake, god it wasn't, it felt amazing, but because I was starting to...to scare myself a little and I ran. It was executed horribly, in the tactical sense. I know that. But if I hadn't left, I'd have crossed a boundary with you."

"I still can't understand," Sherlock urges, voice rattling. "Make more sense. Don't be vague, I can't bear vagaries."

"Fine." John's mouth pulls into a thin, calm line. "Sarah and I aren't exclusive. We don't have any sort of romantic arrangement. You were right, I'm not in love with her--I like her, she's a friend. And I'm properly bisexual, by the way, for what it's worth. But when you asked why I was shagging her if I wasn't in love with her, it. It just wasn't really a question that would necessarily occur to...most people. You know, dull people, nice ones. If people stopped shagging everyone they weren't in love with, the economy would probably collapse. And you also said she wasn't good enough for me, which was complete bollocks by the way. So. I haven't wanted to ask, and I'm not really a labels man. But you're...do you have a good descriptor, one you like?"

Oh.

Sherlock rolls onto his back, covering his face with one unsteady hand.

This is officially the worst day of his life. If Moriarty could top this, Sherlock would have to applaud in sinister appreciation. Because it would take the effort of an evil genius to outdo today for sheer bloody awfulness.

"Hey," John says gently, "come on. It's a compliment, not a threat. You just confuse the shite out of me, Sherlock. You're so...so passionate, its. And the way you move, your body language is
frankly stunning, and I just got my wires crossed a bit, yeah, typical bloke mistake. If you're straight, or not attracted to PTSD-riddled veterans, god knows there's one that wouldn't stagger me, it's fine. I respect that you said coffee means coffee. I do. Hey," he repeats, rubbing at Sherlock's upraised elbow, "nothing is the matter, I was about to apologize for having been ready to snog you senseless if I stood there one more minute and then fleeing, and I--"

"Asexual," Sherlock reports in a dead tone, letting the arm John is touching be softly pulled from his face.

*Kissing John Watson, god, and he wanted to, at the same instant I wanted it more than anything he even wanted me to and I wasn't alone in that after all, me of all people, how do people live through feelings like this when that can never happen because it would mean the end of everything.*

"I discovered the term online at age twenty," Sherlock forces out. "I'm not a virgin, but I don't want to talk about that. Yes, all my various sex acts were consensual. What would your other questions be? Let's follow the general pattern. Have I ever desired intercourse with another person? No. Have I experimented? Yes. Am I sure, really really sure? Yes. When did I last have sex? Seven years ago. Do I masturbate? Yes, very infrequently and when I have no other choice. I hate it, it's like electrocuting myself. Do I dislike being touched in general? No, not more than anyone else does. Am I into horrible sex practices and simply celibate for the good of humanity, no, shall I list the things I'm not inflicting on innocent--"


"It was nice meeting you," Sherlock says, throat tight.

"Will you shut the fuck up and listen to me for a moment? Whatever you've been told by complete tossers, there is nothing wrong with you. Do you hear me? Nothing whatsoever."

"Of course not. Neither is there anything wrong with shooting street drugs. Thank you for the hangover assistance, now if--"

"Sherlock," John says, the command back in his tone. "Are you chucking me out of your flat because you have a very attractive mouth and I noticed on an empty street corner in a moment of revoltingly maudlin self-pity? Because that would be truly daft."

"God, no I'm not chucking you out." Sherlock laughs an ugly little laugh. "My flat is nicer than yours. You ought to live here. It would be...practical. Oh, fuck, please just leave me alone."

John falls silent, but he doesn't let go of Sherlock's wrist. It's nice, like being attached to someone, so Sherlock doesn't object. He instead closes his eyes and pictures star systems in their multitudes, silent cold configurations in the vast void of space, until he feels as if he's probably neither going to hyperventilate nor throw up. All the while, John anchors his wrist, and all the while Sherlock wonders why. It's senseless. He can obviously offer John nothing save chaos and a convenient flatshare that doesn't interest him. His pulse is still far too high, and John has his thumb over it. Possibly counting again. Possibly marveling at the freak.

"You said earlier that genius needs an audience," John says at last. His voice has lost all the hardness of the John from the kitchen. Instead he sounds nearly hopeful. "Is that what you want? Because you've texted me, um, a lot. You have texted me half to death. And I need to know why so I don't make it into something it isn't."

Opening his eyes, Sherlock looks at John half-smiling at him and thinks *I want every particle of*
"So what you want is an audience?" John prompts.

"A colleague," Sherlock whispers.

For a split second, one Sherlock thinks he might have imagined, John looks disappointed. But this is the way it's going to work, if only for a few more days. This is what keeps him safe. This is how the impossible will be made merely improbable--if keeping John means never allowing him to imagine Sherlock might be enough for him, then by god, that is what Sherlock will do. Because a tiny piece of this tiny person is worth any effort in an infinitely large world.

"I think I can manage that," John answers at last, equally low.

The warmth leaves the detective's wrist as John scrunches his eyes shut and he rubs them, yawning. "That sounds. That sounds good, Sherlock. I don't know what you see in me. Or why it requires so many texts. But hell, why don't I find out, I've nothing better on, after all." John smiles as he drops his hand and squeezes Sherlock's wrist once more, lightly.

"I thought you had clinic hours," Sherlock muses, if only to delay departure.

"Rampant lie, that." John shakes his head. "Sorry for all this nonsense. Dreadful, really. Won't happen again."

"Mmm. You're exhausted." Sherlock backs up, pushing himself fully on the other side of his bed. "You can rest here for a while. If you like."

"Er, no," John says, face darkening. "No, I cannot do that." Then his eyes drift to the other side of the room.

"It's not contagious," Sherlock observes icily.

"Sorry, hmm? Oh, god," John exclaims, and then he laughs. A full-throated laugh, too, the sort that is the only defense against absurdity. "Not you. I don't...no, you're not contagious. You're extraordinary, and I. Ha. No. I'm dangerous when I'm sleeping."

"Oh," Sherlock says softly. "I'm dangerous when I'm awake, you said. So it's fine."

John laughs again, and this time there isn't any distress in the sound. Sherlock pictures him in dusty fatigues, skidding down a rill of sand toward a nest of snipers or riding in the back of a Humvee or shouldering a rifle or storming into a shell of a stone building with pieces of mortar blast around his combat boots. He pictures him packing high-tech absorption materials over wounds that will bleed out anyway. It's easy, because this, apart from the text messages, is how Sherlock falls asleep now. He pictures ragged sobbing children running for John and John scooping them into his arms and away from harm. He pictures John under the Afghan stars, only there you can see them for what Sherlock knows them to be, wild swaths of multicolored light.

"I'm not afraid of you," Sherlock states.

John licks his lower lip, exhaling hard.

"Are you afraid of anything?" he inquires.

"No, nothing. Well," Sherlock sighs, "one thing a little, but that's a Pavlovian repetition of a childhood response to threat of pain and death, which is purely animal but ingrained unfortunately
by means of multiple instances, and since I know it's an instinctual lower brain function that formed a regrettable groove in my youth, I can override it."

A smile appears on John's face. He shakes his sandy head in disbelief. It's one of the fondest looks Sherlock has ever seen.

"Are you saying you're only afraid of a psycho killer who wants to torture you to death because you were exposed to him as a child and not an adult?"

"Yes," Sherlock agrees.

"Okay, fuck this, if you can make up self-calming therapeutic bullshit that effective when it's complete crackers, I can too," John says decisively.

He toes off his shoes, leaving them by the side of the bed, and goes into the kitchen for a moment. Sherlock hears a subtle clicking, but nothing further. When John returns, he settles on his back on top of the coverlet at some distance from Sherlock, with his hands peaceably folded over each other. He looks quite harmless, but of course Sherlock knows better.

"What did you do?" Sherlock wonders.

"I broke down my gun," John says calmly, "and then I put a pretty important part of it in the microwave. It doesn't generally get that bad, but. That's. What I did. Yep."

Sherlock stares at the side of John's lined face. His profile is perfect, the tilted-up nose and the small chin. There is a piece of his gun in the microwave. That is better than any fantasy Sherlock could ever have dreamed up during the wildest morphine high.

"Are you still angry with me?"

"Mmm-hmm. Raging."

"Are--"

"No, I don't live here, yes, I'm exhausted, yes, I will punch you in the face if you keep talking. Now, sleep it off."

It takes a few minutes, because Sherlock is watching John's breath, in and out, in and out, and also his eyelashes fluttering and also the way his lips relax ever so slowly out of their set horizontal.

But eventually, his eyes close, and he shudderingly drifts off to sleep.

When Sherlock awakes, the room is dark and John is gone. But upon further investigation, a much steadier and less achy Sherlock Holmes finds a note sitting on his bedside table that reads:

*Why are there horse hooves in the fridge? I'm off to mine, but I ordered takeaway and left you the pho I didn't finish. I think you live off of adrenaline, which is not actually sustainable. Eat the food, drink more fluids, take it easy for once. I actually truthfully work a double shift tomorrow, so don't text me all day long if you can help it. People get miffed when their doctors are thinking about crime and not whooping cough. I'll see you soon. That was a nice rest, actually, so cheers. I don't often sleep that well.*

*Try not to fuck with your brain, please.*

*Your colleague,*
Chapter 6

Sherlock spends the day after he fell asleep with John quietly breathing beside him, which he thinks of as The Day Without John and The Day Sleeping Near John respectively, setting certain plans in motion. But he begins, active and clearheaded and still very fucking annoyed at himself for nearly ruining everything by acting like some reckless self-loathing teenager drunk on the Wagnerian fumes of his personal loneliness, isolation, and melodrama, with a text.

*How many texts qualify as texting you all day? SH*

He then puts the pho in the microwave, not because he really requires the food to be hot but because a piece of John's gun resided there the day before and thus he is now terribly fond of this particular kitchen device. It is officially his favourite. When it dings, and he pulls out a soup spoon as the aromas of beef and cilantro fill the air, he receives a reply.

*My god, you are barking. I have no idea what to do with you. Um, twenty. You are limited to twenty including the one you just sent.*

Frowning, Sherlock carries the soup to the dining table in the sitting room and then runs downstairs for his newspapers. Twenty texts—nineteen, rather—is a ludicrously low figure. John cannot possibly expect him to follow these insane instructions. Moriarty is coming for him in three more days, for god's sake. Sherlock might simply be forced to appear outside the clinic whenever John is finished. Yes, that would be best, in all likelihood. That would be the surest way to see him.

Sherlock sighs and taps out a note to Shinwell Johnson.

*Beginning on Monday, I am going to text you daily the phrase Vatican Cameos. Should I ever fail to do so, please set the homeless network in search of me, at triple the usual scale for both them and yourself. SH*

The soup is, surprisingly, extremely satisfying. But that might be because Sherlock can't actually remember when he ate last. He hears back from Johnson in a matter of minutes.

*Ten four, sir, instructions shall be followed to the letter, with my assurances of full support during this unfortunate time in your life, with apologies for bringing up such a delicate subject.*

Rolling his eyes, Sherlock heads for the unused upstairs bedroom and drags out the plastic box containing all of his collected mad correspondence from Jim Moriarty. He is going to read through it all again, and not be afraid, no matter how brutal the quality of the rage emanating from the pages. He is going to meticulously follow the insane logic and vile execrations, in order of receipt, because he has nothing to fear from letters, *he has nothing to fear from mere letter, they are only pieces of goddamn paper,* and nothing will escape his razor sharp focus and diligent attention, because he might have missed something, and it would be intellectually lazy to ignore them today even if for reasons he doesn't want to admit to himself, he has been putting off this project for weeks now. Moriarty cannot reach through letters and hurt him, and it is extremely stupid to avoid inanimate objects, and Sherlock is a genius.

Sherlock spreads all of the hundreds of letters out on his carpet in chronological order.

By the time he has read the first three of them, written when Moriarty was only a little boy, it feels like he is having a heart attack.

He goes to the window and leans against it, opening the sash and then reaching with trembling
hands for a cigarette from the pack in the Persian slipper. The smoke floods his lungs and he begins to remember how to breathe again without closing his eyes and seeing:

_It would be a properly brilliant lark to cut off your eyelids, and don't worry my darling, I'd lay in plenty of stock of eyedrops for you, but I don't want you ever to look away from my face for the rest of what is going to be a beautiful, sparkling life together. Too many people close their eyes during really fucking fantastic sex._

"Stop being frightened, it's ugly and common," Sherlock says aloud to himself before reaching for his phone.

**What time are you through with boring diseases? SH**

The cigarette, Sherlock thinks, was a very good idea. It burns in his lungs beautifully. A bit of morphine would also be a very good idea. Or he has Valium in his bedroom. Valium, he decides, will be best. Valium is for calm, it's for just this sort of situation, when he need to stretch his mind out smooth and clean and slow and clear like his best violin compositions. Valium will solve everything. He goes to fetch it and fills a glass of water from the tap. John told him to drink more fluids. It can't hurt, after all. His mobile pings.

**God, not until midnight, I'll see you tomorrow.**

Growling audibly, Sherlock shakes out three Valium instead of two and downs them.

*I need you, I have a case. And it would take you half the time to get here, so you could sleep here if you like. I don't mind. SH*

The cigarette Sherlock set on the counter returns to his lips automatically, though he is no longer enjoying it quite so much. The pills are producing a queasy sensation, but that's fine, that will pass. And then he can look at the letters again without losing his mind or having a heart episode. Staring evil in the face is much easier after a certain type of high has been achieved.

**Sherlock, you are the single most confusing person it has ever been my pleasure to know. I will see you tomorrow.**

Pouring another glass of water, Sherlock swallows it down. Tomorrow. That is much too long. Tomorrow. Fine, he can manage. Fine. He is fine. No. No, he isn't. No, tomorrow, he thinks, is unacceptable. And the Valium needs to work faster.

**What's confusing? It's about efficiency. SH**

*I would swear half the time that you're flirting with me, though I promise I know better. And that's confusing. I am merely less tied to what I deem impractical societal codes than you are. Societal codes that make no sense are for idiots. SH*

Sherlock would feel a bit guilty about lying to John in this manner were not the sentiment completely true. He hates forms and courtesies and procedures and rules that make no sense and he always has done. The fact that he also wants to crawl into John's arms and never never never leave them needn't be discussed. Need it? That would only create false expectations.

**You are actually correct on that point.**

*I know I am. SH*
You're also using up your allotted texts bloody fast. :)

Taking a very deep breath, and then a very deep drag, Sherlock sets the phone down and heads for the sitting room to read the sodding letters. This time, with the Valium spreading like warm honey through his veins and his thoughts acquiring a slow, methodical, late summerish drag, is a little bit easier. He manages for a period of an hour to examine every document for clues, although he doesn't have the slightest idea of what he is actually searching for. Or even what it's possible to find in the first place. Then he reaches a missive from the nineties regarding the torture techniques of the Viet Cong and feels like walking into the Thames and being done with it for good and all. The Valium whispers to him that lying to John might be fine, even necessary, but a bit of truth might be even better. So he straps his dressing gown tighter and goes back to his mobile in the kitchen.

I'm going through the letters he sends. He'll be out in three days. It's challenging. SH

This time, there is hardly a delay in John's response.

I bet. Are you OK? Listen, you have a truly creepy brother and probably a lot of friends at the Yard and now a colleague. You'll get through this.

Sherlock swallows. He brushes his thumb lightly over the screen. His heart hurts in ways he didn't think were humanly possible.

It's admittedly been rather burdensome. SH

Yeah, I should fucking well say so.

One likes a worthy adversary, especially a determined one, but something about this is different. I don't know why. SH

Maybe because the bastard has been mucking with your mind since you were bleeding ten years old. Jesus, Sherlock. It's okay to be a normal human about it.

I am not a normal human. SH

You can say that again, but I'd worry for your sanity if you weren't affected by this.

You don't think it's cowardly? SH

Being cowardly is letting the fear stop you, letting it own you, not fighting back against the fear. Now I get to call you an idiot.

I don't even fear death in particular, but the situation remains uncomfortable. SH

OF COURSE it does. Sherlock, you are NOT a coward, OK?

That's reassuring. I trust your opinion. SH

You have every reason to trust me on this one, I know what cowards look like. I killed terrorists.

Really? You were a doctor. SH

I had bad days.

How many terrorists? Was it in battle? When? SH
Sherlock, I have to go, have a cuppa and we'll talk about it later, yeah?

Am I truly confined to twenty texts? SH

Sherlock sits on the floor next to the letters. Then he collapses with his phone on his chest, lightheaded and a bit woozy from the Valium, and just breathes, hoping.

I don't know how to stop you, so no. :) Look, I have patients. One of whom has a really nasty broken arm. Calm down, okay? You're going to be fine.

It's oh so very tempting to simply close his eyes and follow the sensation of floating and think about nothing save John. Ever again. Think about the way his hair ruffles in the wind, or about how his tongue appears so constantly, about what that tongue would taste like. What other parts of John would taste like, which Sherlock is beginning to suspect he wouldn't mind finding out. He is a scientist, and he's painfully aware he's never had sex with a person he actually liked before, let alone worshipped. And he likes being touched, if it's gentle. Not that anyone ever touches him, of course, except for Mrs. Hudson. But there is work to be done. So he sits up again, scrubs his fingers through his curls, and is about to get back to it when a second text arrives.

I want you to know, that last sentence? That's a promise.

The following day, when John arrives at Baker Street, Sherlock has spread the letters about on various surfaces. They're yellowing with age, some of them, some are handwritten and some typewritten, and they are covering every surface of 221, apartment B. Sherlock loathes them. But they are all he has to go on. So they are important.

He'd spent the previous day desperately trying to get through them all before the Valium wore off, because John told him not to mess with his brain, and he wants to obey this order to the best of his limited ability. Once he'd achieved that goal, he'd fielded a phone call from DI Dimmock about a housebreaking case of intriguing and unusual violence, and had spent the better part of the night racing about collecting evidence. An army colonel by the name of Barclay had suffered a bashed-in head, a look of utter horror lingering on his face, and to Sherlock's endless delight, there had been markings of a mysterious animal running amok throughout the room, in addition to clear footmarks of a second intruder who absconded with the room key for unknown reasons. Sherlock had made certain to involve John as much as possible, first by taking a picture on his mobile of the footmarks, which had five well-marked footpads, indications of long nails, and were about the size of a dessert spoon.

What do you make of that? SH

It's prints from a dog?

Dogs can't run up curtains. This did. SH

A monkey?

That isn't the print of a monkey. SH
Sherlock, where are you and what is going on?

Murder investigation, of an army veteran no less. You should be here. The animal is about 15 inches long, and carnivorous. SH

Why carnivorous?

It was after the canary cage. The intruder carried the key away when he left. I love locked room mysteries, they're better than Christmas. SH

You're like a kid in a candy store right now. Jesus.

The only superior type of case is serial killers. I also love serial killers. SH

I am just going to really hope you phrased that poorly. I have to go. Car accident victim.

This is more interesting. Meet me after. SH

Sherlock, I WILL SEE YOU TOMORROW.

Tonight is preferable. SH

I'm turning off my phone. Thank you for the picture of the weasely thingy's tracks. Goodnight.

And so Sherlock had completed the case on his own, and returned to Baker Street, and skipped the cocaine because the Valium would certainly have been what John would consider enough for one day, and gone to bed. In his actual bed, because John had so recently occupied the same space. If he thinks hard enough about it, he can even feel as if John's hand is lightly circling his wrist.

When John arrives, there is a spring in his step. He comes into the room with a pair of what Sherlock recognizes as Speedy's tea carryout cups and hands one over to Sherlock with a little nod. He's wearing a brick-coloured striped button-up that makes his eyes more vividly blue.

"Thank you," Sherlock says, a bit surprised by the tea.

"Holy Christ," John says, stunned by the letters.

They do change the atmosphere of the room somewhat. And most of the screeds are neatly typed or penned, but several feature highly questionable illustrations as means of explaining archaic instruments of pain. Sherlock rather too clearly remembers receiving the one about the iron maiden. He hadn't previously been acquainted with the device. And they also impede travel through the sitting room. John carefully walks through the path Sherlock made and pushes a small pile across the sofa so he can sit down. Picking one up, he begins to read it. Then, wincing a little, he turns it upside-down and drops it disdainfully on the floor.

"We are going to get this fucker," he announces.

"God I hope so," Sherlock agrees.

He pushes the pile of threatening missives still further over and sits next to John on the sofa. Of necessity, they're very very very close together. Crossing his black-trousered legs, Sherlock spreads his arms over the back, balancing the tea on the edge. John is sitting a bit forward, with his elbows on his thighs. If he leaned back, he'd be tucked right up under Sherlock's neck. He isn't going to, of course. But it's nice to think about.

"What happened to you when you were sleeping?" Sherlock asks. "It must have been something.
Sleeping with a person is the only thing I've seen you fear. You're not squeamish about guns, or killers, or externalized dangers. You're only frightened of the internal ones. Oh. It was something you did, not something that happened to you at all. What was it?"

John turns, eyebrows raised, and tugs a knee up on the sofa seat. It's pressed directly against Sherlock's leg. It's one of the more marvelous events in the history of recorded time.

"That was, um. Apt. And incredibly invasive."

"So was demanding to know my drug history and everything about my complete lack of sex life."

"I needed to know about both of those things. It's better than you completely mystifying me."

"I don't know that you're correct about that."

"You need to get it in your thick head that your lack of sex life is not an issue for me."

"It has been something of an issue for me."

"Yeah, I get that. John drops his hand momentarily to Sherlock's knee before pulling it away again. "And I kind of want to punch those people. Whoever they were. Okay. Yes, what happened."

He stops. Sherlock waits, sipping tea.

"Yes," John begins again. His eyes have turned stony, and it's breathtaking. "What happened, um, was that I was shot. In the shoulder. And. It was infected pretty badly. And I developed enteric fever, as I told you on the first occasion you sent me a million and a half text messages. So, I was invalided to a base hospital at Peshawar. I was recovering, actually. Funny enough. I remember this veranda I used to sit on, and it being just, outrageously warm but much calmer there, and the way the breeze blew in, and Peshawar is actually this amazing city, it's in a valley, super diverse. The local food there, don't get me started, even on a base hospital it was to die for, they can send you to heaven with like, mere lentils, and I thought, yeah, this is going to be okay. It's all going to be okay. It was high summer in Pakistan and I hurt like hell but it was getting actually more bearable, more like I didn't want to scream every time I moved my arm. And that's when I caught the enteric fever. Fuck my luck, right?"

Sherlock nods. He doesn't seem to be expected to do anything else, though. So he remains silent.

"And then, I was just. I was gone, Sherlock. The fever, I had no idea who I even was anymore. I don't remember much of it, actually. But there was this nurse there. Helen. She was American, from the South I'm pretty sure, and she was lovely. One of those people you can say anything to. I liked her, I talked with her all the time about her family and my family and life in our respective, whatever, previous lives. And she was dealing with shit with me that, this fever was ravaging and I mean I was completely helpless in every way and she along with the staff doctors got me through it, you know? And I was having a nightmare one night, dreaming about an insurgent coming up on the Fifth. And I was a captain, you know, these guys were my life. They were just. Yeah. My whole life. So all I remember was getting my hands on this bastard's throat without firing and giving away our location, that was important for some reason, that I not use the gun, that it be silent. And then later, when the fever had broken and I wasn't delirious, I saw a handprint in pretty fucking impressive bruising on Helen's neck in the exact size of my hand, and I didn't even have to ask, I just knew. I knew what had happened. I'd tried to kill her."

Sherlock ceases breathing for a moment. For this man, this perfect man, to have done such a thing--
it would have been completely devastating. He doesn't need to read it in John's cold, revolted
expression or in the set of his shoulders or in the ache shining through his eyes. If he'd been told
the story by someone else, he'd know it all logically. This is the worst thing that could possibly
have happened to a very good man.

John stares back at Sherlock with a challenging expression.

"She lived," Sherlock says.

"Yep. No thanks to me."

"She didn't blame you."

"No, she didn't. And believe me, that was worse."

"You wanted to be punished for something you didn't know you were doing?"

"Not exactly. I sure as fuck wanted to be blamed for it, though."

"She didn't blame you because you weren't to blame."

"Yeah, it was someone else who tried to crush her trachea," John snaps.

"You thought you were defending yourself."

"Well, I made a mistake there, didn't I."

"You still have nightmares," Sherlock surmises.

John sighs and puts his tea on the floor. "Yeah. I do."

"You're afraid to trust the evidence of your own senses when in that state because anything could
be real or not real, an actual threat or only a perceived threat, and you could harm someone
innocent."

"Got it in one," John says mock cheerily.

He leans back against the sofa as if he's too disgusted to be expected to sit upright any longer, too
hurt and too weary of it all, which plants his dark blond head directly on Sherlock's arm. The
detective's blood pressure takes an immediate turn for the perilous. John doesn't seem to care that
he's using Sherlock for a pillow, however. Or to notice the effect he's having.

"It's probably why I can't really get anywhere with Sarah," he says quietly. His eyes close. "I never
stay over. I never will. It's never going to go beyond casual shagging. This is how my life works
now. I guess I'm done with meaningful relations with other humans."

"You slept fine the other day," Sherlock says, equally quiet.

John's eyes open again, and he rolls his head toward Sherlock's face. "Yeah. That was weird. But I
appear to have this almost unnaturally strong urge to protect you that came out of absolutely bloody
nowhere, so. Dunno. It didn't feel as risky. Also, you're kind of way, way bigger than me. Not that
I couldn't still kill you, I could easily kill you, but. When I saw your martial arts certificate, I felt
better."

Sherlock is trying to think of a sane-sounding way to say you can live here and sleep with me and
maybe even curl up against my chest, not that I'm romantically interested in you, that's not it at all,
well it is, but that discussion is off limits, but is it possible to propose intelligently that you only ever sleep again with your hand around my wrist when there's a ring at the door downstairs. John's head lifts--completely unhurriedly--as he sits up again.

It's just as well, thinks Sherlock, trotting down his seventeen stairs and receiving a package at the door and signing for it, that was interrupted. It was unspeakably dangerous. When he returns, John is binning his cup in the kitchen, staring dubiously into the other contents of the rubbish container. Seeming satisfied there are no biohazards there, he straightens up again. He looks, surprisingly, much calmer. Happier, even.

"What's this?" he asks.

Sherlock reaches for the scissors and sets the package on the table. When he gets the cardboard open, he finds an industrial strength plastic bag. When he opens the bag, a strong aroma of organic decay wafts out. And when he sees that its contents are a human head in an advanced state of decomposition, it suddenly goes very calm and very quiet inside his brain.

"Oh my fucking god," John says, staring over his shoulder.

Sherlock pulls out a letter which has been sealed in another plastic bag. They read it simultaneously.

Dearest Sherlock,

I thought I'd send you a little present, since we'll be seeing each other so soon. Call me a hopeless romantic, but it's what brought you to me! Carl Powers's head! I had it exhumed for you. I thought it was the least I could do to send you a little token. You never write me back, you see, and it occurred to me that I ought to have given you a gift when I introduced myself. So here you go! Now you MUST write me back. I know you'd never ignore decorum so far as to fail to send a thank you card.

You're going to look so pretty in an iron collar.

Love,

Jim

Sherlock swallows.

"Okay, no." John is pacing, running his hand over his neck. "Just no. Fuck no. I can take a lot, but not this. This I will not be taking. No. This is the last straw."

John gets his green coat, shrugs into it, and leaves, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sherlock goes to the window and twitches the curtain back. John is walking away from Baker Street very fast, without a trace of a limp. The sky is overcast today, but his pale hair still shines at a distance. He is soon lost to traffic. He went in the direction of the underground station down the street.

So that is that, then.

It's understandable. There's a human head involved now.

Really, he would have to be out of his mind to have stayed.
Sherlock isn't surprised in the slightest.

Oh, how it aches, though.

"Goodbye, John," Sherlock whispers as he closes the curtain again.

Sherlock is planning out a genuinely massive dose of morphine when he realizes he should examine the head for clues. So he lays plastic over his experiments table and sets to it. He hasn't the slightest doubt it is truly Carl Powers's head. And he doesn't know what he's looking for, but he completes a very thorough examination of the yellowed teeth and the bones and the few faint indications of flesh still remaining. It's too old to smell as bad as it could, but the scent is still extremely distinctive. Fortunately, Sherlock works with cadavers constantly. So he spends well over two hours on the head before taking a picture of it with his phone and sending it to Mycroft along with a scan of the letter. After about ten minutes, Mycroft responds.

*Tampering with the grave confirmed. This man is beginning to try my patience. MH*

This, Sherlock thinks, is one of his brother's better understatements. So he fails to insult him in response. He merely smiles grimly.

*Would you like it? SH*

*I'll send someone round. MH*

Going about cleaning up after the head takes another half hour, and tidying away the Moriarty letters because he cannot bear to look at them any longer takes twenty minutes since he is careful to stack them in chronological order, and by then Sherlock is merely dully numb over the events of the day rather than sharply agonized. It isn't much of an improvement. Setting the letters on his desk and returning to the kitchen to get rid of the plastic, he wraps it in on itself and shoves it on top of John's discarded takeaway cup.

The cup, oddly, is what makes him feel like he's finally falling to pieces. That is decidedly not part of the plan, however, so he simply discards the plastic and heads for his collection of illegal substances.

Then Sherlock hears footsteps on the stairs and glances behind himself, a bit spooked. He has no reason to be frightened yet, he reminds himself, but of course that isn't John, the tread is much heavier, and it isn't Mrs. Hudson. So Sherlock goes to his small supply of kitchen knives and closes his hand around one of them.

The visitor, whoever it is, doesn't bother with knocking. The door flies open.

John sets a large and heavy-seeming military-style duffel bag on the floor. He clenches his left hand a few times and glances around himself. Then he removes his coat and hangs it on the peg. As a final touch, he toes off his shoes with a satisfied sound.

"Sorry, the tube was a nightmare. How's the head?" He sniffs and then wrinkles his nose. "Still here then, right. Suppose you had to examine it. Listen, I'm starving, do you want Chinese or Indian or what? I know better than to think that you ate in my absence. And where's this spare bedroom of mine, then?"
Chapter 7

For a moment, Sherlock can do absolutely nothing save blink. Then he sets the kitchen knife down. It seems rather rude to be brandishing it at John.

"You're back," says Sherlock.

Yes. He's back. Are you or are you not a genius? Why must you state the obvious every bloody time he--

"Yeah, well, I was uncomfortable with the letters," John says, rubbing his hands together as he comes into the kitchen, "and I know we haven't been acquainted for very long but, you know, no one should have to go through that. It got my hackles up. But, um, a head. That's just. We are done with this son of a bitch. And I realized, if I were you, and I'd been dealing with this shite for practically my entire life, I wouldn't want to sleep alone in this flat either right about now, and that's what that was all about, and...yeah, sorry for reading something else into it, but your instincts for self-preservation are pretty spot on the money, asking someone to move in, even if that someone is a bit slow on the uptake as to your motives and was being an unnaturally wary berk about the whole thing. Not that you weren't right about this being closer to the clinic and my flat being so depressing you want to test the oven by putting your head in it. I'm not accusing you of completely selfish motives or anything, I really believe it started as a nice thought, something you could do for me, just the urgency you were broadcasting on the subject was. Um. I get it now, okay? So. Right, you have a live-in colleague for the moment."

It is a very curious thing, Sherlock thinks as a dizzy sensation overtakes him, that he never imagined this development would actually take place. Even though he was fighting for it, hinting at it, coaxing toward it, longing for it, telling himself that it would be highly improper to beg for it, he never allowed himself to actually imagine success. He has pictured John Watson on vast plains of infinite-seeming sand, inside dawn bunkers and twilight hospital wards, at medical school during the noon rush for the dining hall with fewer lines on his face and less depth in his navy blue eyes. Hours have been spent at this single activity, ever since they met. But he had never once allowed himself to imagine John in the sitting room reading the newspaper with the down-slanting afternoon light heightening the contrasts of his remarkable face. He never pictured John in the kitchen, laughing at a private joke they share as he stirs a curry and opens a second bottle of wine. He never imagined running into him in the hall just after a shower, John's face pink and wet hair standing up like a punk rock star, with a single drop of water tracking its way down his temple.

Dwelling on these things, Sherlock knew, would have been much too much for him before--

"You're staying?"

Sherlock doesn't bother to hide his enthusiasm for this plan.

"I kind of think it was either that option or worry myself to death every time you stopped texting for more than ten minutes at a stretch, and that's not really, er, convenient to my lifestyle." Going to the cupboard, John pulls down a glass and fills it with water from the tap, taking a sip.

It's as if he's lived here for years. As if he was made to live here. It's like the other flat, where he was alone, was slowly draining the life force out of him, and here, it's like recharging a battery. It's beautiful. It's completely unexpected. I never anticipated he'd look like this here, now that he knows he needn't leave, so much brighter than he was across the river and far away.
A new and rather less agreeable thought occurs to Sherlock. The thought is new because he hadn't ever expected to be successful in this enterprise. But now that he has won, there is a serious problem. He debates voicing it and then realizes he would never forgive himself if something went wrong and John hadn't been warned. So Sherlock hops up on the countertop to sit, leaning on his palms.

"This could be dangerous," Sherlock says gravely.

John walks over with his water, a grin that says *game on* plastered over his face. "And here I am."

"No, I mean very dangerous."

"I like dangerous. Remember? You're the one said I was terrified of calm."

"There's calm, and then there's standing in the way of an oncoming train."

"We'll just have to duck and let it pass over us, then."

"You could get hurt due to your association with me."

"But I probably won't."

"But you might."

"Probably won't, though."

"You're a capable and experienced army doctor, I grant, but you're not bulletproof, by your own account. You might get hurt."

"Well, I've been hurt before. And I'm still around. A bit wonky, yeah, I'll admit, but present and accounted for."

"Moriarty means business."

"Yep, he pretty much convinced me of that with the severed head and all."

"I don't want anything terrible to happen to you."

"Ah, cheers, mate. Mutual feeling."

"You're not taking this seriously."

John sets the water glass down and puts both his small hands on Sherlock's knees, leaning in close. Sherlock can smell him, the clean desert dunes and Irish Breakfast and warm cotton aroma he has come to identify as *John.* It makes Sherlock's mouth water. If he only knew what John tasted like just at the nape of his neck--

"Sherlock," John says, "look into my eyes. You have completely lost the plot if you think I am going to waltz back out of here simply because you informed me that danger might be involved. I saw the head, Sherlock. I...seriously, are you taking the piss? I'm an adult male of sound mind and body. I think I figured out that the tosser who send you a bit of the corpse he murdered and you imprisoned him over might be dangerous."

"And you're still staying?" Sherlock asks softly. Louder would be impolite, as John is inches from his face.
"If you'll have me, I'm staying. Until this whole business is sorted, at least."

"Then you really are an idiot."

John laughs appreciatively, completely unaffected. The motion sends his brow forward and just for a moment, their foreheads touch. Sherlock swiftly archives every sensory input he can gather from the experience, converting neural signals at light speed into permanently recorded files, the shadows in John's hair and the ticking of the clock and the distant hum of a sanitation truck and the faint aroma of severed head and the sweet softness of the skin just above John's eyebrows, and tucks it in his mind palace in a carved ebony box under the bed in the master bedroom, where all the few loveliest moments of his life reside.

"Still starving." John breaks away and finishes his water. "I'm calling for Chinese, yeah? Where are your takeaway menus?"

Leaning, Sherlock pulls a drawer open. "You can always tell the best Chinese from the bottom third of their door handle."

"I'm not even going to pretend to know what that means." John takes the folded paper menu from Sherlock and peruses it. "Hungry?"

Sherlock shakes his head.

"You're eating. You looked too skinny but still fit when I met you four days ago, now between the stress and the fucking street drugs you look like a ringwraith. What's your fancy?"

"What's a ringwraith?"

"Did you really just ask me that question?"

Sherlock glares.

"Right, then, movie night with the new flatmate. No problem. Ooh, they have real Szechuan things on this menu. They must have a really great door handle. Do you like smoked duck?"

"Yes, but--"

"Good, you're having it for tea."

John whips out his mobile and requests three-pepper chicken, tea-smoked duck, fried string beans, and a side of pork dumplings. Sherlock has no idea who is going to eat all of this. But watching John order delivery and smile so that his voice sounds pleasant over the phone to the girl-with-her-hair-in-black-braids Sherlock knows is at the counter, and then hearing him say "Two two one Baker Street, flat B, please," is almost as satisfying as solving a case. One of the quicker ones. A better than average robbery, perhaps. Still. That is very satisfying.

"Right," John says, hanging up the phone and returning it to his pocket. "How about a tour?"

Sherlock slides back to the ground. He walks through the hallway, not pausing at his bedroom though the door is open. John has seen his bedroom, and under unusual circumstances. He opens the door to the loo, however, and they look inside.

"The water is scalding at first, fair warning," says Sherlock.

"See?" John smirks. "Danger already averted."
Quirking a smile, Sherlock trots up the stairs to the spare bedroom. Opening the door, he feels John crowding behind him and...oh.

Well, it isn't as if he was warned John was moving in, after all.

"This..." John clears his throat. "This could be very nice temporarily."

The boxes stacked in the corners mostly consist of reference volumes Sherlock hasn't needed in ages but might one day, though they are also filled with the textbooks from his eccentric courses at uni, because he hand-picked his education, after all, according to what he deemed most necessary. Then there are the boxes which contain all the documents related to Sherlock's solved (and a few infuriatingly unsolved) cases. And since Sherlock has been working with the Yard as well as on commission for quite some time, those particular boxes do admittedly take up quite a bit of space. Sherlock wonders whether it would be impressive to show John the myriad wonderful cases he's already solved, the one with Ricoletti of the club foot perhaps, or the time he almost had his left canine knocked out by Matthews the Lambeth strangler in the middle of Charing Cross station, but decides it might prove better in the long run, supposing there is a long run, to be coy on this subject. There is already a lot for John to take in as regards this room. What with the full-size model skeleton and the bear rug with the growling head Mrs. Hudson wouldn't let him keep in the parlour and the imposing bust of Eugène François Vidocq.

All covered by two years, three months, and eight days' worth of dust, of course, that being the date when Sherlock moved in. Alone. He hadn't wanted Mycroft and he hadn't wanted movers, so he'd carried the whole bloody lot of it upstairs himself after sending it through the post on his brother's expense account. That had led to an interesting series of text messages, Sherlock recalls.

Sherlock walks to the window and pulls up the blind, instantly regretting it. The chamber only looks smaller and dustier.

"Were you planning on keeping me in a room with an angry bear?" John wonders, taking in his surroundings.

Sherlock sniffs. "He isn't angry. He's triumphant. And I didn't exactly have advance notice that you were beginning to be taken with the idea of living here. Heads aren't deciding positive factors for most of my acquaintances."

"No," John agrees. "Well, if you have a blanket, I can kip on the sofa. I don't mind, I'm an old campaigner. But depending on how long this Moriarty business is going to take, it might do to put, I don't know, a bed in here. Maybe a bureau. I need furnishings anyway for when I get my own place, so it isn't as if it's a bad thing for me to start collecting now."

Of course, yes, naturally he'll be leaving when Moriarty is caught, if Moriarty is caught, Sherlock realizes, refusing to be stung. This is better than you hoped for. Don't let yourself ruin it, thinking of the future. Anyway, you probably won't have to deal with much of the future, and this is a magical way for it all to end, isn't it? It is.

"What about the furniture at your flat?"

"Oh, that was a government-furbished patch of hell. Think of it like a subsidized halfway house for wounded brownjobs. Somebody other than me needs it now, the poor sod, lord knows there are enough of us, and I emailed the administrator before I left. I never want to see that place again. Everything I own is downstairs."

At the thought of both John Watson and everything the man owns being in the Baker Street flat,
Sherlock turns his back as if to admire the view outside, fairly certain that he is glowing like a surface to air missile impacting. Which might put John off. "I sleep on the sofa all the time. You can use my room if you'd rather."

"We haven't even talked about what I can afford to pay you, I'm not kicking you out of your own bedroom, you nit."

"Or I could stay in it as well." Sherlock shrugs, staring out the window at the London plane tree in the rear yard, which has begun to change to a brilliant yellow colour. "We already know you don't have a problem sleeping near me."

"Yes, of course, I should have thought of that myself, that couldn't possibly throw a spanner in the works, why don't I sleep next to the tall, dark, and handsome genius boy wonder consulting detective with the voice like three hundred quid scotch who I already mentioned I've decided not to fancy because he isn't interested? Tease."

A black rage rises in Sherlock's chest without any warning whatsoever.

"I am not a tease," he snaps without turning away from the window. "Though I have been called one on exactly thirty-nine occasions, none of which were any more truthful than the others. Of all the many scientifically accurate terms you could employ, including but not limited to freak, which is a favourite of some of my Yard associates, I am not a tease."

Though the first occasion, two weeks after accidentally rejecting Reggie, was it two weeks, I tried to delete it but it wouldn't scrub off my brain, anyhow that was decidedly the worst, when Reg took it upon himself at my family's garden party to spread that specific word amongst our entire social circle, because apparently Reg had confided his feelings to one or two of his mates, who entertained high hopes on his behalf, and rather than look like rejected goods, he'd determined to exert as much power over damage control as possible, to be expected really, I can understand that urge, it's not as if it was Reggie's fault there's something wrong with me, and of course Reggie had scores of friends and I'd one former friend, and thus enjoyed the unusual circumstance of being scowled at whenever smiling at anyone for the remainder of the summer. Not that John meant it that way. Still.

John is quiet for a moment. Then Sherlock hears him sigh and shift his feet. When John approaches, it is with a careful tread. As Sherlock registers that John is just behind him, John slides his arm around Sherlock's lower back in a steady half-hug. Sherlock looks down in considerable surprise. John's eyebrows are performing fascinating new configurations of chagrin.

"That, there, was me teasing you. But I'm sorry. I ought to have figured--well, I just ought to have figured. That's all. You're not a tease. And I'm sorry. Again."

Sherlock shakes his head, tight-lipped. "No need."

"There bloody well is a need, I think you're just so used to people slagging you off that you've decided it's normal. Not that I haven't seen you do your fair share of slagging in reverse already, but I'm not going to hurt your feelings without apologizing."

"I've been reliably informed I don't have any," Sherlock returns coolly.

John barks a laugh. "You have no feelings. You have no feelings? Um, right. Yes, and I am Kate Middleton. Posh git."

The detective can think of nothing to say in response to this outright dismissal of public opinion.
For a few moments, they look out the window, at the plane tree's leaves dancing in the autumn wind and at the rest of the dim little yard with the bicycle tire propped against the fence. Then Sherlock turns into John's arm so they are nearly facing. He can feel the warm, small doctor all up and down his side.

"Did you just say you fancied me?" he inquires.

John smiles, tilting his head up. "No, I said I have no intention of fancying you. Anyway, I'll get over it, we've sorted that part. Stop worrying."

Sherlock is very, very worried.

He is worried that John's arm around him feels like being pulled up to the surface when he wasn't even aware he was drowning, for instance.

He is worried that John will continue to see Sarah as an alternative.

He is worried that he is worried about Sarah.

He is worried about failing to worry sufficiently about Sarah as well.

He is worried that he has just drawn John Watson down a dark and ugly rabbit hole with him.

He is worried that John might come to care about him.

He is worried that John might not come to care about him at all.

He is worried that if John comes to care about him and Sherlock dies horribly that it would be his fault if that causes John any slight inconvenience.

He is worried that, if John comes to care about him, then all too quickly--

The front doorbell rings.

"That'll be the nosh, I'd wager," John says, heading for the door after giving Sherlock a friendly pat on the back.

Sherlock takes an interlude of about ten seconds in the upstairs room, breathing slowly, wondering if this flatmates lark wasn't the worst notion he has ever conceived. Because it jolly well might be. It might be an unparalleled disaster. When he feels calm enough, he follows John downstairs.

But there is no Chinese food awaiting them. Sherlock might have deduced that, it's far too quick for their delivery service, and even if the duck is the work of a moment, the chicken is made to order there.

Two men in immaculate black suits are in the kitchen, transferring the head Sherlock returned to the box into a large plastic container with a biohazard symbol on it, leaving the packaging intact. John isn't paying any attention to them, however. He is staring down Mycroft Holmes, who is dressed in a bespoke pinstriped suit and appears to be wrapping up a phone call, and who gestures to Sherlock with a single forefinger to wait a moment, the utterly unbearable prick.

"You said you'd send someone round, not come round yourself," Sherlock bites out as he descends the last of the stairs.

"...and the gravesite likewise. Yes, all the forensics we can muster for a five hundred yard perimeter search." Mycroft pauses. "Excessive. I wonder if you would find it excessive if I asked
for whom precisely you work, and whether you enjoy complete job security?"

"Mycroft," Sherlock growls.

Mycroft blinks and sets the raised finger to his lips.

"This tossbag is your brother, then?" John asks, eyebrows raised.

"I prefer to think he was left on our doorstep by one of the village locals before Mummy was able to conceive me."

"Ah, excellent, I knew you'd see it in the light I do eventually." Mycroft smiles the smile of a Gila monster, motioning for Sherlock and John to be still. "It is an opportunity, you see, even if the act was perpetrated by an intermediary. The mastermind behind the grave's desecration must be traced with undeniable physical proof."

"I don't like him because he kidnapped me. What's your reason?" John wonders.

"Look at him."

"I am."

"Isn't it awful?"

"No, I plan to take certain measures to ensure that will not be happening again." Mycroft twirls his umbrella on the floor as if he's about to spring into a Fred Astaire number. "If you have not yet grasped that this will garner media attention where mere correspondence does not, I am beginning to find myself at a loss as to why I pay you."

"I've seen worse," John says judiciously, crossing his arms. He glances back to Sherlock. "He's trying to protect you."

"He's trying to ruin my life by sending me to America."

"Really?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going."

"It's probably out of family feeling, though."

"Is it out of family feeling he trains CCTV on me, bugs my flat periodically, and tried to tap your phone?"

"Fair enough."

"I don't think you are looking at this from the proper perspective," Mycroft suggests in the tone of a complacent predator, tracing his finger over his chin slowly. "Eleven court judges who have been asked to alter James Moriarty's sentencing in light of his clearly dangerous antisocial obsession have either retired, been transferred, declined the case, died under mysterious circumstances, or in my personal favourite instance, moved to South America and taken up coffee farming thanks to a sudden inheritance. These men and women were dealing with letters, however, and now we are dealing with the severed cranium of a murder victim. The twelfth judge will see reason."

John bites his lip, turning to Sherlock. "Is that...true?"
"No, of course it isn't, Mycroft only mentions it because I haven't enough concerns already," Sherlock hisses.

"Because if he or she does not see reason, he or she will have more onerous problems to face than James Moriarty," Mycroft croons into his mobile.

"So you've tried eleven times to keep Moriarty behind bars and it's fallen through. What about the account given by the prison itself? He can't possibly be up for good behavior," John observes carefully.

"The prison director has changed five times since Moriarty was incarcerated," Sherlock answers. He snatches at Mycroft's mobile, but his brother easily shifts it to his other hand, and without dropping the umbrella. "One quit because his entire family died in a fire. One quit because he was infected with anthrax. One--"

"Got it, yep, we're on the same page," John interjects, pressing the space between his eyes.

"Ideally, in seventy-two hours or less. Yes, in spite of the Syrian situation." Mycroft snaps his fingers at the two men in black suits, who are dithering about fastening the clasps on the plastic container, and then moves his hand in a circle to indicate further delay will displease him. They move downstairs silently and swiftly, and the aroma of decay begins to lessen. "Syria is being handled by my most competent undercover aides, and you, I deeply regret to say, are presently my most competent forensic analyst. Did I or did I not hear rumour that you were interested in a new post in northern Greenland? If you find this to be too perilous or too futile an exercise of your skill set, that can be arranged."

The bell chimes again. John goes to answer it, and Sherlock, still glaring daggers at his brother, assumes that this time the delivery service was merely exceptionally fast. Instead, about twenty seconds later he finds himself face to face with one Shinwell Johnson, who is particularly resplendent today in a red tracksuit, white undershirt which smells vaguely of tuna, white trainers that were perhaps stylish in 1994, and a gold chain with a pendant of Jesus Christ's head encrusted with diamond chips.

"He says he's your ambassador for hire in certain economic sectors within the urban London populace," John says, staring at the newcomer with calculating blue eyes. "Sounded too ridiculous an excuse for someone who wanted to kill you when he could have said he's here to check the gas, so..."

Shinwell Johnson winks contentedly at Sherlock. "May I state, for the record, Mr. Holmes, setting aside our other transactions, that I very much look forward to further intercourse with this Dr. John Watson individual, and that I think I can predict unreservedly that he is crump, and that any projects you undertake in future will only be enhanced by his addition to the team, as it were, and not in any way slowed by it."

"Other transactions," John says slowly. "Wait, other transactions--what other transactions specifically?"

Sherlock looks at the ceiling and makes a silent request that, if God exists, God smite Sherlock to save him the further trouble of being alive.

Johnson coughs, seems desirous of a place to spit, sees none, and then swallows heavily. "Transactions of a personal and a business nature combined, sir, and thus regrettably ones I must keep well mum regarding, no disrespect intended to either your feelings or your already acknowledged status as a man of the world."
"Sherlock," John says in a steely tone.

"John," Sherlock says, as he can think of nothing else to the purpose.

"Tell me this man doesn't sell you...fresh produce?"

"Oh, you told him?" Johnson brightens considerably. "Cor, that's on me, then, here I've been ear bashing the pair of you and you've already come fully clean with the gentleman, it's better than I predicted, Mr. Holmes, the forthrightness on your part, the unasked-for honesty as to your proclivities, and for having failed to expect you to make a clean breast about the circumstances of your private life, I humbly beg forgiveness."

"You needn't, actually," John says coldly.

Johnson, red-veined face alight with pride, remains wholly pleased by developments. "I hope Mr. Holmes likewise conveyed my desire that the aforementioned portion of our dealings together cease whensoever he finds it possible, respecting as I do the talent residing in his every--"

"Will you shut up," Sherlock snaps.

"No, no, now I'm listening," John says firmly, widening his stance. "Please go on."

Before John has the opportunity to continue this conversation, Mycroft hangs up his mobile decisively. At the same moment, the doorbell rings.

"Ah, excellent," Mycroft says, making a note to himself on his phone before pocketing it. "Might you answer that, John, if you would be so kind?"

"Might you sod off?" John returns, though he heads for the stairs at the same time.

"Might you tell me what in hell is going on here?" Sherlock snarls.

"I invited Mr. Johnson to meet with us, knowing your trust in his network and his acumen is not unfounded, despite my brotherly reservations regarding the more reckless aspects of your character and ways in which your self-destructive streak is habitually indulged," Mycroft purrs, walking to Sherlock's chair and seating himself without being asked.

Johnson unzips his track suit, revealing a gut of sumo proportions, and bows, arms extended.

"Reservations, Mr. Holmes, that I share in every particular, and am keen to explore further at the leisure of all parties, when this present business is at an end, as overextending oneself can add to the risk of matters going pear-shaped, at least in my humble experience."

"I am aware of the opinions you hold upon the subject of my brother's potential," Mycroft sighs. "It is the reason you are still free to move about London. Others are not."

Sherlock's mouth drops. He stares at his brother, stunned. But Mycroft is presently focusing all his attention upon Shinwell Johnson, who is the last dealer Sherlock could find to sell to him after his other sources dried up under mysterious circumstances.

"I hope my sentiments do me credit." Shinwell Johnson grins widely. "But I'm harder to catch than you might figure, all due respect. As for the tendency to self-destruct, though we all possess it to some degree, my pet theory, Mr. Holmes, is that Mr. Holmes here indulges as an act of defiance, a sort of ownership over his life if you will, threatened as he has been practically from the cradle and desirous of maintaining the illusion that he can make an end for himself outside of the plots woven against him, that in the act of injuring himself, he takes control of his personhood, if you
"Oh, thank you," Sherlock sneers, "a hygiene-impaired petty criminal with delusions of grandeur is exactly the person I require to explain to me my own systems of thought, or wait, better still, inflict your opinions on me when I ask for them or when you acquire a higher education than year ten of secondary school, whichever comes first."

"It is admittedly an intriguing pop psychological analysis, though one I fail to share," Mycroft demurs. "Isolation, pure and simple, can have a deleterious effect upon the psyche. Do sit down, Mr. Johnson, I find the settee quite adequate. Oh, cease looking so surprised, little brother. You might have expected events of this nature, were you the perfect reasoning machine you claim, but I see that you've recently developed...other demands upon your valuable time and attention."

Detective Inspector Lestrade walks in with Sally Donovan in tow, both looking brightly determined although Sally's version is noticeably less enthusiastic.

"What the fuck," Sherlock breathes.

"Right, cheers," Lestrade remarks. "All right, Sherlock? Sorry to be the last to arrive, traffic is murder coming straight from the Yard." His eyes return to John, who is just cresting the stairs. "Just met your new...what, colleague, was it? You look familiar, though, if you don't mind my saying so, mate. Have we seen each other somewhere before?"

John regards Lestrade and the rest of the increasingly crowded room with the air of a man who has seen everything, and thus is incapable of being flummoxed. It's one of the most brilliant expressions Sherlock has ever witnessed. As for Sherlock, he isn't sure whether to swan out the door in a huff with his coat swirling and his hand in the doctor's and leave them all to whatever they're scheming, or to remain at Baker Street due to desperate curiosity. Either way, he determines, the late afternoon will be a distinctly uncomfortable one.

"I tackled that killer, Abernetty," John explains. "You arrested him."

"Blimey, that's it!" Lestrade exclaims. "I'm pretty keen at faces, but I didn't see much of yours. Yeah, now it's all coming back to me. Sally, you remember? You know your stuff when it comes to tackling, don't you, Dr. Watson?"

"I do."

"Army doctor, was it?"

"That's right."

"Well, nice to see you again."

"Likewise."

"Lestrade. Sally," Sherlock grates out.

"Freak," Sally chirps.

"Don't call him that," John says.

"Why, you've got a better one?" Sally nudges Lestrade with her elbow. "When people first meet him, the new impressions are always choice."
"How about Sherlock?" John suggests, smiling as if he's about to murder someone.

"Doesn't really flow off the tongue," Sally muses.

"Neither does Anderson's semen, I would wager, his physical regimen being nil and his diet--"

"Sherlock!" exclaims the entire room at various volumes, excepting Shinwell Johnson, who shakes his head indulgently and sighs, "Mr. Holmes, Mr. Holmes."

"What?" Sherlock shouts. "What are you all doing in my flat?"

Lestrade rubs hand his over his cropped silver hair. "Half a tic, Sherlock, pardon me for asking, but just what is Dr. Watson here doing in your flat?"

"I live here," John says calmly.

A silence falls as everyone digests this information. Where all was chaos previously, a pin dropping would now sound like a lead pipe hitting the floor. Sherlock stares at each in turn, practically daring them to object to this development. The reactions are, to say the least, mixed. Mycroft looks dyspepsic, Sally aghast, Lestrade pleased, and Shinwell Johnson might as well have just swallowed the sun, he is beaming so brightly.

"May I be the first," Johnson intones, "to offer my sincerest congrat--"

The door chimes again.

"Right, yep, that'll be Chinese," John announces dryly. "Corking. Um, get some plates, yeah, Sherlock? I'll be right back. And then we can start this...what is this again?"

Mycroft flashes an icy smile.

"It is a discussion," he answers, "regarding the continued survival of Sherlock Holmes."
Chapter 8

Hours later, when the smell of smoked duck has almost faded, when the street lights have flared into life, when the tellies are being switched on up and down the roadway and all across Great Britain, after the sun has fallen and Baker Street is all shadows and traffic glare and blue streaks of moonlight obscured by the pooling warmth of their lamps, Sherlock is curled up in his brick-coloured dressing gown with his nose against the back of the sofa, shoulders hunched into a shape resembling a tortoise's back--teeth clenched, eyes tight shut, craving morphine, and longing to dissolve into a vapour.

Or barring that, to murder everyone he knows except for John.

"Okay, it really wasn't that bad, mate," John says for perhaps the third time, though he's rephrased it on each separate attempt.

John has been wandering between the sitting room and the kitchen ever since the others left and Sherlock changed his clothes as a signal he was done with the day entirely. John is clearly wondering when Sherlock plans on moving. Sherlock's answer to this question would in theory be never. Not after the extended display he was just forced to witness.

When in the parlour standing over the sofa, John clenches and unclenches his left hand and regards Sherlock as if Sherlock might possibly have blown a fuse somewhere. When in the kitchen, John sets about preparing beans and toast, because that's all they have in and Shinwell Johnson alone would have made short work of the Chinese food, let alone the rest of that pack of feral idiots.

All eating and drinking and talking about Sherlock as if he doesn't even exist. As if he isn't in the same fucking room. As if they care about him. As if he's the important part of the equation. As if they give a damn. As if they aren't simply using him for their own ends. As if he matters. As if he's an expensive gardening tool they'd prefer not to replace. As if they want him alive. As if they didn't actually loathe him. As if he shouldn't even be asked what he thinks of it all. As if he isn't a genius. As if he needs to be protected. As if they give a shit. As if he hasn't thought this out already a thousand fucking times. As if he's afraid.

When he isn't. He isn't afraid.

Sherlock has never been more confused or more utterly furious in his life.

"No, the case is on the fast track to be tried a fortnight from now," Mycroft simpered to the room. As if it were his bloody idea for Moriarty to steal the bloody head and he were already congratulating himself upon his cleverness. " Expedited in every manner, and the judge about to be quarantined in a maximum security scenario along with her entire family. Needless to say, Moriarty won't be going anywhere until this new matter is decided, which also extends our deadline."

"So he's not getting out at all, then, and our problem is solved already, is what you're saying?" Sally clarified.

"No, he's saying Moriarty is going to be awarded his own private island and care of an endangered coral reef," Sherlock snapped. "Do keep up. I haven't the slightest notion of what you're doing here."

"Nor me neither," said Sally in a huff. "Helping you, I think. And you want to know why? You're
the saddest sod I've ever encountered. I mean, who else do you have besides us?"

Sherlock found himself unable to reply to this question.

"And I don't even want to be here," she muttered next.

"A bit chummier, yeah?" Lestrade said, annoyed, flicking a piece of lint off his jeans.

"Why? Alone is his whole mojo. He thinks alone protects him. Anyway, he likes it better alone, the man hates humans, and I say good riddance."

"Begging your pardon and never meaning to imply your impressions of the matter are false or, dare I say, potentially affected by my associate's entirely regrettable lack of tact, but that's a load of bollocks, if you'll pardon the vulgarity," Shinwell Johnson said around a heaping mouthful of spicy chicken and rice.

"Hear, hear," said John Watson quietly.

"Likewise seconded," Mycroft agreed.

It's maddening. His head could explode from the pressure inside it. Sherlock thinks about John listening to this conversation, with his impassive lined face and his very dark eyes, and shivers all the way down his thin frame. It's getting to be quite cold on the sofa, as his--their, he supposes now--fire isn't lit. So he wraps his arms tighter around each other and breathes into the cushions.

If John's impression of Sherlock was sketchy before, and he is fully aware that he is an off-putting person, now it must have assuredly tipped over into dubious, if not doubtful.

"Sherlock, cut it out, all right?" John protests again from behind him. "It was weird. Granted. I mean, yeah. So weird I have new respect for the word weird. Now, come over here and share this with me. You didn't eat a bite earlier."

No, Sherlock had not. Because after they'd tucked into the Chinese food, the horrible people filling his flat and preventing him from being with John, and after they'd discussed the court case and the likelihood of Moriarty's sentence being extended, which everyone agreed was more or less a sure thing, they'd moved on to another topic and Sherlock had lost what little appetite he'd boasted previously: the topic But What If He Gets Out Anyway?

And it had been all John's fault, too.

Dimwitted, wonderful, concerned, focused, stupid, brave, diligent, experienced, crafty, thorough John.

"This prolonging of sentence notion is all very well if we're just having a chin wag over it, but it's failed pretty comprehensively on previous tries, yeah?" John asked, studying Mycroft with a measured fuck-you smile on his perfect face. "So. What I want to know is, what's the contingency plan? For if, you know, it fails again. Like before."

The room had fallen silent, in awe of John's wisdom and his eloquence. In reverence of his force in proportion to his stature.Marveling at his acumen. Or maybe because Mycroft had turned a bit violet. Sherlock hadn't cared. But he'd cared very much that he was watching a panel discussion of his survival play out with no one consulting him. Not even John. It was all right where John was concerned, fine, John probably wanted to spare Sherlock the anxiety. But as for the rest of the bastards...
"It is a question of the right degree, if you are suggesting armed security escorts," Mycroft answered in his horrible oily manner. "Physical protection shall be implemented if Moriarty is released, of course it will. Can you imagine I have not planned for such an extremity? As I said, the question is of degree. Degree, and of duration."

"Right. Whatever it takes," Lestrade added. "We're on board."

"You can't be serious," Sally exclaimed.

"Well, cor, I'm not suggesting a battalion, but we can't very well leave him to walk about on his own," Lestrade said, crossing his legs widely and jiggling his knee.

"I've been saying that for years, haven't I?" asked Sally nastily.

"If you're going to insist on using your mouth when none of us have asked you to, you'd best stick to what talents you--"


"My sincere regret, and forgive me for voicing such an opinion, lord only knows I don't care to hold it meself, but considering the knack this Moriarty sod owns for infiltration, not to mention intimidation, not to mention botheration, not to mention escalation, how long will guards work? It's a matter of diminishing returns," Shinwell Johnson intoned sadly. "And the longer it drags on, the better the chance of someone or other getting careless. Human nature being what human nature is, you understand, on a philosophical level."

And Shinwell Johnson, as is so often and so infuriatingly the case, had been right.

Sherlock's eyes fly open as a warm weight settles against his lumbar curve. Right up against it, not bothering to keep an inch or a centimeter or even a hair's breadth of space between. That is John Watson's spine and the top declivity of his arse sitting on the sofa, aligned at right angles with Sherlock's spine and the top declivity of his arse, and life is so much more complicated now than when he was merely about to be tortured to death. Now everything is topsy-turvy and drugs are an immediate necessity.

"I'm eating all the beans if you're going to sulk like a spotty teen," John informs him. "And toast is nearly gone."

"Oh, yes, considering the fact I'm not hungry, that is the ideal threat to employ," Sherlock drawls cuttingly. "I'm ever so delighted you were here to discuss strategy."

"Are you going to be this pleasant all night?"

"I don't know. How many more stupid questions do you plan on asking?"

John goes on stabbing bits of toast into the heated tinned beans that were in the cupboard when Sherlock took the flat while Sherlock bites his lip in agony. He doesn't mean it. Does John know he doesn't mean it? He probably doesn't know. And Sherlock doesn't mean it. When he hates everyone, he tends to hate everyone, that much he realizes, but he could never hate John. Not even if the sugary salty mealy smell of beans and toast is making his stomach clench.

Sherlock whispers something not even he, with his perfect hearing, can discern.

"Sorry?"
"I'm delighted you were here to discuss strategy," Sherlock whispers.

There is a brief pause as the back against Sherlock's back shifts in thought.

"Oh. You mean really now, not sarcastically. 'Ta."

"You're ex-military."

"Hmm."

"A soldier."

"Yep."

"It's useful."

"Thanks."

"I hate them," Sherlock snarls. "With their concerned looks and their asinine ideas and their little plans and their 'oh, it's all going to be just lovely, Sherlock, wait and see,' and meanwhile they don't consult me on the matter, do they."

"Well, they're being practical, Sherlock."

Several seconds pass. Awful ones. Sherlock knows what John is referring to, but he'd tried his utmost to delete it instantly.

When Sherlock realizes that hadn't worked, he practically shoves his face in the back of the sofa.

"Why would you have your own forensics expert work on the grave robbing site?" John asked Mycroft. "Why not ask your brother? He's clearly the best in the business or the Yard wouldn't be consulting him."

_Stupid John, perfect John, thoughtful John._

_Stupid perfect thoughtful._

_Stupidperfectthoughtful._


"Oh, hadn't you heard, then?" Mycroft sighed with a cruel smile. "Sherlock hasn't been convinced to visit a James Moriarty-orchestrated crime scene for over five years now."

That was not meant to be common knowledge. And Sherlock hates Mycroft with every single cell of his being.

"Okay, I'm just going to do this," John announces.

Sherlock hears a plate striking the tabletop just before John physically flips the detective onto his back, and with a highly suspicious gleam in the doctor's eye.

Sherlock swallows. His hands are shaking, and he pulls them into fists. He loathes being out of control, and when he is out of control, he tends to dive straight for the drugs, and the drugs are right over there, they will restore control, _John would prefer it that way_. _Under control. John would prefer it if Sherlock used the drugs. Yes? Then Sherlock would be friendlier. How to_
"You're kind of...taxing my patience just now," John reports.

His hands are still on Sherlock's shoulders, oh so warm, and Sherlock could close his eyes and melt away at the giddy rush his nerve endings have created thanks to this position and this pressure on his skin. Mere transport shouldn't be so...transportive.

"I didn't realize you paid rent here," Sherlock attempts frigidly.

"I didn't realize you wanted to live alone," John snaps, releasing his hold.

Sherlock actually winces at the sudden loss of touch, and from that point onward has zero notion of what to do with himself or with others or even with John, who fits in neither category. He is actually dissolving into nothingness. As he has so long dreamed of doing.

*But he deserves it, doesn't he? In any, in all, in every sense. He is not merely defective, that's merely one of the problems, he is also willfully--*

John is playfully catching him by the earlobe and tugging it as if he needs Sherlock's attention. The sensation jerks him out of his reverie.

John is talking.

"...wasn't what I meant by challenging your brother, but I'll stand by my word," John says. "Are you planning to have armed guards follow you everywhere throughout your whole life? I was serious, Sherlock. Dead serious. I'm going to help you and we're going to fix this. When I asked why he wasn't making better use of your talents, I never meant to--"

"You're wrong," Sherlock growls. "Let go of my ear."

"Actually, I sort of think you listen better this way. How am I wrong?"

"You think you know why, but you don't," Sherlock spits out venomously, sitting up. "You and your tiny little mind. What is it like in there? Is it nice, not being me? It must be, since I can hardly stand it even on the best days. You think that I haven't visited a Jim Moriarty-orchestrated crime scene in five years, that smuggling operation or the extortionists or the gambling fraud affair or the money laundering and now the fucking grave robbery, because I'm frightened. They all think that, don't try to deny it, they all think I'm frightened. Even down to Shinwell Johnson, who to my great alarm seems to know me better than most. Well, that isn't the reason. The reason I don't bother anymore with Moriarty crime scenes in person is because there is nothing to find. He isn't playing a game with me, or at least not one I can win."

Sherlock stops for a moment, trying to breathe. He thinks of all the long years he spent, attempting to turn the persecution into a puzzle, and his tear ducts start burning with murderously angry sorrow over the time wasted.

"I tried," Sherlock says more quietly. John is riveted--he dropped Sherlock's ear when the sleuth rose to a seated position and is simply watching, weathered face rapt, with his hand on Sherlock's thigh. "I tried so hard, I tried...examining the letters like I did yesterday, studying cold cases he might have been connected with, going to every crime scene he was remotely tied to, the head, now the _head_, I spent over two hours on it, and there is _nothing_ to find, John, because this isn't a game. I would give anything for this to be a game, an intellectual exercise, something I stand a chance at winning, but it isn't riddles or secret meanings or breadcrumbs through a forest, it's just abuse. That's all. So I won't play anymore, not for the last five years, since he won't even do me the
courtesy of interesting me while he threatens to flog me or flay me or fuck me or bury my limbs in slow two-inch increments over the course of decades with a full medical staff looking on until I'm a head and a torso. He's *boring*. It's...completely unforgivable that he's boring. I wanted to have...I wanted it, this, whatever this is, to have rules I could follow and steps I could take. There aren't any of either. I tried, you can't know how I tried--"

Sherlock stops talking when John abruptly puts his arms around him.

In fact, everything stops.

Every single thing, from London around the world in a sonic boom and then back again, ceases its motion to register what has just taken place.

The doctor is as warm and soft as ever, which is to say very warm and very soft, and his left arm is firmly circling Sherlock's waist while his right wraps around his upper back. John's blunt chin rests on Sherlock's left shoulder moments later.

"I didn't think that," John says softly. Sherlock feels his traitorous head listing sideways until his curls crush against John's fringe of blond hair and he rubs along John's scalp once with his own, as if he were a cat. John sighs at the gentle nudge. "I mean. The truth, or that you were afraid. So quit assuming... Yeah, I didn't think either one. But the truth... It makes sense, Sherlock. It makes cracking good sense, all right? The real reason."

Finding that both his long hands are splayed lightly around John's waist, just barely brushing the cotton, Sherlock closes his eyes. He can keep this for a moment, he thinks. It's fine. It won't make a difference. John doesn't intend to fancy him. It will work out between them, which is as much as to say that it won't.

"What did you think, then?" Sherlock murmurs.

"Me? I thought the other forensics specialist was better at observation and deduction than you."

John is giggling before he even finishes the lie. Grinning like a fool, Sherlock drops his head and props his brow on John's clavicle. John straightens almost immediately, moving the hand that was gripping Sherlock's shoulders to tenderly press against the back of his long neck. The hand stays cupped there, slowly kneading.

"No, I thought to be honest that you were being needlessly brave or showy or something and pretending it didn't matter to you."

"Me? Showy?"

"Yeah, you. Showy."

"Problem?"

"With what?"

"I show off. It's what I do."

"I like the things you do, as a general rule. So far."

Sherlock says nothing, smiling like a Sphinx at his own lap.

Slowly, gradually enough for it not to hurt too terribly, John pulls away, adding a deeper squeeze to
Sherlock's nape as he does.

"I promised in front of all of those people not to let him hurt you," John says, staring into Sherlock's eyes. "I keep promises. Doesn't mean I think you need me, doesn't mean I think you're frightened. Okay? Are you with me here, Mr. Colleague?"

Sherlock blinks his long eyelashes in a yes, as words seem rather difficult just now.

Satisfied, John stands up and clears away his dishes. Sherlock tucks himself back into the sofa, this time facing out rather than in. He's suddenly exhausted. It's begun to rain beyond the window, a lovely pattering that means the streets are all a-glitter, and he lets the random, predictable, constant sound sink through the top of his head as if there were shimmering raindrops in his hair. All the people howling in his brain, the voices from this afternoon playing on one track while the voices from Moriarty's letters play on another, have grown subdued.

A John-shaped shadow reappears. Sherlock's eyes drift upward.

"Look, I'm pretty knackered, considering," John confesses. "But you're in the way."

"Sleep in my bed," Sherlock sighs.

"We talked about that, Sherlock."

"No, we argued and you didn't listen when I was right. That isn't the same thing."

"I'm pretty sure I was there too, and I was listening."

"Obviously not. I sleep out here most nights."

"What about the other nights?"

"Use my bed, we'll get you one soon enough. It won't be for long."

"This is silly."

"Yes, it is."

"You're being unreasonable."

"I'm also being unmoving."

John thinks for a few seconds. "Do you want to, um...oh, fuck it. If you feel like you want your bed, just hop in the other side, okay?"

Sherlock thinks about the word *tease.*

"I'm fine out here," he insists. "Really, John. Get some rest."
"You're sure?"

"Go away. I'm tired, too. Stop annoying me."

John's hand makes a swift descent and ruffles Sherlock's hair.

"Stubborn git," he declares as he walks away.

Sherlock's eyes fall shut again, his scalp tingling. Vaguely, he hears John lift his duffel bag, the sound of him crossing through the kitchen to the loo, leaving the hall door open. John brushes his teeth. He spits in the sink. He gargles something or other. Listening to John make meaningless sounds in the flat, Sherlock realizes, like listening to the rain, is a bit like noise-cancelling headphones. Or, no. Deeper than that. Mayhem-cancelling headphones.

Sherlock can put off the morphine until tomorrow, perhaps. Well, he can try. It might not work, but it won't hurt to put in the effort. Attempting to open his eyes, Sherlock finds that they are very heavy. Someone has turned his eyelashes to stone. The rain continues, growing in volume, drops splattering ever harder, pounding against the glass. Then all at once he is on a little ship, planning great conquests, sailing along gently rocking seas through the warm blue glare of the Mediterranean, though it's still raining, it's raining through the sunlight on the water and the silvery fish, and he--

"No!"

Sherlock lurches awake, heart pounding.

That was a real sound.

That was not imagined.

Fuck.

No, definitely not a figment of his dreamscape. And he is uncomfortably sober for nighttime, so he should know.

For some reason, Sherlock is tangled in a blanket. And all the lights have been turned off. And it is very, very dark in here.

Thrusting the afghan aside, Sherlock sways on his bare feet, heart pounding, before he recalls who he is.

*Deduce it*, he tells himself.

*Be quiet.*

*Think.*

*Why can't people just think?*

*So think, genius. Stand there and calm yourself and think.*

The lights must be off because John lives here, that he recalls as he walks silently into the kitchen and catches lingering but pale whiffs of dumplings and tinned beans. The blanket which was tucked around his body is explained in the identical manner. Sherlock fell asleep, he must have done, and he is disoriented because now he has a flatmate and flatmates are allowed to alter the environment. Perfectly natural for them to do so, really. That's fine.
As Sherlock steps into the hall, he hears a sound like a muffled whimper coming from the general vicinity of his bedroom and a fist hitting a pillow with an enraged *thump*.

Ah.

Sherlock returns to the sitting room, momentarily at a loss.

The rain has stopped. It has left behind an emptiness in the flat like vast deserts and ice-capped mountain ranges and the smell of heated gun metal after the bullet has flown in its deadly arc.

Entering his room seems like a terrible idea just now, since John seems to hate his own nightmares. Sherlock would, were their positions reversed, loathe them equally if not more so. Sherlock's entire existence is based upon the ability to record and interpret facts, and if the facts were suddenly created by the malicious whims of his own mind, produced like cancer cells by a brain churning and shaking and clacking and spinning out of control...

Feeling a bit queasy just thinking about it, Sherlock sits down in the cold leather chair.

Then he knows what to do.

It might be a bad choice, the wrong choice.

It might be annoying or even infuriating to John, if Sherlock is reading this situation poorly.

But either way, John deserves to know what he's in for, doesn't he? They'd never discussed respective flatmate foibles, after all.

When Sherlock stands before one of his two tall windows minutes later with the Strad nestled under his neck, he doesn't play for John. Or he doesn't directly. If John suspected he was being coddled, as Sherlock so often senses placation oozing from his brother's pores, John might be angry.

Instead, Sherlock allows the violin to play itself. He knows his instrument intimately enough that the task is easy--and it's another effective distraction from morphine, which is beginning to sound outrageously good again. Sherlock's violin hums with meandering music at his touch, purposeless as a daydream and every whit as melancholy. And because he isn't terribly worried about impressing John, or about playing an actual piece, he allows Chopin riffs to bleed into the colour lavender, plays autumn rain on the roof without the staccato, blending the drops into a rippling pool, plays lamplight reflected in John's hair. The detective coaxes every lovely thing he can think of out of his violin, not limited to the five peaceful seconds of sad, sweet success following a crime well solved, but certainly including them, and then morphing into treks through childhood forests with a stout companion at his side, and the knowledge that the way honeybees communicate will never be fully understood and thus there will always be a problem left in the world to unravel, and the certainty that John is in Sherlock's bedroom.

By the time Sherlock has played long enough to ease the ache in his own heart, his violin is talking about sudden caresses and duffel bags scraping across his floor.

When Sherlock drops his hands at last, the noises from his bedroom have been replaced by a smooth and peaceful absence of all sound.
"You need to stop, by the way," John says the following afternoon as he walks into their flat.

He has just returned from a morning shift at the clinic and there is rain in his honey-coloured hair and on the tops of his shoes. Sherlock has no notion why that should matter to him, but he likes it tremendously. He wonders how the rain smells that has been caught in John's hair but opts not to request permission to investigate.

"Mmm?" Sherlock says, looking up from an email.

"Oi, is that my laptop?"

"Can't you recognize your own laptop?"

"Yes, that's. Yeah, I can do, which is--why are you using my laptop?"

"Closer."

Sherlock types the last details of his meticulous report to the Russian police regarding the Trepoff crime syndicate, being careful to attach the relevant photos he discovered after searching Flickr for an hour (tedious, why can't these so-called master criminals learn not to allow their trophy mistresses to snap pictures and then smear evidence all over the internet in unlocked accounts, not that I couldn't have got in if it had been locked, how hard can it be to deduce a password chosen by a woman named Bunny, still, it's the principle) and clicks send. He looks up at John, who now stands beside him at the kitchen table with his hands on his hips.

"Sherlock, your laptop is right there," John says, pointing a foot away at the other side of the table.


"There's a password on mine."

"Well there was. I've left it unlocked now. Easier."

"Oh, ace. I take it this isn't a one off, then."

Sherlock blinks.

"You're something of a nutter, you know that?" John asks in a friendly way.

Sherlock smiles primly. "What do I need to stop?"

"What?"

"You were saying, when you came in, I need to stop. Stop what?"

"Right." John pulls up a chair and sits at a ninety degree angle to Sherlock, rubbing his palms on his grey trousers. "You need to stop suddenly displaying new skill sets that gobsmack your flatmate. It's unfair. That was you, right? Last night? Paganini didn't wander into our digs for a cream tea and a chat? Because that was...pretty remarkable."

"Oh," Sherlock breathes. "You liked it, then. That's...good. I never asked how you felt about the violin. Slipped my mind."

"A well-played violin is a treat for the gods."
How appropriate a phrase for the situation as I perceive it, Sherlock thinks, his ears pinkening slightly. John is sitting there beaming at him, scratching the back of his own head, one eyebrow raised as if they are sharing a secret. Maybe they are. Sherlock desperately hopes so.

"The concert was well-timed," John adds meaningfully.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"You know why, of course. You know everything."

"I know it's a lucky chance to find a flatmate who doesn't mind the violin in the middle of the night."

Chuckling, John leans forward on his knees. "What are we doing then, today, genius?"

"What would you like to do?"

"Dunno. Solve crime, have a pint with you after?"

Sherlock suppresses a maniacally pleased grin.

"Let me present you with a situation. A woman has been engaged as a nanny in Hampshire for a couple with one small boy," Sherlock answers slowly, savouring the moment even as he opens the email he received on *The Science of Deduction* and slides the laptop over so John can read it. "She's been offered what my research indicates is double the usual rate for a single child to care for, plus room and board. But there's a condition attached. She has to visit a particular London hairdresser before she leaves the city and request that he dye her hair a very specific shade of electric blue and crop it very close against her head."

John's eyes are tracking across the words. He frowns a little. "Violet Hunter. Kink of the father's, maybe? That's unsettling."

"I thought so too."

"She's not going through with it?"

"She already made the commitment two weeks ago." Sherlock clicks on another tab--Violet Hunter's Facebook profile, showing a wryly smiling young woman with short electric blue hair.

"Not a job I'd let my sister apply for. As if Harry listens to a word I say."

"Ms. Hunter asked us to meet her in Hampshire. There have been developments since."

"She asked us?"

Sherlock cocks his head, eyebrow tilted, barely able to mask the fact that he feels as if he is about to float out of his chair.

"What's the Moriarty situation?" John wants to know.

Pulling his mobile out and opening a text, Sherlock passes it to John.
James Moriarty transferred to solitary within the confines of maximum security for duration of trial. MH

"Hip hip hooray," John says cheerily.

"Scroll down," Sherlock instructs, jutting his chin.

A trio of heavily armed guards with documented antisocial dispositions have been placed on a 24 hour watch. MH

"The trial is scheduled for two weeks from now," Sherlock states innocently. "Presumably I've nothing to worry over until then."

They pause, glancing at each other. John hands the phone back to Sherlock, who locks the screen and pockets it. Sherlock closes the lid of John's laptop. He pulls his white shirt cuffs down. Crossing his legs, John regards the detective with a brilliant sapphire spark in his eyes. The pause lengthens until the two men are both smiling from ear to ear at one another. As if they were each a post office from some gaslit Victorian crime novel full of cobblestones and hansom cabs and London Particulars, and the space between them were a telegraph wire, sending little electric clicks back and forth along the line.

"Come to Hampshire with me?" Sherlock says breathlessly.

"Oh, god, yes," John answers, standing.
The train ride to Hampshire is marked by low-lying housing developments, sun-dappled meadows, office parks and petrol stations, wide stretches of asphalt filled with gas-efficient cars, and the rolling hills around Aldershot and the grey and red roofs of old farmsteads peeping from amid the foliage. John watches out the window where he sits across from Sherlock, dark blue eyes flickering as he scans the passing landscape with an absent little smile on his face. Sherlock can finally, finally see their colour properly in the sunshine, and they are precisely the earthy cobalt he had theorized. Pretending to read the newspaper, Sherlock checks another box off in his head regarding Important Things to Learn About John Before I Die, which is now appearing to be a list he might actually make some significant headway through. He is a very fast study, after all.

"Lovely, aren't they?"

"Hmm?"

"Dunno, these sleepy little hamlets, I s'pose. People going about their lives and never leaving the place their grandparents lived in. It's nice."

"It's horrifying."

"It's--sorry, did you actually just say horrifying?"

Sherlock sets the paper aside and leans forward with his fingertips touching. "The countryside has always rather horrified me. I've often theorized that places like London, where privacy must be fought for, are much safer as far as the impunity with which crime can be committed there. How often have you heard vile tales of abuse, sex scandals and victimized children and the like, coming out of towns and suburbs just like these? It happens all the time. This girl had a child by her own father, that one was never fed, this lad was...oh, come on, you watch telly, you know I'm right. The population density in London is such that hiding, say, an imported Ukrainian sex slave, would be much more difficult. Think of the potential for hellish cruelty that could take place in these insular communities where to cover up is always preferable than to expose."

Sherlock doesn't mention it to John, but he is thinking of a Moriarty letter from when he was seventeen:

*I give ever so much thought as to where we'll spend eternity together. Oh, no, you sweet little sugar cube, not the hell we'll see each other in when we die but before--do I keep you in an abandoned warehouse in the middle of economic nowheresville or a cage in a stable on a crumbling country estate? Don't you think atmosphere is really everything when it comes to romance? We could winter in a defunct meat locker and summer on a boat with you locked below decks. I'd have to bring you everything. Would you like that? When we retire, and you've forgotten everyone else on earth except me and every sensation other than the ones we two share together, do you prefer the remote outskirts of Colchester or a soundproofed dungeon in Hindhead*
Against his own will, Sherlock shivers. John had been leaning toward the stroppy end of his bemused spectrum, but at the little shudder down Sherlock's spine, his expression quickly shifts. He's angry now. Not confused. Lips set in a rock-steady line, he folds his arms.

"No." John shakes his head. "That isn't what's going to happen."

Frowning, Sherlock asks, "What do--"

"I'm playing at observation and deduction, it's a right lark. That. Isn't. Going. To happen. To you. So just enjoy the scenery, yeah?"

Embarrassed, Sherlock fakes a put-upon scowl and snatches up the paper again. John's reflection in the train window merely smiles and shakes its blond head indulgently. Sherlock remains safe behind his paper fortress, furious. He isn't this transparent, he really isn't, or he isn't around anyone other than John. It's rather maddening. It's also perilous, given his circumstances.

*How perfect to be a closed book to the entire human race and a bloody flashing neon sign complete with synchronous bells and whistles around the one person you need to guard against, Holmes.*

They meet Violet Hunter in a coffee shop. Her electric blue hair is remarkable for its shine and ferocity and the tousled punk look she's mussed it into, but otherwise she's dressed in a loose button-up blouse with boots and a pair of skinny jeans and seems utterly normal. Well, normal except for the salient fact that she is terrified.

"You were right, it's well peak for me here," Violet says lowly, stirring coffee that doesn't require further agitation. "Every fucking day we walk to this coffee shop and Mr. Rucastle buys me lunch, yeah, and always in the front here where the windows are, never in the back with the armchairs and the puzzles and board games and whatnot. Then he tells me jokes. God, the worst jokes you've ever heard, but funny. I'm just expected to sit here having a coffee and laughing like a nob and then we go back to the house every day."

"He doesn't contact anyone while you're here?" Sherlock questions. "Leave a fork or a knife in an odd place, greet the same neighbour, that sort of thing?"

"Not him. Just says, you know, a nun gets on a bus that has no passengers. Nun says to the bus driver, 'It's tragic I know, but I'm dying and I want to have sex before I die. But I must remain a virgin so it's going to need to be anal, right, and I can't commit adultery, so obviously the bloke has to be single. Can you fulfill my wish? Driver says hell yes and shags her up the arse. He feels guilty, though, the driver, so he says, 'Sorry love, I lied--I'm married with 3 kids.' 'Cheers, mate,' says the nun, 'I lied too. I'm going to a fancy dress party. My name's Jacob, what's yours?'"

Sherlock stares blankly. John chuckles softly under his breath. Sherlock shoots him a steely look and the chuckling stops.

"What?" John protests. "Been years since I heard that one."

Sherlock rolls his eyes as extravagantly as he can.

"But sometimes, mind, I see a fellow out in the street when I'm sitting here with Rucastle. Just glancing into the shop in passing, like, but he always slows down, and it's always at the same time, always the same bloke. And that isn't the half of it. There's a whole wing of the house I'm not
meant to go in," Violet adds in a tense little whisper. "How fucking scary is that? Like a ghost story or a Korean horror film. Not on. And you're not going to believe what I found in a linen cupboard. You are not going to believe it. You'll die. It's awful. I can't even look at it."

"At what?" Sherlock demands, impatient.

Violet Hunter reaches into her purse and pulls out a long lock of electric blue hair contained in a plastic bag. Sherlock, upon opening the bag and fingering what looks like a very odd wig piece, knows at once that it originated upon a human head. Though the colour is bizarre, the extension itself is entirely natural. It's the identical shade Violet's head now proudly features. It sits there on the metal table, gleaming like a lost artifact.

Then Sherlock notices that the top ends, the ones that aren't split, are cut raggedly as if removed during the course of a severe illness, and not trimmed neatly as if performed at a hairdresser's.

"Oh!" Sherlock gasps, understanding. "Clever. Clever."

"What?" John and Violet exclaim at once.

Rescuing the imprisoned Alice Rucastle from her family's country estate proves less complicated than Sherlock imagined it might be, since her highly determined fiance has already stormed the gates and delivered her from captivity, although there is the small matter of the half-starved hound that the master of the house sets on them when he discovers his elaborate bait and switch plans have gone awry.

"I've caught you!" Ruscastle screams in the foyer, where he finds Sherlock and John and Violet after they've invaded the forbidden wing of the house and found the missing woman missing in quite a new and better sense now. "You'll never leave this property alive!"

"Oh, fucking hell, hell, he's gone for the dog," Violet gasps, turning white.

Sherlock is already running into the yard, stopping to slam the front door behind him as John emerges, licking his narrow lips while he pulls the gun from his coat. John doesn't wait for Sherlock. He breaks into a steady trot in the direction of the sound of chain link rattling and keys knocking against each other, around the angle of the house and out of their sightline, where an enclosed dog run is situated about fifty yards from the main building.

The sounds of metal on metal shift to the sounds of barking, growling, and then soon enough--a man shrieking.

John's determined pace bursts into a sprint and Sherlock follows, coattails flying, around the corner of the brick estate to where Rucastle is being slaughtered by his own dog. It's a huge famished brute, treated as Sherlock imagines Rucastle's daughter was treated, and that worries Sherlock terribly, this dog's condition and its owner left to his own devices with a daughter in an ivory tower, the dog so enraged at its own gaunt ribs and the scars from a whip on its back, its black muzzle buried in the villain's throat as he writhes and screams.

John comes within two feet of the pair before blowing the hound's brains out. Blood spatters everywhere as the abused creature twitches in its death throes, its yellowed teeth still sunk into the flesh of Rucastle's neck. His throat pulses blood sloppily onto the ground. John tucks the gun in his trousers, kneels swiftly by the dying man and the now-deceased dog with the half cranium gleaming and the now missing left eye and the grey matter strewn upon the ground, and grips the dog's jaws with both his hands. It takes a moment, but he pries them off Rucastle's neck. John's fingers come away covered in gore, and he whips the woolen scarf Rucastle was wearing looped
about his neck out from under his body. Wadding it into a thick compress, he tugs at a few of the whimpering, moaning man's wounds with his thumb and then attempts to staunch the bleeding. All the while he is very small, and perfectly at his ease, as if he were a nucleus or a center of gravity or the eye of a thunderstorm.

"I think he'll live, the prick," John remarks. He glances up at Sherlock, who now looms over him. "Kind of unfortunate, in a way."

"I was right about the countryside," Sherlock pants, half-smiling.

John grins widely. "Oh, la di da, Sherlock was right about something, sound the alarms, prepare the cannon salute, polish the dress uniforms and ready the ceremonial sabers. What, you want a biscuit every time you're right about something? There would be no biscuits left in the world. Be a dear and call nine nine nine? My hands are full."

Sherlock turns his back, and walks a few paces away, and tries to breathe a bit more slowly, and calls nine nine nine.

*You supposed you were madly in love with John Watson five minutes ago,* he thinks.

He glances back at John as the mobile rings. John seems to be muttering, "Hold still, you sorry shite, I'm trying to save your hide," to Rucastle.

Sherlock's heart is hemorrhaging blood everywhere, pooling in his torso, he can feel it, his heart aches, it's in the identical condition as Rucastle's neck.

He'd no idea what being in love with John Watson was like, Sherlock concludes when emergency services picks up. Until now.

The pair continue in this manner for the following fortnight, solving murders and robberies and kidnaps and frauds, sometimes with Lestrade and sometimes with Dimmock and sometimes entirely by themselves.

They're never *by themselves*, though, now, Sherlock realizes two days before the first Moriarty hearing is scheduled to take place. Even when John is at the clinic and Sherlock is curled up on his John-smelling bed with a book while the doctor is away. John at the clinic is still John with Sherlock, because Sherlock texts him dry observations regarding the idiots who have commented on their respective blogs, and John responds with less than serious instructions to shut it and questions over what Sherlock wants for dinner. They're still together, in a way, even when they aren't. Sherlock sleeps on the sofa at night with a resolution that is beginning to baffle his colleague, but *oh*, is it worth it---worth it for the clinic hours that are full of John's scent on Sherlock's military-neat bed, and small doses of cocaine, never enough to be impaired when John arrives back. He can't be allowed to notice the drugs, and thus Sherlock is careful now.

Because it is likewise worth it to be careful and secretive in exchange for the way the whole flat has changed, livened, now John is here. 221B now better resembles Sherlock's mind palace than it does a mere residence--memories and associations lurking in every corner, anecdotes and small smiles called to mind by the garishly printed paper and the mirror and the skull on the wall with the headphones, information embedded like code in the floor plan, just the way whole
encyclopedias reside in the palace inside Sherlock's head. Only 221B has become a study in John.

Life--apart from Moriarty's possibly imminent arrival, and occasional dry reports of preliminary trial proceedings from Mycroft, which are ignored--is perfect.

Then John almost dies.

They are on a small squat ship at the time, a Dutch-owned ship called the Friesland, that is sitting in dry dock just off the Thames. It's a dumpy cargo vessel in for repairs, which wouldn't be a problem in the smallest under normal circumstances. However, as it happens, the crew experienced a breakdown in mechanics mere hours after having taken on a huge supply of illegal drugs and smuggled weaponry that is now going to be late arriving in Vladivostok. And is guarded by the sort of men who enjoy killing.

Sherlock has been threatened enough times in his life, and knows enough about international law, that he is careful about this sort of thing. So Lestrade is there as well as an alarming number of men and women from the drug squad and port authority, and the fight is over and most of the grim-faced men in custody before anything very interesting happens. Other than a spectacularly successful number of arrests being made and a massive amount of contraband being seized.

Standing on the deck of the ship with John at his side and a little ways behind him, Sherlock is indulging in a very showy round of How I Figured It Out and the Rest of You Lot Are Idiots, when a burly smuggler with facial tattoos and a desperate expression--as if, Sherlock thinks in the split second before he cannot think at all, the man would far rather be imprisoned for a British crime on British soil than be sent back to Russia without their treasure--breaks away from the policeman handcuffing him, the one now threatening to fire, and throws John bodily over the side of the ship into the dry dock.

After that, Sherlock doesn't remember things very well at all. And his memory is usually quite clear.

He is racing down the gangplank with John's name on his lips as four officers subdue the smuggler and Lestrade shouts after Sherlock.

He is stumbling down the steps of the small dry dock, slipping on spilled diesel.

He is kneeling on wet wood at the bottom next to where John hit a large overstuffed barrow full of lumber with a muddy tarp on it and then slid to the ground on his back.

John's eyes are closed. He is perfectly still.

Sherlock is not thinking at this time, so he doesn't remember afterwards what he was thinking. But several long moments pass with his hands on either side of John's small crumpled body, the fear so overwhelming he feels as if it's drowning him, staring, and then one hand is on John's cheek and the other is checking his pulse at the throat.

John's heart is beating, but John is not breathing.


Sherlock is about to lean down and force his own air into John's motionless lungs, potential aggravation of a spinal injury be damned, when the doctor's head rolls experimentally and he blinks, opening stunned eyes to the sky. The former soldier winces, then gasps.

"Oh, thank you. Please don't be hurt. Tell me you're not hurt," Sherlock is chanting over and over
again. His hands are in John's hair now, and it's soft, it's so soft, the dark blond strands, and he's gently cradling the fragile bones that keep his mind intact, trying to keep the spinal column still. "John, stop moving your head, you fell nearly eighteen feet. John. Are you hurt? Where are you hurt? Please for god's sake say that you aren't hurt."

John coughs violently and seems to revive a little. He is far too broken looking, however, lying like a bird shot from the sky on the sandy, dank-smelling dry dock. His eyes, small fragile precious things eyes skulls hearts bones lungs, manage to focus on Sherlock's face.

"Oh, fuck me," he groans. "That bastard." John tries to lift his head.

"No no no," Sherlock cries, bending his brow and adding it to the cage of his hands. Now he has John's skull, breakable shatterable smashable skull, trapped by two hands and one forehead and that ought to get his point across. He will be a box for John's small perfect head, he will be a fortress, he will be a bloody barricade. "You could have a spinal injury, tell me for god's sake you don't have a spinal injury. I couldn't--don't be hurt, please don't be hurt. Take your time and think and don't move. Where does it hurt?"

"Jesus, Sherlock, where doesn't it hurt, I'm fine." John's warm hands are gripping Sherlock's forearms now, and Sherlock realizes his own eyes are wet. "Hey. Watch this." John kneels him.

"Oooow ow ow, fuck," John hisses, "yeah, that is the bruise to end all bruises. Sherlock. I fell on my side on the barrow. Took about four feet off the landing total."

"You weren't moving," Sherlock says, and his voice is trembling. "You weren't moving, weren't breathing, I saw. Stop lying to me. Tell me."

"Okay," John says more gently, "I have a giant bruise and maybe a cracked rib on my left side, I scraped my elbow landing, my ankle might be a bit twisted, and the wind was knocked out of me when I hit the floor. And I bumped my head a little. It hurts, but it isn't even a concussion, I think, just a goose egg. I was stunned, Sherlock, you understand? It looked bad, but it isn't. Nothing serious. Do you think you can let go of my head, please."

Sherlock can't breathe himself, now. He pulls back a little. He looks up above at the ink-faced smuggler where he is being hauled off the gangway by four not very gentle officers. A rage so great it threatens to send his entire brain offline sweeps through Sherlock and he finds himself screaming, "I would have murdered you in cold blood. Do you fully comprehend that? If you had broken this man's neck, I'd have taken the nearest gun away from the nearest agent and shot you like a fucking dog, do you hear me?"

The man's eyes widen. So do those of the Scotland Yarders Sherlock now realizes have gradually surrounded them on the dry dock's upper level.

The man is dragged away out of sight.

Lestrade has joined them inside the dry dock proper, on the steps. Lestrade's mouth opens. It's moving. Sherlock suspects Lestrade might be saying something to him. He isn't certain, can't be certain of anything anymore. Lestrade's face is pale and his eyes are creasing kindly at the edges, wind ruffling his silver hair. Lestrade, already nearly to the bottom, steps onto the floor of the dry dock and sits on the ledge, hunched in his windbreaker, making himself roughly the same height as Sherlock, since the sleuth remains kneeling with John's face in his hands. Lestrade is still saying something, this time a bit louder.
Sherlock can't hear a word.

"Sherlock, let me sit up, yeah?" John asks again.

Sherlock sits back on his heels and closes his eyes, his entire body shaking. He wraps his arms around his ribs and grits his teeth. He fists his hands, which had just been holding John's mortal temporary animate beautiful brittle cranium and now aren't touching him any longer. Sherlock thinks he might be sick. John has pushed himself up and is sitting before him now, he senses, though he does not see. A hand reaches out and lightly brushes against something wet on his cheekbone. That's John's hand. So John really is fine. That is good. Sherlock swallows, stomach churning.

"Hey," John's voice says hoarsely. He sounds more than a bit off. "You practically perfect nutter. Hey, I'm fine. Look at me."

Sherlock obeys.

John's face is wracked with concern and fondness, his entire brow wrinkling and his blue eyes narrowed on either side of his fine delicate fracturable crushable upturned nose.

Sherlock begins to sense, if only dimly, what just happened.

Panic mounting, he glances at Lestrade, who is still moving his mouth with no sound coming out, as if someone had turned the mute button on.

"Sherlock, you're scaring me a little," John says. "Can you take a deep breath for me? Just out through your mouth and in through--Sherlock? Hell no, come--Sherlock."

Lestrade, Sherlock realizes in his peripheral vision as he blinks the moisture from his eyes and flees, up, up the steps of the dry dock with John too slow and bruised to follow, is also calling after him. So are several other plainclothesmen and detectives, unless they are simply moving their lips for no reason. Sherlock pays them no mind.

When he reaches the surface, he runs for the road, away from the terrible boat and the colleague who just stared into Sherlock's eyes and must have seen nothing within them save for an impossible, tragic, foolish, and undying love.

When John arrives home, the flat is dark. Sherlock had wanted it that way for many reasons. John took his time coming back, enough time to get an x-ray in fact, and to check for internal injury at hospital, though not enough time to file a statement with the police, which means he was worried. Sherlock blinks in the glare when his flatmate flicks the lights on. They illuminate a glass bottle, a tourniquet, and a syringe on the coffee table with Sherlock sitting on the sofa before the small tableau, feet tucked up to one side, fingers tented up by his lips, now dressed in cotton drawstring sleeping clothes with a loose-necked t-shirt. He cleaned the blood off his arm so John wouldn't have to see that, because it pains him, Sherlock knows it pains him, but the mark is still plain as day.

"Oh, do not tell me--" John cuts himself off. He pulls off his coat gingerly. He sounds as much exhausted and sad as he is furious. "Fuck you, you absolute wanker. Jesus, that is just perfect. Morphine or cocaine?"
"Morphine," Sherlock murmurs without looking at John. "Morphine is for forgetting. I packed your things for you."

"You what?"

"I packed your things, you can be gone in five minutes if you like, I just couldn't find your medal of valour. You probably hid it again after I found it in your shaving kit."

There is a long pause. John approaches. A tiny shadow cast by a very large soul.

Sherlock continues to study his drug paraphernalia. "I'm sorry you were almost killed in the course of a career that isn't yours, but now it won't happen again. you see, you needn't stay, and you were right, I am a drug addict. You couldn't possibly want to live with a drug addict, and I've been continuing to use since you've been in the flat. It's for my brain, my brain's balance is essential to my profession, and my brain doesn't...it doesn't work when there are too many peripheral distractions, too much white noise, like anxiety over collateral damages to colleagues during drugs busts, for instance. The legal and professional ramifications of that sort of thing, I can't be concerned over trifles, you understand, so it's best for all concerned to end it now, I think."

"Sherlock, are you still sodding high?"

Sherlock glances at John, who looks decades older than he did this morning. "No. I wanted to be sober again when I said goodbye to you. I'm glad I calculated the timing of your visit to A&E so accurately. How are you?"

John grimaces. "About ready to punch you in the mouth. And fine. Giant hematoma, no cracked ribs, a swollen ankle and a sore spot on my head. You need to hear this Sherlock, I am fine, and you are a very poor liar."

"How dare you accuse me of lying?" Sherlock snaps coldly.

"One, because you'd have to still be high to imagine I am moving out. Baker Street is close to the clinic and a very nice flat. It's convenient. I'm keeping it. Two, because you don't do drugs to fix what's in your head."

"Oh, how very perceptive, what's your alternate suggestion, my spleen?" Sherlock sneers.

John taps two fingers over his heart and stares.

Sherlock, determined not to hear any of this, because he can't, he simply cannot, closes his eyes.

All is quiet for a very long time. Sherlock thinks about John's grip on his gun, about the lightness of his step, about the sun in his hair, and about how still John was at the bottom of the dry dock, and how John has to leave. Tonight. The alternative is excruciating.

"Wonder boy, we're not through talking here."

Sherlock discovers that John is still staring at him. Not in any previously noted manner, and he had begun to think he had memorized them all.

"I'm trying to tell you that I'm a moron," John says softly.

"Practically everyone is," Sherlock sniffs. "You're no different."

"Sherlock." John pauses, then leans forward in that wonderfully steady way he has, and Sherlock's
heart clenches. "Do you want to tell me something?"

Sherlock shakes his head. He cannot, cannot tell John aloud what John wants to know. If John knew for certain that Sherlock loved him, if it were out between them like a dissection subject with an open chest cavity, then John would want to be intimate, which would lead to him fancying Sherlock, which would lead to disappointment when Sherlock couldn't respond, which would lead to shame on John's part, which would lead to him avoiding Sherlock, which would lead to him leaving Sherlock after angry words, hateful words, instead of this simple, clean, heartbreaking goodbye.

The detective can see it in his mind like a map, the steps to John's departure from his life. They are so clearly marked, so certain. Sherlock doesn't even think he would mind sex with John any longer. It might even be enjoyable. He likes it when they're close, when they brush skin over skin. He loved having John's face in his hands, though he detested the reason. He could kiss him and hold him and smell him and taste him, and all of that sounds miraculous, better than Christmas. John could even fuck Sherlock if he really wanted to, if he wasn't happy with anything else—he's a doctor, he'd be kinder than some, the detective thinks. But then he would question why Sherlock remained entirely unaffected and in fact preferred to be so, preferred to remain safely unaroused and avoid the terrible overwhelming flooding shrieking sensations he suffers whensoever he comes.

John would lose his confidence, and Sherlock would lose his only friend after having a taste of what he wants. Instead of before.

Instead of now. When it's bearable. If only just.

Sherlock schools his expression, but John has adopted a persistent look, his mouth soft.

Confess, the look seems to say.

It isn't going to happen. If Sherlock can keep his secret, then he can keep John in his memory the way they have been the last two weeks, without bad sex and worse recriminations and still worse disgust, keep John's laugh and his ridiculous typing and his thoughtless bravery. He can keep them locked away in his heart like treasures, to take out and examine when the world is horrible. Which it will be forever now, without John.

"Sherlock, I'm going to turn the telly on and come over there," John says at length. "We're going to watch something silly and you can tear it to pieces and we'll take all the parts of today that were shite and just forget about them, all right? And if I do anything you don't like, you tell me. Immediately."

Sherlock's breath freezes in his chest. What could John be talking about?

John collects the morphine and its accessories with obvious loathing and moves them to the small breakfasting table, where he covers them with a pillow from the armchair. Then John picks up the remote and switches the set on to a talk program, turns the volume up a bit, and comes over to sit next to Sherlock.

Only he doesn't just sit next to Sherlock.

He seats himself and reaches over, nails gently scratching Sherlock's granite-hard back where the muscles are knotted with terror. He reaches further and tugs at Sherlock from the side, and Sherlock lets himself list over oh god what is he doing Jesus Christ until he is laying with his head in John's lap. He smells like home and warmth and pine and distant star systems, like every good
thing Sherlock has ever imagined, and Sherlock's feelings swell until they can't fit in his ribcage any longer. John's arm stays snugged tight around him, and his other hand comes to rest in Sherlock's hair, tenderly carding through the curls.

Sherlock could cry. That, he thinks, would be beyond absurd after the day they passed. But nevertheless.

"Hugh Grant has turned stammering into an art form," John says thoughtfully of the man on the telly, who does indeed seem to be stammering a great deal.

Closing his eyes, Sherlock lets sight and sound drift away, training all his keen senses on smell and touch. John's worn jeans are soft, and his thigh is compact. Sherlock doesn't deserve this, he doesn't. He can't be enough for John. John is normal, and normal people want things he can't give them. John is already far too attached to Sherlock, and Sherlock knows that he deliberately cultivated this situation, and feels a crushing wave of guilt. But he nuzzles his nose into the fabric anyhow, pushes back into the hand in his hair, takes as much as he can because he knows it can't last and that John is doing this out of sweetness, not passion.

A hand in his hair should not provoke this extreme a reaction. It's unscientific. It's also manifestly asinine.

"I can't think why I didn't see it before today," John says very quietly. "It was just...so fast, I missed it, that's all. I thought I was imagining things. I didn't think I could possibly mean that to you, not a bloke like me who can't even decide if he's more disgustedly normal or disgustedly broken. You know? And I didn't know you at all, still hardly know you, so I didn't trust myself to see what it was, never at the beginning, and then later maybe I think I just wouldn't believe it. As in refused to believe it. I was afraid to be wrong. That would have--god, wrecked me, you know? If I'd been wrong about you. I think it happened that night I jumped in the cab like a tosser after you told me I was good and not nice, that. That was. I should have known then. But if I'd read you badly and allowed myself to, to picture us, and I'd made a mistake, I'd have. I don't honestly know. That would have been pretty ugly for me. But I see it now, okay?"

Sherlock could say see what? But he won't risk it. So he bites his tongue instead. It hurts, but less than the alternative.

John snakes his hand down and finds Sherlock's. When he lifts it, he kisses the base of Sherlock's wrist and then weaves their fingers together, keeping his arm around Sherlock with their appendages attached now and his other hand combing evenly through curls.

"Fine, be that way," he says. "Prat. I have all the time in the world."

But I probably don't, Sherlock thinks.

Sherlock shivers and snugs in still closer. He falls asleep that way, with the man stammering in the background, and his friend's hand together with his hand clutched over his heart.
Chapter 10

Sherlock awakens to the dull ashen light of an overcast dawn in London, stretched to his full length on the sofa, covered with a blanket, his arms full of army doctor.

At first, he imagines he is dreaming. Then he realizes he isn't. And remembers.

Oh.

He swallows, heart speeding in a way that feels distinctly dangerous after coming off a morphine dose and having been in a dead sleep seconds ago. His mouth is dry, head faintly aching, but oh how very good it is here. John's uninjured side is tucked between Sherlock and the sofa's back, his fine blond head on Sherlock's lean shoulder, his knee over Sherlock's leg with his foot twined between the detective's, his hand resting lightly on Sherlock's right pectoral muscle with the fingers slightly curled, Sherlock's hand cradling the elbow. Releasing it in favour of lifting the blanket slightly, Sherlock realizes John must have left him for long enough to strip and then cover the pair of them, for John's clothing is neatly folded on the armchair. He's wearing boxers and a white undershirt. The shirt has rucked up a little in his sleep, which means the fingertips of Sherlock's other hand are tracing his flawless beloved twistable fracturable snappable spine.

Before he can even think what he's doing, Sherlock pictures the scene at the dry dock and tightens the embrace, lowering his nose to bury it in John's hair. He still smells of warm tea and of cedar chests filled with stacks of thrilling, perilous, fantastical stories.

"Mmmm," John says.

Sherlock startles a little. "Sorry, I--"

"I'm not." John's voice is rough with dreams and disuse.

Sighing, Sherlock returns his nose to John's head and runs his hand up John's bicep, feeling hard muscle and soft skin, simultaneously curling his nails against John's bare back. A small pleased sound comes from John's throat.

This is beautiful frightening marvelous thrilling terrifying delightful, the detective thinks, though the words are not a string in his mind but a single concept, one that looks rather like a mobius strip made of braided blood vessels. It interests him. He tucks it in a stainless steel drawer in the underground laboratory of his mind palace for further study. His hearing, meanwhile, seems to be back to normal. It had startled him tremendously back at the Friesland, not hearing anyone or anything save for John. But now the clock ticks along faintly and there is traffic in Baker Street beyond the window.

"How'd you sleep?"

"I can't recall." Sherlock raises his head fractionally, leaving his lips against John's scalp. "Your gun is in the microwave. Or part of it is."

"How d'you know that?"

"Here you are. Obvious."
"Oh. Yep. Doesn't mean you aren't incredible, just that I'm stupider before coffee."

Sherlock smiles, and that shifts the strands of John's hair, and that is magical. "You slept well. You'd have woken me otherwise."

"Yeah. Other than the bruising, I was about as comfortable as I've ever been. But I've been up a couple of times for Vicoden. It's mine, by the way, hands off."

Gritting his teeth, Sherlock gently folds the blanket down and pulls the edge of John's undershirt up.

The bruise is spectacular. Purple and yellow and abraded red and even a vicious near-black, fading to yellow at the edges. It curves a little toward John's pale back and a little towards the smooth flesh of his belly. If someone had smashed a wrecking ball against John's side, it couldn't have looked any worse. It fills Sherlock with a rage so intense he thinks that the Russian gangster, wherever he is, can probably feel it. And Sherlock isn't even looking at the entire thing. He promptly tucks two fingers in the waistband of John's boxers and yanks them down sideways. The bruise continues over his hipbone, nearly to where the small line of muscle marks his pelvis with a V, and up along the side of John's arse.

"Sherlock, just an FYI here, no direct objections, you can see me starkers all you like, but you tearing my pants down is shortly going to lead to a very predictable biological reaction on my part, one that will necessitate me leaving this sofa to have a wank, and I'm pretty cozy right now."

"I'm going to kill him," Sherlock hisses, carefully returning the boxers to their former state and pulling John closer to his chest.

John chuckles into Sherlock's t-shirt. His eyes are still closed. "You mentioned as much. 'In cold blood,' I think you said, though, which is frankly, um. Wrong. That ever so slightly mischaracterizes what you were feeling. 'In incandescent rage' would work. 'In blind fury' is good."

"He hurt you," Sherlock whispers. "I don't care how you characterize it so long as he dies."

"I'm actually going to send him a thank you card."

"Excuse me?"

"Gratitude is often expressed through a note in the post. It's only decent."

"Are you deliberately winding me up?"

John shifts, resting his head on his hand and gazing down at Sherlock, blinking. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the faint light. He rubs them with his fingers briefly, then says, peering into Sherlock's face, "No. I'm perfectly serious. It was worth it."

"Don't say that to me."

"You don't have a choice in the matter. It would have been worth it if I'd been thrown off a bloody smuggling ship a thousand times. To know that you..." He shakes his head. "It was worth a bruise, okay?" Clearing his throat, he drops his hand and traces his fingertips down the column of Sherlock's neck. "Any more inclined to talk than you were last night?"

Sherlock feels warmth spreading at the touch, from his neck down his arms and into his palms. And no, he is not more inclined to talk, although many, many things require saying.
"This is a bad idea," he remarks softly.

John frowns and pulls his hand away. He's anxious. Sherlock realizes with a rush of discomfort that John's pulse is thudding rather frantically where his torso is mashed up against the detective's. John, who isn't afraid of anything, is presently quite afraid of something. It's incongruous on him, as if he had suddenly become very large or very cruel. John being frightened doesn't make a bit of sense, but when Sherlock eliminates the impossible, that is what has happened. Not that there isn't significant cause for alarm on several counts. Sherlock wonders which of the many, many, many practical things to be afraid of he's worrying over.

"A bad idea because of the sex thing or the Moriarty thing?" John asks.

"Yes."

"Which?"

"Because of everything."

"I don't care about your daft idea of everything."

"Well, I do."

"I concede that, but--"

"Doesn't my opinion count, then?"

"Of course it does. We're a pair of bloody Englishmen, I don't need you to whisper sweet nothings or declare your undying whatever or bare your soul or anything like that, I just..." John winces his eyes shut.

"You're frightened of something. You're never frightened. Well, except about sleeping. What's wrong?" Sherlock inquires, frowning. "Specifically, I mean, as many things are wrong at the moment."

John pulls in a deep breath. "Um. All right. Last night you fell asleep on me and it was, that was good, okay, and when I went to change, I just, I'd forgotten you'd packed my things, and it--I couldn't look at it, couldn't even. Just touching the zip was. Seeing that duffel bag outside your bedroom door, I started thinking about you know, bedsits and pensioners' housing and it bloody gutted me, I just...I left it there and stripped off and crawled on top of you, I should have asked, I know, I'm sorry, that was wrong of me, but. It was so quiet at my old flat, and the last few weeks, it's like the part in The Wizard of Oz where the colour flicks on. There's not going to be any pressure to do anything, okay? Not talk, or touch if you don't want to, or, I don't know, we can go back to how it was before, I can pretend I don't understand. Just don't... You're amazing, I think you're amazing. I don't have to say anything else save for that if you like. But you packed my things and I was so alone and I owe you so much--"

Sherlock reaches up and cups the back of John's neck and tugs him down again. He goes readily, breathing much, much too hard into the sleuth's neck. It's unspeakably painful. John frightened cannot be comfortable for John, but for Sherlock it is practically unbearable. It smells of gunsmoke and animal terror and it is all Sherlock's fault. It needs to be stopped, and instantly.

"I'll unpack the bag myself," Sherlock offers.

John makes a laughing sound that is far more jagged and broken than Sherlock can readily stand. "Yeah, that. Would be much appreciated. Cheers."
"I didn't properly calculate the effect it would have on you."

"It was nauseating. I almost had a panic attack in the hall."

Sherlock tangles his fingers in John's hair. "See?" he murmurs, shutting his eyes. "I've already hurt you. This is a terrible idea."

"Shut up."

"But I'll hurt you again, over and over."

"I've hurt you already, I've called you crazy, called you a tease, we got past it, it didn't affect your...the way you think of me."

This is true. But irrelevant.

"That doesn't matter. It'll be ruinous, I can't even shag you, let alone make you happy, and anyway my life expectancy is atrocious."


"It's the truth."

"I don't care."

"That's absurd. Why not be logical about this?"

"Because yesterday when I fell you looked--this isn't about logic."

"Everything I am is about logic."

"That's a right laugh. And for the record, if you'd fallen that far and seemed as dead as I think I did, I'd have...looked the same as you. Okay, Sherlock? The exact. Same. Identical. That's. That's really all we need to say about it if you want to consider the subject closed."

Sherlock swallows the lump that is threatening to build in his dry throat. He can picture it happening all too easily, Sherlock imprisoned with bamboo under his fingernails and water dripping down down down down, and John hurting over it. John, it turns out, is too affectionate for his own good. He deserves, here with his warm skin and his soft hair and his lined face and his blue eyes, only good things, and Sherlock is desperately worried he cannot provide them.

"I believe you, but I hate the thought of that. So you ought to go now. It would be better for both of us in the long run if--"

"Stop it," John begs, "just, god, shut up, please, if you can't make it better then stop making it bleeding worse, will you? I'm right, you know I'm right. Tell me the things I'm right about."

Sighing, Sherlock shifts marginally and goes back to dragging his fingers lightly back and forth across John's spine. This is useless. John isn't going anywhere, Sherlock realizes. John is stuck. And Sherlock stuck him there. And very possibly, John is in fact right. He is right about most everything. When he said the crisper was no place for a human hand, that was true if inconvenient. When he said that the earth went around the sun, and Sherlock Googled it, that was true too. John, apparently, is an immovable object, and there is nothing to be done about it.

Sherlock allows himself a small smile.
"Well, I am amazing," he owns.

John laughs again, but it still sounds nothing like happiness. "Yeah. Yeah, you are."

"And my flat is nice."

"Mmm-hmm."

"And I...didn't like seeing you hurt."

"Understatement of the buggering decade."

Fitting his palm to John's cheek, Sherlock lifts the doctor's head. His face is much paler than it should be and the wrinkles beneath his eyes have taken on a bruised look. "You need to comprehend I am a brain, and I treat the rest of me as a mere appendix. With drugs. With sex, when I did have sex. With people. I've never been in a relationship in my life. Sally Donovan was right the other day. About me and humans. They hate me, and I--"

"You don't hate people, you can't bear to be alone. You hate what people did to you," John breathes. His eyes are piercing, sapphire-bright points. "I don't know who it was, but I want to wring that person by the neck."

Sherlock thinks of Reggie, of the days after the ill-fated kiss, of the one letter Sherlock dared to write, apologizing, even asking if they couldn't be friends again, and of the response to his plea for forgiveness, which was a single line delivered the next day reading *I've no notion what I ever saw in you in the first place, but from now on stay well clear of me--you're poison.* In all the years of torment, Sherlock can't think of a single letter from Jim Moriarty in all the litanies of hatred that hurt more than Reggie's unsigned note.

"I've been told I am not good for...people," he says hoarsely.

"You're good for me," John says fervently, "you're so bloody good for me, you know you are, the sleeping, the adventuring, the how do you call it, *bustling*, the violin, the having someone, you're the best thing I can think of and you practically forced me into it."

"Yes, and that rather alarms me."

"Frankly it alarms me too."

"I'm dangerous, even you said so."

"Yeah, but I'm the one invaded Afghanistan."

Sherlock can't help but smile at this, and John hesitantly mirrors the expression. So he is still frightened, Sherlock realizes. Of how Sherlock will respond, the decisions Sherlock will make, the choices and the options and the paths.

The detective feels something significant within him shift. He has spent a very great deal of time not being afraid, no, he isn't frightened of Moriarty or the letters, well, he was when he was a child, but anyhow now it's merely a chemical reaction like any other chemical reaction artificially or naturally produced, but Sherlock knows what it feels like to be frightened because the chemical reaction and actually being frightened feel the same, not that he's in fact *afraid*, of course he isn't, but in any event Sherlock never wants John to feel that way again. And if what is required for John not to be frightened is that Sherlock is brave, he decides he can do it. He has a pair of bollocks, and he will man up to the challenge. If this means keeping John here rather than sending him
away, Sherlock will manage it courageously, he determines. If it means having a relationship, he will try it. If it means protecting John from hazards like bullets and spinal injuries and James Moriarty and Sherlock himself, he will fucking do what it takes. And that is that.

"Say yes to me," John whispers. "Don't think, you sodding brain-in-a-jar, just say yes."

"Yes," Sherlock says, "yes, fine, yes, but--"

"Stop right there," John grins, with his thumb tracing over Sherlock's ample lower lip. "Yes was plenty. Down to brass tacks, now. You like having your hair touched."

"Everyone does," Sherlock scoffs, nipping at the thumb.

"And the, you know, sleeping together."

"Yes."

"Cuddling, for lack of a better word."

"For god's sake, surely there must be one?"

John's smile widens. "Not that I'm aware of. How about kissing?"

"Yes, only not on the mouth."

Despite the fact kissing John would be something akin to paradise, he says it because kissing ruined his life, and because that's what he always says. The response is nearly automatic.

No, not on the mouth, I don't care how much extra you'll give me. The answer is still no, and honestly I don't see why you would give a damn. Well, if that means it's off, then it's off, that's all. Other people exist with access to coke. No means no on this front, non-negotiable. It's none of your business why--because I said so. Why does everyone insist they want this from me? It's just casual sex, this should not be so complicated. No, it's not against you, I just won't, that's all. I can't, I never do, and no, nothing you can say will change my mind.

John's face is doing something complicated.

"Are you already disappointed?" Sherlock snaps.

John looks swiftly horrified. "No, god no, I was just thinking, and I see why that's, yeah, it's intimate and there are, you know, fluids and. Other kissing is fine?"

"Other kissing is fine."

John ducks down at once and brushes his lips across Sherlock's eyebrow, mouthing at the bone, tenderly pressing a very slightly open-lipped kiss to it. Sherlock can feel it like a gamma ray from the top of his prickling scalp to the tips of his oh-so-warm toes.

"That sort of kissing?" John asks softly. "Good?"

"Um. Yes," Sherlock says, slightly breathless. "Good."

Descending with an almost predatory look, John next mouths across Sherlock's jaw, which elicits a gasp. There are lips, plentiful lips, and their soft undersides, and the scrape of teeth, and finally a bit of tongue. Sherlock is uncertain whether stars should be bursting behind his eyes, but that is emphatically the case.
John stops. His face is flushed. "That sort of kissing?"

Growling, Sherlock catches John's head and nuzzles and kisses and licks, finally discovering what it tastes like where the doctor's jaw meets his ear. It's velvet cream sandstone starlight. John makes a sound like a happy panther, so Sherlock keeps right on doing it fantastic amazing, god, you're the amazing one. Eventually, after he's had nowhere near his fill but can't quite breathe, he gently bites John's earlobe and John laughs out loud.

Sherlock drops back, gasping. "Good?"

"Yeah," John says. He laughs again. "Yeah, good. Are we okay now?"

Sherlock bites his lip. "I hope so. I'm sorry about the bag."

"And the morphine?"

He thinks it over. Not really, no, that was for John to see Sherlock plainly and then leave him, but as that hadn't panned out quite the way Sherlock expected...

"If you like," he concedes.

"I do."

"Fine, then."

"You can make it up to me."

"Yes, name it."

John rolls up, throwing the blanket off their legs and heading with a pleased look for the loo. He's limping a bit, but on the other foot from the psychosomatic one. "We're taking you to the clinic," he declares. "You've been using for a decade, I've been remiss in not doing this before now. Get dressed. I have many pressing concerns about you in general, but specifically, today we're focusing on your heart and your liver."

"This is grotesquely unnecessary," Sherlock grouses, seated on John's exam table. He isn't working today, but he looks very doctorly anyhow, drawing blood and consulting charts and scribbling forms and tapping his fingers on file folders and writing requests for testing. It would be very charming if Sherlock weren't sitting here with his shirt unbuttoned, watching John make concerned professional faces as he listens to Sherlock's heart through a stethoscope. He is unspeakably bored. He has already memorized the medical posters, the ones he thinks will be relevant to crime somehow, and now the walls are closing in.

"Yeah, well, you don't consider eating necessary, so...breathe deeply for me?"

Sherlock obeys, letting out a gust of disdain on the exhale.

John merely smiles. "I'm dead certain you've not had a checkup in years, so don't be an arse about it."
"I am fine."

"You are, probably, but seeing as how you abuse street drugs and I don't quite know how to get you to quit yet, we're making certain. Breathe."

"Breathing is boring."

John whaps him in the chest with the stethoscope. So Sherlock breathes. John is staring rather intently at his chest, he realizes a moment or two later. It's a pleasant sensation, the being observed, even if the exam itself is ludicrous. Sherlock watches John watching him, watches him counting freckles and sparse scattered moles and the smooth planes of his breastbone and the muscles of his abdomen and the curve of his ribs. Sherlock is aware he is attractive in theory, likes his transport in the abstract, but it has never been this satisfying in the past. It's a bit like John calling him amazing. It's rather lovely.

"You like the way I look," Sherlock muses.

A smile quirks into life on John's face. "Yep."

John moves the metal stethoscope. But it's an excuse, Sherlock theorizes. There's nothing wrong with his lungs, for god's sake. He smirks at the top of John's head.

"Hmm. You can see more of it, if you want to. Without the doctoring."

"Oh, god," John laughs, "I'm fine, you don't have to--"

Then someone raps at the door and John calls "Yes?" and Sarah walks in.

The sleuth feels his hackles, if he has hackles, instantly rise.

Sarah is small and curvaceous and rather charming, and she is smiling, and wearing a pink dress that doesn't suit her hair, which for some reason Sherlock finds infuriating. Her shoes are sensible and her eyes sincere. She seems the sort of person normal people like. A nice person. Not a dangerous one, not a person with sharp edges and dark depths. Sarah probably gained her medical degree in order to help strangers live longer lives, had liked the idealism and the goodness of the profession, and she probably couldn't kill a mouse that hadn't already been slain for dissection to save her life, and she probably catches the insects she finds in her flat and carries them outside and sets them free. It's repulsive.

"Oh, hello again," Sarah says brightly to Sherlock. "Everything all right?"

"Wonderful," Sherlock drawls.

Putting her hand on John's arm in a casual way, she says, "So sorry to interrupt, John, I know you're just popping in for a bit, but can I get you to sign off on--"

"Stop touching him," Sherlock snarls.

Sarah's hand drops. She turns to Sherlock, startled. Her eyes are doelike, round and pretty and unsure of how she caused offence. Sarah looks instantly apologetic following the confusion. As well she should. John has fucked her, many times, and Sherlock loathes her.

"Jesus, Sherlock--" John begins to say.

But Sherlock is already hopping off the exam table and buttoning his shirt and sweeping his coat
off the chair and exiting this horrible white room with the horrible nice woman in it with all the haste he can muster. He hates the cold sterile air and the warm gentle woman and the places where her soft graceful hands have been. Now his shirt is half-done up and he is outside of the clinic, the air is better here, and he strides to the bench under the tall glass building and sits. Cigarettes. He needs a cigarette. He needs a cigarette like he has never needed one before. Because how dare she with her face and her hair and her small hands and he finds half a pack in his coat and lights it, detesting the fact that John is still inside. Making explanations or excuses or jokes about Sherlock or apologizing or kissing his girlfriend or sliding his fingers between her legs or--

The cigarette is snatched from his hand and ground out on the bench. Sherlock looks up in surprise.

"No," John says. He sounds tightly angry. "Drugs are one thing, but this shit will kill you."

Crossing his arms, Sherlock sneers, "Have you quite patched things up with your sweetheart, then?"

"I broke it off with her two weeks ago, you prick, when I moved in. I didn't know what would happen, but I knew we weren't going anywhere. So you just shouted at my friend. Not to mention my boss."

John sits next to Sherlock, who stares at him in awe. Everything was a bit grey for a moment there, but now he can see the green of the small hedge and the red of the passing car and the different straw-coloured shades of John's hair.

"You did?"

"Yes. You are a wanker."

"Only very occasionally."

Shaking his head in frustration, John falls silent. He swipes his tongue over his lips. He flexes his left hand a few times. There are storm clouds in his blue eyes now, ones Sherlock put there, and that is extremely annoying. They are quiet for nearly a minute, John fuming and Sherlock testing words in his head to use on him. None of them seem very appropriate. But they cannot sit on a bench with the grey sky overhead without speaking forever, that would be unbearable. Meanwhile, Sherlock isn't sorry and doesn't intend to be, so an apology--which might be the quickest route to forgiveness and is generally the approved technique--is untenable. He will have to proceed along another route.

"Okay, you have questions," Sherlock sighs at last, flipping up his coat collar and settling back into it like a shell. Talking about this will be a nightmare, he thinks, but better to get it over with before one of them is literally killed.

"Yes yes." John says the words very close together, so they sound like one word. "I do. Yes, I have questions. Now, listen, if you don't want to answer any of these ques--"

"I don't want to answer any," Sherlock growls.

"Yeah, I get that, but we're sorting this. Now. That was not a reasonable reaction to her touching me."

"Of course it was, you shagged her."

"And now we have a whatever-this-is, you're jealous about that?"
"No."

"Possessive?"

"Closer."

"Is it a Sarah thing, or would you react like that to anyone I'd slept with?"

"The latter."

"When you were sexually active, was it about affection?"

"It was about expediency."

"But what happened just now sure as hell wasn't about expediency, though?"

"Are you going to fuck other people?"

John blinks several times. "I, Christ, Sherlock, I wasn't planning on getting a leg over anytime soon, but--"

"Because I would probably kill them, fair warning," Sherlock spits out, turning away.

John mulls this over for a moment.

"Does that mean that you want to have sex with me?"

Sherlock thinks about it.

I don't want to have sex with you, I've never wanted that from anyone, but I want to fly hand in hand with you out of our window and peep into all the houses at their secrets and their lies, and then when we were through with London we would fly higher, and I would show you the star systems I observed through a telescope as a boy, and did you know I can picture them three-dimensionally? I can, because I'm marvelous, and I want to give you a night you've never had before, and I want to taste you on my tongue and let you linger on my lips and I want to turn myself inside out until I'm your entire world because I wrapped you inside with me as if we've gone supernova together, and I want to hear what someone I love sounds like when they're shouting for me like they're dying, and I want to give you every sort of pleasure imaginable now that I won't let you be frightened anymore, and none of it would matter to you, because you would see that I didn't want the same night that you wanted, that I'd be just as happy tracking trails through a forest with you or sleeping on your belly, but when you saw that for yourself, in the flesh, for a fact, undeniable, before your eyes, that you couldn't arouse me, that I didn't want what you did in the same way you wanted it, it would be over.

"No," he says.

"Right, unsurprising, right, but what is this about, then? I honestly can't imagine, Sherlock."

"It's about me hating her."

"That's ridiculous, you can't hate her, you don't know her. You can only hate what she was to me. And that's...you don't need to...fuck, I'm not going to dance around it anymore. I get why you don't want to talk about it, but have you seen the way I look at you?"

John's voice is growing hoarse. That is terrible. That is terrible, and one hundred percent Sherlock's fault, just the way everything else is. He turns back to his former colleague.
"It's about closeness," Sherlock attempts.

"If I can get any fucking closer to you without hurting you than I did this morning..."

"I want to give you gifts!" Sherlock shouts in despair. John stops.

"Wait," he says, waving his arms in the air. "Wait. Just. Wait. Let me rephrase something. It's going to sound crazy, but bear with me, yeah? Yes or no to this one, because I think I have it nailed."

"I'm waiting," Sherlock snaps.

"You think of sex like a trip to the dentist. And I think of sex like a trip to the races, yeah? I love it. You don't."

"Can you skip to the part where you want an open relationship, or some other ghastly disgusting--"

"You want to have sex with me, but you do not want me to have sex with you. Is that it?"

Sherlock is astonished.

For that is, as John put it, it.

A couple holding hands passes them on their way into the clinic. A raindrop falls on Sherlock's arm and he brushes it away. Time is either moving very quickly or very slowly, but it certainly is not progressing in the usual fashion. John pulls out a little bottle of Vicoden and pops one into his mouth, dry swallowing it. Then John grins, spreading his hands wide and lifting them.

"I have absolutely no problem with that."
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Warning for explicit fully consensual sex between men, one of them asexual, from here onward, with very vanilla D/s themes, and the return of Kate's all time favorite trope, top!Sherlock.

Sherlock and John's conversation is cut rather short seconds later by the fact that Bradstreet sends Sherlock an urgent text summons. It seems that a ring of combined false identity suppliers and identity thieves they have been attempting to draw their nets around, who dabble in everything from forging signatures on extensive loans to hacking bank data to providing fake passports, have finally taken Sherlock's bait and agreed to hire him on as a web consultant. The irony inherent in that Sherlock provided them with a meticulously crafted false identity himself is not lost on him, and in fact is rather delicious. And despite the seriousness of the present discussion, the mere chance at finally being allowed an employee's inside access to Conk-Singleton Identity Management Limited is too precious to be ignored. Sherlock and Bradstreet have spent far too many nights hunched over dodgy documents and peering through dull boring boring boring account statements to lose this chance.

Anyway, John has by now developed an almost Pavlovian response to Sherlock's text tone. The instant his mobile chimes, John's open face gleams with predatory anticipation. The wind ruffles his fair hair where they are seated on the bench, scattered raindrops plashing on his shoulders, and he swings one leg over the other in Sherlock's direction and nudges his calf with the toe of his shoe.

"Case?" says John affably, letting the rest lie.

"Hmm," Sherlock agrees, showing him.

"Oh, cheers. I like Bradstreet."

Sherlock narrows his eyes to silver slits and John laughs abruptly.

"Not like that I don't."

Sherlock raises his eyebrows.

"Jesus, are you going to be like this forever now?" John exclaims. "I look at a bird's earrings because they're shiny and I'm visual and you, what, break her kneecaps? What's it going to take to make you calm down? And if, you know, what I said before, we can play it by ear and all," he adds, sounding anxious again. "Should do. Right? I mean, I really have no problem with not-shagging you at all. In any way. While being, like I said, amenable to whatever level of shagging me you'd prefer. Or not prefer. But if you want to--"

Standing, Sherlock grips John by the wrist and tugs him up. John lands very nearly within the edges of Sherlock's open coat, which quite disproportionally (but everything about John is disproportionate, everything, everything about how tiny and how world-encompassing he is) is the most aesthetic thing Sherlock has ever seen in his life, John with his hair windswept and growing
damper, darker, and his eyes creasing and Sherlock's coat lapels flanking him like guardians.

"Case," Sherlock says avidly.

"Right, um." John tucks his hands in his pockets. "Yeah. You should text her back, post me up in the cab or--"

"I want to," Sherlock says against the shell of John's ear.

John swallows as Sherlock pulls back. His tongue appears, and disappears again. "You want to." He smiles. "Good. That's...I don't know what you mean, but that's. I'll wait to find out, yeah? That's good."

"Good."

"Because being pretty visual, and since I like you and all, I was kind of struck from the outset by, um, how you...are. In appearance."

"I know," Sherlock says with a smug sigh.

"No more shouting at Sarah, she's a good egg."

"Whatever you say." He strides off, trusting John will follow him. "Now let's put a wire on me and send me into a ring of ruthless identity thieves."

"Wait, let's--let's what, now? Sherlock!"

The cab ride to New Scotland Yard goes by in a rain-obscured blur, because Sherlock is filling John in on all the nefarious doings of Conk-Singleton Identity Management Limited. The re-drilling Sherlock over his false identity at the Yard takes almost no time, as Sherlock is a genius. The putting the wire on Sherlock is the work of a moment, as he's used to this sort of thing, Bradstreet taping him up and the pair sniping at each other.

"God help us, you're sort of cute like this," Bradstreet remarks, threading the wire down Sherlock's back, under the hood. They've covered his habitual posh appearance with a techie's oversized grey sweatshirt and jeans and a pair of round rimless glasses and fluffed his hair up into an almost ridiculous level of chaos, as if Sherlock were a long-haired terrier. Bradstreet had wanted something more complicated in the way of disguise, but Sherlock has always found hiding in plain sight easier. And anyway, the false identity he forged is already a work of art, having fooled the Conk-Singleton HR department. "You almost look--"

"Human?" Sherlock asks coldly, sipping coffee.

"Was going to say cuddly."

This is unexpected but still marginally unpleasant. "Well, you would know, I suppose."

"No, I'm not much a one for it, actually. More of a shag and run girl, myself. Never fear."

Bradstreet comes around the front of Sherlock's chair and looks him over, appraising. She's wearing a very professional no-nonsense dark green suitdress with black patent pumps and her short platinum hair is much spikier than the usual. Supposing it turns out John does fancy her in any way, shape or form, as she's very fit, Sherlock is going to have to break something, and John had a point, there, about kneecaps. Just then, from behind her, John comes in with a file folder and a determined look.
"My colleague will want to be in the surveillance van," Sherlock notes.

"If you don't mind," John adds evenly, joining Bradstreet.

"Nah. You were ace on the Hatherly case, and anyway, this one's nicer when you're around."


Bradstreet, grinning, elbows him. "This is nothing. Wait till he stands up. He'll completely change his posture, the ways his hips move, his center of gravity, everything, it's just brilliant. So creepy. You've not seen him do it yet, the disguise bit, apart from the lab coat at the clinic, right? Oh, you're going to love it."

John smiles broadly--first at Bradstreet, then at Sherlock, who has forgotten how to breathe. "Sounds a treat."

"Oh, it's unbelievable." Bradstreet rubs her hands together. "You know those actors at the National sometimes, the really good ones, the way you see them onstage and then you see them off and it's not like they were even wearing that different an outfit, right, but the person on the stage was just completely separate from the person at the stage door? This one..." She points a manicured nail at Sherlock. "He could have been an actor, and a rare one. It's the theatre's loss he's a consulting detective, I'm telling you. Watch this, Doctor, it's crackers. I love it. Sherlock, who are you going to be for this, Shuffling Lives-With-Mum or Vaguely Gay Programmer or Doesn't Know Where His Limbs Are?"

A brief silence falls.

Sherlock loves Bradstreet.

He loves her.

Not the way he loves John. That would be scientifically impossible. But John is practically bouncing on his toes in anticipation, his head half-cocked.

Sherlock adores Bradstreet.

"You choose," he offers Bradstreet, smiling deviously.

"Seriously?"

"Yes. It's not as if John knows the roster. Before nightfall, if you please." Sherlock examines his fingernails with nonchalant interest.

Bradstreet purses her lips and then exclaims, "Can you be Introvert Virgin Straight-But-Has-Cats? I just fucking want to squeeze him, he's to die for."

Carefully, Sherlock stands up. His head is down, but not much, his shoulders a bit defeated, one of his feet ever so slightly pointed inward, smaller steps smaller steps and as he walks to the door, eyeing it sideways instead of directly, he pulls the glasses off and polishes them on his hoodie sleeve. When he gets to the door, he turns back to Bradstreet and says, "I just, I think--don't take offense please, but you look very fit today. Sorry."

Bradstreet and John howl with laughter, Bradstreet clapping and then bending almost double and then pumping her fist in the air in a circle. John half-covers his face with his hand, looking over his fingers in admiring disbelief.
"Incredible," John says, and it sounds a little bit like he might be saying I love you, even if Sherlock cannot be certain.

Sherlock maintains his character, smiles shyly, and says, "Hadn't we better be going?" as he departs.

It isn't as if Sherlock meant to get himself locked in the Conk-Singleton basement and then drugged.

He was merely hacking into their database (expertly) in his small cubicle at his new desk (privately) after amassing some truly excellent on the job training relayed to Bradstreet and John and the rest of the team in the surveillance van via the wire (perfectly) and was now transferring hundreds of encoded files (deftly) and yes, maybe it (technically) wasn't part of the plan, but who follows plans to the letter when so much more can be accomplished, and he'd been about to stand up and make his escape (gracefully) when a security guard said "We just need you for fingerprinting, won't take a moment," and Sherlock said "Can't it wait?" (naturally) and the guard had pulled out his gun and said "No," and, once forced out of the public eye and into the freezing sublevels, doing his best to drop brief sarcastic remarks about where they were headed all the while for the sake of the wire, a chloroform-soaked rag was shoved in his face.

Everything is a bit blurry after that.

"Here, here, take it easy," John says. He is under Sherlock's arm, and they're at the upper level of a set of steps. Sherlock suspects they are in Baker Street. It smells as if they might be in Baker Street, smells of vague cigarette smoke and old walls and the fried eggs they'd had for breakfast after Sherlock unpacked John's duffel bag. And that means that John helped him up the stairs, probably, in an effort to reach their home. Sherlock suspects that might have taken a while.

"Nmf," Sherlock says.

"Yeah, well. I didn't much care for them either."

The door opens. John flicks the light on with his other hand, groaning, "Christ we are the walking wounded." The glare is terrible, all-encompassing. It lances like liquid fire.

"Ugh," Sherlock says.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry, but I need to see, okay?"

He feels as if he's coming off a wild freefalling canyon-deep skyscraper high. And he didn't even get the enjoyment. Just the punishment. His head is about to explode. His tongue is numb. He cannot feel his lips. His eyes ache. They may be bleeding. Where are his lips?

Do I still have lips?
Next he is aware, Sherlock is seated on his bed in his bedroom, and John is carefully taking his glasses off. He stops to run his finger alongside what Sherlock suspects to be a nasty cut near his hairline.

"Nng," Sherlock says, flinching.

"Sorry, I know, I know. Shh. You're all right. Can I, er." John has one hand in Sherlock's rat's nest of hair and one on his neck. "You are just kind of flirting with shock symptoms right now, and your circulation has been crap since they knocked you out. Can I get you into bed? No funny business, I promise."

"Rmm," Sherlock says, burying his head in John's stomach. It's better there. It's nice. Whatever John wants to do is fine. John is a very sensible person. He can feel John laughing through his belly. John's hands are warm, always warm. It's one of the many ways John is excellent.

"Mrm?" Sherlock asks.

"Yeah, this is probably confusing. You flew a bit too close to the sun and got yourself knocked out with a trihalomethane. You goddamn fucking lunatic. I was furious at you. Not before you pretty much locked down these Conk-Singleton bastards, mind. When you went quiet, we went in after you. They were calling the higher ups about the intruder, so they didn't get the chance to search you, thought your whole plan was to hack the mainframe, so that's a blessing. Nice narration of where you were, by the way, but Bradstreet put a tracking device on the wire. Did you know about that?"

"Nrrf."

"Thought not. I like that woman. I like her very much. Not like that, though. I like someone else like that. Can I take your clothes off? Please?"

"Hsss," Sherlock sighs, entirely amenable.

Firm hands reach down and pull the hoodie upwards. Sherlock tries to help, honestly he does, but his limbs are shaking and unsure and his vision very blurred. Once the shirt is finally off, a tow-coloured head comes into his impaired sightline and fingers begin working at the Converse he's wearing.

Before the blankness takes him, he recalls a sting of a cloth against his brow and a voice murmuring I know, love, it's almost done, and Sherlock wonders who love is, and then he senses soft clothes sliding on and let me, just let me, let me and here, shh, I've got you, and then being arranged on smooth sheets like a sacrifice and then being wrapped in a cocoon, only Sherlock vaguely recalls that cocoons are made of sealing wax and honeycomb typically, aren't they, but this cocoon isn't bone china at all, it's more like a pair of spun-sugar wings enfolding him as he drifts off into the nothingness of a cloudless summer sky.

When Sherlock awakens, the pain is mostly gone. There is still an arm around him, an arm with a tanned wrist and a pale forearm and blond hairs, and someone is breathing softly into the back of his neck, seemingly on the same pillow, and now (unlike last night, he is sure of it, last night there was only let me please and you're okay, I've got you) there is a noticeable erection jutting into his lower back.
It's morning, according to the light, which is a honey colour Sherlock associates with bees who have been mucking about with clover as opposed to, say, buckwheat or lavender or alfalfa.

The light, Sherlock realizes, it quite flattering to the arm he is observing.

Sherlock is beset with a strange feeling of deja vu. Didn't he wake up yesterday with an army doctor, and now, again, does this mean the process is to be repeated, the sleeping tangled together ad infinitum? If so, is that a reward for all the cases he's ever solved in his life, and if he keeps solving cases and keeps Moriarty at bay, will he continue to have a living breathing John in his bed?

Their bed? Could it be their bed now?

It certainly seems so, he decides. But this is such a miraculous development as to be unclear.

John is stirring a bit, his arm shifting up to Sherlock's chest rather than his thin waist.

*What happened yesterday?* There was the sofa, and then the eggs, and then the clinic, and then the fight over Sarah, and then the cab in the rain, and then Bradstreet admiring him in front of John, Sherlock loves Bradstreet, and then Conk-Singleton, and then the security guard, and then *No*, and then a rag in his face, and then stairs, there were certainly stairs, and then you goddamn fucking lunatic *I was furious at you*--

Sherlock freezes.

"Oh, Jesus, sorry," says a sleep-softened voice behind him.

John rolls away.

Sherlock, a bit alarmed, turns over. John is on his back now, wearing a t-shirt and presumably pants, one arm flung up lazily and his hair wildly sleep-mussed. He looks...he looks lovely. And he doesn't look angry, not precisely, well not at all, the lines around his mouth are perfectly calm, but Sherlock cannot recall what took them from you goddamn fucking lunatic to John sleeping with his chest to Sherlock's back and his arm around him. John yawns luxuriously.

"Did we..." Sherlock asks softly.

John's eyes blink open. His head lists in Sherlock's direction. "Did...god, no, I'd never--"

"...solve the case?"

"Oh." He smiles. "You did, yeah."

"Ah."

"You got yourself in some trouble with chloroform, but Bradstreet says that's kind of your usual thing. So. Yeah, it was fine. Scary, for a second. But fine."

"Just a day at the office, then."

"For the child prodigy consulting detective? I imagine so."

"I don't remember."

"No, you wouldn't. Prat. But you seem much better now, so that's sorted."
They fall silent. John stares at the ceiling. He isn't angry even though Sherlock can't remember apologizing after you goddamn fucking lunatic, the sleuth can tell by his respiration rate that John isn't angry. That is excellent news. Sherlock watches his chest rise and fall, the faint outline of pectorals and the clear evidence of lungs beneath, thinking, wondering what on earth John was sorry about when he rolled away. For sharing the bed? Surely not, not at this point. For calling him a goddamn fucking lunatic? Probably not, considering chloroform was involved and Sherlock, while quite capable when it comes to computers, likely should not have added hacking a mainframe to the agenda. For--

"Well," John says, sounding a bit embarrassed, "I'm just going to, um, take a quick shower, and then--"

Oh.

Before Sherlock is aware that his hand is moving, he has a John by the forearm. It's smooth in his grip, solid, small like the rest of John, but then again Sherlock has always had rather extraordinarily long fingers.

"You don't have to go anywhere," he says.

John peers at him, seeming puzzled, navy blue eyes gradually clearing in the morning light. "You--I didn't mean to alarm you, I just--"

"You didn't alarm me."

"Yes, I did."

"I couldn't remember what happened last night."

"I know, and--"

"I was thinking about it, and there was a gap, that's all."

"So it wasn't--"

"I'm not alarmed."

"But you were."

"Not by sex. Sex doesn't alarm me," Sherlock insists, exasperated.

John bites his lower lip, musing over this assertion. He looks...if Sherlock is honest with himself, and he does make every effort to be, he looks delicious, from his absolutely perfect nose to his slender lips to his John-smelling neck.

"Yeah, we did talk about that," John says slowly, "but I just, seriously, whatever else anyone you've ever met has said to you, and from the way you act I want to throttle more than half of them, I want you to know that I don't--"

Steps need to be taken, Sherlock realizes.

He abruptly sits up and tosses the covers back and swings his leg over John's lap where he is lying on his back, drawstring pajamas over a pair of boxers, and gently sits down, John's hard cock trapped beneath him and John's wide eyes staring up at him in shock.

"Sex," Sherlock repeats clearly, "doesn't alarm me."
And it doesn't. If it did, he wouldn't have offered. Oh, he did hate it with other people, loathed it with some more than others in fact, but John, Sherlock is realizing, is different. John isn't a person Sherlock despises who has something Sherlock wants but perhaps shouldn't have. John is a person Sherlock loves, though he still doesn't know whether or how he should mention that, who is something Sherlock wants, and perhaps should have. He comes with as many side effects as the drugs, Sherlock's heart murmuring and his breath being lost from time to time and the strange flutterings in his chest, but this isn't about bartering goods for services. It's an entirely different sensation, rather like the time Sherlock was introduced to chemistry or when he found a book about forensics in their library at age six, that same feeling of wanting everything to do with a subject, all at once.

"Right," John says, eyes fluttering. "Um. Good, sex doesn't alarm you. It seemed, though, that--"

"Sex doesn't alarm me. Orgasms alarm me tremendously."

"That...thank you for that distinction."

"You're welcome."

"I just want you to be okay about...everything."

"When have you seen me ever do something I didn't want to do?"

"Yeah, I get that you're a brat, trust me. But it can't just be about what I want. What--and you are, Christ, really making your point and frankly, uh, distracting me here--what do you want, and can you answer that question as quickly as possible because Jesus."

Wriggling a bit, which causes John's eyes to fall shut, Sherlock says, "I want everything to do with you. When you're not here, I want to know what you look like and what you're doing and when I text you it helps, because then I can picture you texting me back. I want to see every mood and expression you're capable of, and the entire range of your emotional and mental and physical capacity, from black to white and nil to infinity and then record it all over again with different variables at play and explore changes in your responses due to the myriad permutations and the order in which new factors are introduced. That wasn't something I wanted you to know about, since the circumstances are so challenging, but you found out after the Friesland, which makes it too late, and so I don't see what choice we have because I want to learn you completely, and if you think I can do that without having sex with you, you are far stupider than I thought you were."

John rubs at his temples for a moment. It makes the lines on his brow shift in subtle and beautiful ways.

"Holy Christ," he says flately. Then he grins, as wide a grin as Sherlock has ever seen anyone wear. "I'm all yours, you know. I think I may have mentioned that. But I'll mention it again, as often as you like."

Sherlock smiles. "Do you trust me?"

"I probably shouldn't, but I seem to, yes. Absolutely."

"And you want to do what I want?"

Pressing his hips up into Sherlock slightly, he hisses, "I really, really do."

"Then let's play a game."
John thinks about this for a moment.

"Um. What are the rules?"

Sherlock takes John's wrists between his fingers and leans on them a little, pinning them to the bed. At the same time, he rocks back and forth slightly on John's lap, which sends John's bottom lip between his teeth again and shrinks his irises and in every way makes him just a little bit lovelier than he was before.

"The rules are, one, that you do as I say. And two, you don't come until I tell you."

"Yes, okay," John says breathlessly.

And almost instantly.

Oh.

"Oh, you like that," Sherlock purrs. "Do you like being given orders because you were in the military, or did you join the military because you like being given orders?"

"It is so not that simplistic," John answers, smiling and wrinkling his nose for an instant.

Sherlock ponders this. "It's more specific. Is it specific to me?"

John flexes his left hand where it's tethered beneath Sherlock's. He clears his throat. "Um, admittedly you are very bossy. But that's not the point. You have, and I am putting this mildly here, an attractive voice. And I could get out of this within two seconds, mind, and have you completely incapacitated in another three. But..."

"But you won't," Sherlock breathes. "And you like choosing not to."

"But I won't," John agrees, lowering his own voice, "and I like choosing not to. Do I get to make requests in this game? I mean, I am a sexual enough person--as in, a very very sexual person--and you are fucking gorgeous enough that to be honest I could probably come from you reading railway timetables aloud, seriously, you could pretty much dance the Macarena and I'd get weak in the knees, which come to think of it means we're probably made for each other, but a hint or two here and there might be useful."

After considering, Sherlock nods. "Three requests."

"Like a genie?" John chuckles. "Fucking start this game, I am desperately uncomfortable. Go."

Dismounting, Sherlock descends to his side, propping his head on his elbow. John watches him, turning his own head on the pillow. His hands, once they're freed, go to his belly and he links his fingers.

"First, do you need painkillers?" Sherlock asks, dragging his fingers over John's elbow.

"Nope. Taken care of. I'm fine. First, are you still chemically impaired?" John adds, suddenly concerned.

"No, I'm fine."

"Good."

"Good."
"Then take your clothes off."

Pleased, John promptly shifts and then kneels up. He pulls his t-shirt up by the hem and over his head, wincing a bit, and tosses it over the edge of the bed. Then he pushes down his boxers, returns to his back, and kicks them off onto the floor as well.

The bruise is of course still a great purpling smear, and Sherlock loathes it. But oh, how much there is to love here, and he takes his time to examine and record it, fearing (yes, he owns to himself, fearing) that he may not get this opportunity twice. John's chest is smooth but not hairless, and the tan lines at his neck and wrists are echoed by another gradation in tone bisecting his upper arms. His stomach is taut but not overly muscled, and his legs are firm. His cock is standing proud, and he's smiling expectantly. There is a mole on his third rib that Sherlock adores. And the scar. The scar is new, and spectacular. It's like a smashed white spider or a hole in a windowpane, messy and heroic and beautiful and--

"God," John whispers, "I'm getting off just from you staring at me, you mad git. Permission to make my first wish?"

"Granted."

"I don't want to be the only naked man in this bed."

*John*, the sleuth thinks, *is a clever fellow*. Sherlock unties his drawstring and obliges, followed by his shirt. He sends them down to be with John's clothing on the floor. He likes to think of them there, together, mingling, while he and John do the same on the bed above.

"Oh, fuck me, that is just unfair," John murmurs, rapt. "You are so...how are you perfect? Did you fucking plan that, the being perfect? What planet are you from?"

Leaning over, Sherlock opens his drawer and pulls out a small tube of lubricant.

"What the hell?" John asks, puzzled.

"I already hate masturbating, you think I like it dry?"

"Oh. Nope. Of course not."

"Hold your hand out."

John offers his left and Sherlock squeezes some onto his fingers. "Don't do anything with that until I tell you."

"When will that be?" John asks breathlessly. "Soon?"

"Maybe." He tosses the tube back into the drawer.

"I vote for soon, okay?"

Sherlock returns to lying on his side but scoots closer. He passes his fingers lightly, very lightly, down the side of John's face. Thence to his neck, and then down to the scar and then beyond the scar to his chest and then down to his stomach and he stops with his palm against John's pelvis. But he wants *more more more*, and so, leaning over, Sherlock passes his tongue over the scar tissue and John hisses softly.

"Touch me," Sherlock orders, smiling on John's skin like a caress.
"God, yes please, where?"

"Anywhere you like. I don't mind."

John reaches out and passes the back of his right hand over the curve of Sherlock's pale hip, up up up his concave stomach and along his neck and into his hair, gripping, which Sherlock rewards by taking John's nipple into his mouth.

"Oh my god." The grip in his hair tightens, so Sherlock adds teeth to the hardening nub. "Fuck. Okay, are you going to--"

"Pull your legs up."

John obliges, knees bent and his heart hammering under Sherlock's lips, which is something so tender and beautiful that Sherlock finds it almost unbearably sad. He brushes his hand down to John's leg, never losing contact, and keeps working at his nipple for as long as he pleases, which is admittedly a long time, whole minutes passing, Sherlock gently scraping with teeth and prodding with tongue under he can feel John's thigh starting to tremble like a butterfly's wing where Sherlock's thumb is now tucked into the creasing skin at his hip.

"Is, um," John says in a strangely high tone, "is one or the other of us going to touch my prick anytime soon--dry, wet, whatever at this point, god, because...well..."

Stopping, Sherlock looks up. There is a little bead of moisture at the tip of John's cock, which is of medium length but a bit thicker than he remembers them being, and it's resting against John's lower abdomen above a neat thatch of dark blond hair. Wondering what it tastes like, Sherlock sees no reason not to find out. He swipes his thumb across the head and collects the small drop, putting it in his mouth. John tastes like mother of pearl. John's taste instantly goes into a large glassed-in greenhouse-like addition to the library in Sherlock's mind palace that he created after John said fucking start this game. The room contains a large array of oak and brass display cases.

Meanwhile, John's right fist behind Sherlock hits the bed with a thump and his eyes scrunch closed.

"Oh, fuck, buggering hell, are you kidding me? That, that right there almost did it, did you just taste me? What the hell, Sherlock? I am touching myself now, okay?"

"I wouldn't."

"Why the fuck not?"

Sherlock brings his hand down in hard, quick slap as low on John's thigh as he can reach without hitting the bed itself. John gasps, and then starts laughing helplessly, shaking his head back and forth with his eyes shut.

"God help me, I am in bed with the handsomest, kinkiest ace on the face of the Earth and I think he is going to kill me--if I die, please don't tell my mum I went being spanked by a desperately hot asexual consulting detective. Please. Oh, god."

"Want another?"

"Yes, please."

The crack in the room is loud when Sherlock obliges.

"That counted for one of your wishes."
"It bloody well did not," John protests, his head coming up.

"Yes, it did. But this one won't," Sherlock concedes, landing a third smack.

"Sherlock," John says, and his voice is very serious. "If one of us doesn't touch me in seconds, I am going to bloody well cry."

Sherlock chuckles deep in his throat, nudging himself a little closer. He puts his head down on the scar, listening to John's heart echo through the marred flesh, his eyes fixed down the line of John's body. John's right arm comes up and curls around his back, scratching at his spine. It's like being in a nest, surrounded entirely by war veteran. Sherlock finds that his own heart is pounding wildly. When did that happen? Was it listening to John's and trying to catch up to him, afraid it would be lost in the distance otherwise?

"Take your cock in your hand."

"Finally, bloody thank you," John sighs, reaching up with his left hand and tentatively gripping himself, coating himself with the lube. A sound comes from his throat Sherlock has never heard before, and he promptly adds it to the display case with John's taste.

"Stroke. Not too hard, but however you like it."

John pumps gently, slowly, twisting fractionally as Sherlock watches. His breath, Sherlock can hear above him, is coming hard through his nose.

"What are you thinking about?" Sherlock whispers.

"The Mona Lisa."

Reaching down, Sherlock pinches the flesh of John's upper thigh where he reddened it. Hard.

"What the fuck do you think I'm thinking about, Sherlock, Jesus, I'm thinking about you watching me toss off as if it's some kind of bloody miracle."

Sherlock blinks, eyes suddenly strangely hot, because it is a miracle. It's a part of John he never thought he would be allowed to see, and if he doesn't live out the week, he thinks he can say for a certainty that he died knowing miracles can happen even if they only happen once. He swallows hard. He clears his throat.

"You don't have to be thinking about something that's actually happening," he says softly, riveted by John's hand working up and down, up and down. "What did you think about before, when you did this? Was I on my knees in a dark London alley while you fucked my mouth?"

John tightens his arm around the detective. "God, no, Sherlock, I--"

"Are you saying you didn't think about me?"

"No, I did, I just don't want you to think that--"

"It's all right, it's only a fantasy, it doesn't even touch me--fantasies are always free. Or was it you on your knees, and me in my chair while you took me down your throat?"

"Killing me," John growls through his teeth, his fist quickening. "You are fucking killing me. Do not consider whether or not you can have sex with me an issue any longer, all right? Clearly you're not a genius for nothing. Fuck. I mean, do you want me to come first, or have a fucking heart
"attack first, make up your bloody mind."

"I'll bet it was that you'd worked me open with your fingers--standing, with my hands against the wall and all our clothes still on but with my pants and trousers down--and then you bent me over the kitchen table and took me in the arse after I'd started begging for it."

A strangled sound emerges from above him and John's fingernails grip harder against his back. Then all of a sudden, John clenches down very hard at the base of his cock, making a tight ring with his fingers, his thighs shaking. Sherlock's heart practically skips a beat.

"Did you just almost come?" he breathes, awed.

John is panting hard now, his chest heaving under Sherlock's ear. "Yes, you complete shite, that is what just happened," he gasps.

"Good," Sherlock snarls greedily. He reaches down and cups his hand over John's balls where they are nestled tight against his body. "Good, because you're close, then, and I didn't want you to be thinking about that when you came, I wanted--keep pumping--I want you to be thinking about me, only another me, and I'm so hard for you, perfect gorgeous perfect you, that I can hardly breathe, you're spread out in front of me just like this, just like this, on your back, only I'm fucking you, I'm fucking you for as long as you--yes, come now, yes, like that," Sherlock demands, pressing the bollocks in his hand gently up against John's prick.

John comes with a bitten-off shout, his right hand tense and glorious in Sherlock's hair. The first stream, and Sherlock really should have been planning for this, lands on John's chest and a bit on Sherlock's eyebrow. The second and third pulse slowly across his stomach as he repeats a chant of fuck fuck, Sherlock, oh god, and then it is over and Sherlock has never done anything he's prouder of in his entire life, not solving the Carl Powers case or surviving uni or being consulted by the reigning family of the Netherlands, not any of that, just this this this this this this this this this this, he is thinking, his mouth open in a sympathetic gasp and his eyes falling closed.

Long, endlessly long seconds pass, John breathing as if he's just run a race and Sherlock shivering--wondering if when his face comes away, an imprint of the scar will be on it, and if that means that something inside him will never be the same again either.

It feels that way.

John's legs slump down and his hold on Sherlock's hair fades into a smoothing, caressing motion.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock cannot be expected to speak right now, perhaps ever again, so he nuzzles into the scar instead.

"Sherlock, did I just come in your face the first time we shagged?"

Yes, and it was wonderful.

Sherlock nods silently.

"I am, wow, so sorry about that. I really cannot, ha. Apologize enough. I'm sorry."

Sherlock shakes his head. Reaching up, he wipes the small amount off his eyebrow and swallows it thoughtfully.
"Oh my god."

They stay like that for a little, John tracing his fingertips through Sherlock's hair.

"Baby, are you okay? Please be okay. Talk to me."

Sighing, Sherlock sits up. He reaches over the bed for a sock and wipes it across John's chest and stomach, John looking at him as if he'd cured cancer.

"That was amazing," John says softly.

Sherlock smiles and tosses the soiled sock away. John is glowing like a Christmas tree, and it's Sherlock's doing, and for a moment the world entire is a wonderful place to live.

"Except for one thing. I didn't get my third wish."

"Oh," Sherlock says, realizing he's right.

"But I figure you can make it up it me. I want a kiss. Now, please."

Sherlock descends with his elbows on either side of John's head and takes his skull in his hands like at the docks, and he kisses him in the middle of the forehead, leaving his lips there and breathing.

"Yeah," John says, running his hands up and down Sherlock's back. "There. That sorts it. Are you, um. You're okay, aren't you?"

Sherlock looks down at where he isn't hard, and where John isn't anymore either, and back up along John's flushed chest, and up his chin, and into his eyes, which are full of questions as well as positively blinding affection, the sort that could conquer entire armies.

"Never better," Sherlock says. And it's true.

John slides a hand around his neck and kisses him, soft and sweet, along the edge of his cheekbone.

Reaching down, Sherlock tugs the sheet up over them. He deposits his face in the crook of John's neck. He drifts for a little, the doctor's hands exploring his spine and his shoulders and his hips and the smooth swell of his arse. He is almost asleep when he hears steps outside their room and a familiar little knock followed by a "Yoo-hoo!"

Mrs. Hudson gives a small shriek when she enters the bedroom, and she drops an envelope she's holding. She's back from her sister's at last, Sherlock realizes. He smiles. He's not really up for conversation at the moment, but Mrs. Hudson is one of his favourite people in the universe. She's wearing a purple traveling suit and seems to have just arrived--there is Charing Cross mud, a particular variety, on her shoes.

"Oh, my stars," she gasps, her hand at her throat. "Sherlock, you--what on earth."

"Bugger, I--sorry," John exclaims, equally startled.

"He's with me," Sherlock drawls, tucking the sheet closer around his chin and giving Mrs. Hudson his best smile.

She flaps her hand before her face, laughing a little. "Sorry, dear, you went and caught me that much by surprise. I've never known you to have company." She adds to John, "You must think me a right old busybody, charging willy-nilly into people's rooms, I'd hate for us to get off on the wrong foot, I'm sure, seeing you're a friend of Sherlock's. Oh, what you must think of me."
"I...really don't know what to think of you," John answers, mystified.

Sherlock yawns. "John Watson, meet Mrs. Hudson. She's my landlady."

"I suppose we hadn't better shake hands just now," Mrs. Hudson frets, concerned.

"Well," John coughs, "maybe not just yet..."

"Right." Mrs. Hudson nods. "I'll just pop off then, I only just got back, haven't even put the kettle on but this was under the door for you, Sherlock, dear, so I brought it up." She picks up the envelope she dropped in her startlement and gingerly places it at the edge of the bed. "Very nice to have met you, Mr. Watson--"

"Doctor," Sherlock corrects.

"Oooh, sorry again, heavens, I keep putting my foot in it--"

"John is fine," John says hastily.

"John, lovely, thank you for understanding, dear. I'll just--yes," she says, smiling as she shuts the door behind her.

"Well, that was one way to meet the landlady," John muses, kissing Sherlock thoughtfully on the end of his nose.

Sherlock reaches out and picks up the envelope.

The word SHERLOCK is typewritten across it, which is ominous. Moriarty letters look like this sometimes. It would be worrisome, if Sherlock were the type to worry.

Long seconds pass, pondering this.

"Sherlock?" John says hesitantly. "Do you want...me to open that?"

Scowling, because he isn't afraid, of course he isn't, Sherlock tears it open himself. He looks for the letter inside. But there is none. Only a scrawled note on the inner flap that reads "Can you come out to play?" And when he shakes it, five little dried objects like lemon seeds--no, they aren't lemon seeds, they're orange pips--tumble out onto the bedsheets.
"Sherlock, you are seriously worrying me sick here. Open the door."

Sherlock is sitting in their dry bathtub, still nude save for the warm robe he threw on, with his laptop on his knees and a used syringe next to him on the cold porcelain. John's voice is, indeed, very concerned. Sherlock can understand why this should be. After all, the dried pips were an eccentric development.

Subsequently the news that Moriarty had escaped from maximum security by walking out the front door of the prison under his own guard's escort and then bloody vanishing would be enough to startle anyone close to Sherlock, and, while Sherlock was not previously convinced anyone was close to him save for perhaps his horrible tosser of a brother, John is proving the exception to many rules.

On a secondary level, the fact that Sherlock just after the pips arrived had fielded two texts from Mycroft on the Moriarty subject and an email with a link to a YouTube video and then had snatched up the morphine without bothering to hide the fact and locked himself in the loo was more than likely a rather startling occurrence, all things considered. It happened very quickly. Sherlock can sympathize with John's anxiety.

But he had been heart racing fists forming sweat beading limbs loosening brain shrieking nerves clanging to a degree he had never before experienced. And now John is in this with him. And so Sherlock had needed to think, to function. And so steps had to be taken, as regrettable as those steps may indeed have been.

"Sherlock, I need to see you. Drop the drugs and fucking answer me. This is not funny."

"I'm fine," Sherlock calls.

"That is a joke, and a really fucking bad joke, Sherlock Holmes."

The sleuth ignores him, his slender index finger hovering over the little white play triangle on the website. He can see Jim Moriarty's shaved head and his frozen face in a rictus of a paused smile, a smile that looks absolutely venomous.

He briefly wonders where his enemy found such a competent tattoo artist behind bars. The criminal mastermind has a positively ornate artwork of a snake crawling in a winding, looping fashion up the side of his neck, ending with the serpent's fangs sunk into an apple just under the madman's ear. It wasn't there last Sherlock saw Jim, which was three years ago when Jim sent a picture postcard, the sort you can order from websites by submitting an existing snapshot--then he'd been depicted in a poorly done electronic cut-and-paste fashion on the beach in Bermuda, waving, and his neck had been bare. On the reverse side, he'd promised to buy Sherlock a tropical island and keep him there in a little cage open to the elements--swinging from a tree branch, baking in the daylight, withering in the sun.

The snake with the apple in its mouth is one of the most disturbing things Sherlock has ever seen. It reminds him of Bible stories he neglected to delete after that serial killer case in 1997--the violent kind of Bible stories. The apple has letters written on it. I-O-U.
Sherlock swallows. And tries to press play again. He can't.

The morphine is helping, at any moment now he'll be perfectly capable of watching the thing, and anyhow that was only necessary because he'd been startled, he'd let his guard so far down with John in the bed and his face and his hand moving and he was beautiful and he wanted you even though you aren't enough, that had been unprecedented, and was certainly the reason this new development had proven such a shock to the system. He's known that Moriarty will have to be dealt with for many years, after all. Practically for his whole life. So this ought to have been easy.

But for the first time in his experience, his body had been naked at the same time his heart was, and it had been viscerally wrenching. All that nudity and kindness and fluids and affection and gasps and laughter at once. It had knocked down every wall he'd ever built. Surely the morphine wouldn't have been needed if that hadn't been followed almost instantly by Mrs. Hudson and the pips and then Mycroft's first message and then his Stay where you are, I am en route. MH

The bathroom door bangs open. John drops a screwdriver to the ground and enters. He's hastily dressed in jeans and a blue striped cotton shirt. His face is stonily rigid. He drops the envelope with the five orange pips in it on the countertop.

"Never and I mean never fucking do that to me again," he snaps, dropping to his knees beside the bathtub. He reaches for the syringe, past where Sherlock has already rolled the sleeve of his robe down again. With a look like he's picking up a live scorpion, he drops it in the bin. "Couldn't wait five fucking seconds, could you."

"Have you forsaken all vocabulary save the F-word?" Sherlock manages to sneer.

The morphine. The morphine is working. Finally. Blessed morphine, hallowed by thy name, he thinks madly, and can't help but chuckle in silence for a moment.

"Christ, you are high." John rises and sits on the edge of the tub, gripping Sherlock by the lapels of his robe. "Look at me."

"I don't need to look at you, I need to look at this," Sherlock hisses.

"You will look at me this instant, god damn it," John swears. "How much did you take?"

"Enough so I could think. I need to think."

"This is not about thinking, you moron. This about you shooting up whenever you feel alone and afraid and I get it, okay, I get it, but this kills me. It is physically killing me, all right?"

"I don't see why it should do."

"Because I have some fairly pronounced feelings on the subject of Sherlock fucking Holmes that we don't talk about," John rasps. "Christ. Are you mental?"

Sherlock's mouth opens.

"Don't answer that. I didn't ask that. All right, I need you to comprehend something. When you say I need to think, that's bleeding grand and all, but what you mean is, as far as I can understand it, I need to numb everything, because it's too much, and maybe that has something to do with your thought processes, yes, granted, but mostly it has to do with your perception of the world around you, um. Overloading. Like. Like your hard drive is fine and dandy but your RAM is severely affected by strong emotions. Not that you, uh, have strong emotions. God forbid. What was I thinking."
"You're clearly *not* thinking. My brain is a device that consists of a combination of organic matter, electricity, and chemical compounds. The epinephrine response is not necessarily under my control, but by masking monoamines that have already bound to my adrenergic receptors, I can to some extent bypass the side effects that prevent my higher faculties from operating at the peak of their potential. Which is very clearly *necessary right now.*"

"Okay, in actual English, what you just said was you panicked, and then you got high."

"That is a gross oversimplification of a precise chemical manipulation. And you're meant to be the doctor around here."

John shakes his head slowly. He looks miserable. "I hate you like this, hurting yourself on purpose because you think you don't have a choice in the matter. Please say you can grasp what I'm talking about."

"I can grasp everything I put my mind to. That's the point of this. You brought the pips."

"Yeah. They creep me out a bit, too. Do they mean something to you?"

Sherlock steeples his fingers before his nose. "Historically, secret societies used to send them as threats--melon seeds, orange pips. It's a warning something is going to happen. Something beyond merely Moriarty escaping, something specific. I simply can't know what until after I've seen his message."

John blows out air from between his lips. "And, yeah. Working on that, are we? That's what the morphine was for? Bliss yourself out a bit, drive me round the bloody twist over you, then we have a happy viewing party? I make the popcorn, you bring the syringe, never mind it fucking hurts us both?"

Sherlock blinks. "It's nothing to do with you. It's not your body, it's mine. And I'm fine."

John laughs, a jagged little sound. "Earlier, when we had sex, did my body's reactions affect you?"

Sherlock considers.

*It was like hearing Beethoven for the first time, everything unfolding, the way I couldn't speak or breathe or slow it down, like a brakeless car, and it wasn't the way it's ever been with anyone else, before I'd only ever wanted it to be over, and I nearly couldn't process the data I wanted to collect, because every sound you made amplified exponentially the way I was drowning in what I could make you feel for me.*

Well, he certainly can't say that.

"That wasn't sex, that was data gathering," Sherlock says dismissively. John is checking his pulse at his neck. "I wanted to see what you liked and how you liked it. Next time it will be actual sex. And yes, it affected me, but this is different."

"It. What." John's neat little jaw tightens. "You are...mental. I stand by my earlier conclusion. First off, I am going to slap you if you keep willfully ignoring the fact that I care about your health and that you *are not fine.* Clearly you're not the sort for big declarations, but yeah, Sherlock, yes, since you seem to need to hear these exact words in a row, I care about whether or not you abuse drugs. I did two weeks ago, and now I care more, you stupid, stupid, stupid knob. Second, wow. We shagged. You call it whatever you want, because you are cracking mad, but the fact remains that we just had sex and your landlady walked in post-coitus during the snuggling portion of
"Now, that is an image I fear I shall unfortunately prove unable to erase," drawls Mycroft coldly, who has appeared in the bathroom doorway with his phone in his hand.

John sits back, scrubbing his hands over his face in despair. He moves to perch on the toilet lid, looking like a rumpled little terrier about to start up snarling at the newcomer, visibly willing himself silent.

"Where?" Sherlock asks his brother, waving at the laptop screen. Actually saying *ISP number* seems too much work.

"An internet cafe in Glasgow. It was given to an intermediary to post to a channel the hired fellow was instructed to create. My men have already located him via CCTV. The culprit is unrelated to Moriarty previously. This was their first interaction. He was offered two hundred pounds to post the contents of a thumb drive."

"Mailed from?"

"Not mailed from. Handed to, along with instructions, via another intermediary, this one not yet traced."

"Credit card, PayPal?"

"Cash in a safety deposit box."

Sherlock nods. He brought his phone into the loo with him, and he now taps out Lestrade's number.

*The bird has flown. SH*

"Might there be another, more aesthetic locale where we can discuss these matters?" Mycroft asks in the pure sugar-sweet tone that means he is deeply frustrated.

"You mean the small matter where you let Jim Moriarty waltz out of maximum security?" John inquires with his eyes closed.

"While cognizant that your feelings upon this matter are justified, might I suggest that sarcasm is an inappropriate response to the deaths of every member of my best security guard's family save for his sister, due to a gas explosion at their residence. The residence that was under heavy police protection, by the by."

Sherlock's phone pings. It's Detective Inspector Lestrade.

*Hang in there, mate. We're nailing this sod.*

Sighing, Sherlock sends the same warning message to Shinwell Johnson.


"You put me under the impression that my brother had already taken care of that activity. Which, knowing him, I find...difficult to credit," Mycroft croons.

John levels a look at Sherlock's brother as if he had just mounted a defense of Nazi policies. Incrédulous, shocked, lightly appalled. It's gorgeous, Sherlock decides.
"Well. Credit it," John deadpans. "If you want to do the hurt-him-and-I-kill-you-speech, could I not be sitting on a toilet lid?"

"I fail to see how your choice of seating is relevant. How is my brother to live with, by the by? It must be intensely challenging for you."

"I'm never bored."

"Oh, good. That's good, isn't it?" Mycroft intones in a smug singsong. "And now whenever you think you might be growing even a little bit bored, you've an inventive new way of expending your...energies. Despite the fact that Sherlock couldn't possibly have the slightest inclinations in that direction whatsoever."

"If you have a problem with me shagging your little brother, that's a right shame, because we're pretty keen," John says through a clenched jaw.

"It wasn't sex. We played a game. It was research for sex," Sherlock explains again, exasperated. "I watched him have a wank, only an idiot would call that sex. I mean, to be precise, John is an idiot, but no more so than most and rather less than others."

"I'm not an idiot, I'm a fucking doctor of medicine, it was real sex, I was there, and you're a right prize when you're high, you know that?" John growls.

The phone chimes, which is for the best, as John's face is turning a remarkable shade of angry crimson.

_Understood loud and clear, with condolences that things have come to such a pass, and assurances that every necessary step will be taken, as well as some steps deemed possibly unnecessary but erring on the side of all due caution, as it were, always hoping and supposing you would find the gesture appreciated._

"How does he text that quickly?" Sherlock asks aloud, the morphine slowing and lengthening and softening the brilliant kaleidoscope shapes of his thoughts. "Does he have voice recognition?"

_Thank you. Vatican cameos. SH_

"It's delightful to find that you have already medicated yourself into a sanguine stupor," Mycroft says nastily.

"Leave him alone," John barks. "He has enough on his mind today, don't you think?"

"You support this habit, then. How very liberal-minded for a doctor."

"You know perfectly well I don't. What's done is done. Are you going to go in intravenously and scrub his blood clean?"

"Believe me, I would if I could."

"So would I. So. Cheers, but that's not scientifically possible. We're waiting it out."

Sherlock phone chimes again. When he opens the text, he sees it is a picture file.

Frowning, Sherlock studies it.

The photo, Sherlock knows even without a visible header, is of a copy of the _Daily Telegraph_. Sherlock can identify any of the London newspapers and the major world dailies.
instantly according to their designs and typeface. The image is a bit grainy and was taken at an angle, but Sherlock has no trouble in reading the article's title. It says: MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT LOWER NORWOOD. DISAPPEARANCE OF A WELL KNOWN BUILDER. SUSPECTED MURDER AND ARSON. A CLUE TO THE CRIMINAL. The rest of the printed words are too pixellated and blurred to read effectively, but Sherlock vaguely recalls the case.

It happened three months ago, Lestrade had been the arresting officer, and the killer was already in custody. The crime hadn't interested Sherlock in the smallest—it had seemed a straightforward matter of murder for profit, and anyway no one had consulted him over it. He only remembered the business at all because he'd wanted work from the Met at the time, and Lestrade had told him nothing was on really, but he'd just collared a firestarter by the name of John Hector McFarlane. Open and shut. Wasn't that grand? It wasn't grand at all, what an asinine thing to conclude, Sherlock had thought, and the boredom had made him so outraged that he'd pickpocketed Lestrade for his ID even though he'd plenty of spares already and one badge from the week previous.

Mycroft walks forward and peers down into the tub at the phone screen. He pulls his fingers over his lips pensively.

"Cold case?" he asks Sherlock.

"No. Warmish, in fact. Hasn't gone to trial."

"What is it?" John asks. "Sherlock?"

"A clue," Sherlock says softly.

"A clue? To what?"

Biting his lip, Sherlock shakes his dark head. He sets the phone down. Time seems increasingly of the essence now. The detective angles the laptop screen so that if John leans forward on the seat, he can see. Taking a very deep breath, Sherlock presses play.

The screen flickers for a moment. The scene is being recorded in a gaol cell. It's dimly lit, therefore, and the only visible object other than the edge of a dingy bed is a chair. Sherlock wonders how the guard felt, recording this, maybe in an effort to preserve his family. Maybe in an effort to save the loved ones Moriarty had threatened, and maybe even thinking he'd managed to redeem them, and then it being all for nothing save a lone surviving sister.

"I've no desire to be subjected to this nonsense again," Mycroft huffs, crossing his arms.

"He hasn't even screwed himself up to watching it yet, so sod off," John suggests.

"Shut up," Sherlock snaps.

Jim Moriarty enters the screen, smiling crookedly, wearing a prison jumpsuit. His head is very closely shaved. There's a lithe grace and power to his movements, a subtle rolling of his hips and catlike lightness of foot. He walks like a CEO or a rock star. The cheap jumpsuit could be bespoke Westwood if the observer were simply to judge the garment by the way he moves in it. The snake tattoo with the IOU apple in its mouth jumps and writhes as Jim begins to speak.

Sherlock can feel his stomach starting to churn. But John is here, and John is brave, and John isn't going anywhere, Sherlock agreed rather stupidly to keep him, and Sherlock decided to be likewise brave for his sake, and so he clenches the laptop very hard and watches.

"Hullo, Sherlock," Jim says. He has a soft, lilting Irish tenor and precise plosives. He seems to
love saying the word *Sherlock*. Jim grins brightly all of a sudden. "I've been waiting such a long time for this. What a treat. So, what's new, how are things, how's tricks, what's the story, same old same old for me, blah blah blah, gaol is really so tedious you can't imagine."

Jim yawns languidly. "All these cons. You'd think they'd be interesting people, wouldn't you? Wildly eccentric, you'd imagine? Never tedious? The thieves and the murderers and the kiddie diddlers. But they're really hideously ordinary. They all beg and scream the same way in the end. Not like you. You'll be remarkable." He blows Sherlock a kiss, winking.

Sherlock shivers.

"I am going to kill this man with my bare hands," John says gravely. "That is a promise."

"Sshhh," Sherlock hisses.

"Anyway, Sherlock, long story short," Jim continues, crossing his legs casually, "I've been perfectly content in here for quite some time, what with the challenges inherent to working from the inside. It's a neat mental puzzle, working around that, kind of a gorgeous one. And I've made so many contacts, you wouldn't believe it. I have to hand it to you, I thought I'd be bored, but apart from the sheep I have to deal with, it's been a kick. Well, obviously. If I hadn't been having rather a ball, I'd have left a lot sooner. But between the clients and you know, staying alive in here, it's been fabulous. And by fixing things up for people, I've amassed a pretty swank nest egg for our retirement. It's not like finding an antique cat's paw is cheap or easy. Have you ever shopped for a real Spanish tickler before? I mean, I could probably achieve the same effect on those pretty hands of yours with a sharpened steel rake, but I adore you too much to cheapen the experience."

Sherlock glances at John. John's face is carved from stone, a monument to strength and courage and he's so steady, it's amazing, he's amazing, and Sherlock pulls in a breath through his nose and returns his eyes to the screen.

"I'm rambling," Jim says cheerily, "but anyhow. Like I was saying, I've had a lovely little business on the side, fixing things for people. It's much more difficult to solve their problems from in here, but I've managed fine, you'll be happy to know. Whoop de doo, point is that the time has come for me to move on. Prison life doesn't hold much charm for me anymore. And I miss you, kitten. I just miss you so terribly terribly much. But seeing as how you've been, I don't know, reluctant, shall we call it? Shy, perhaps? Shy. There we are. Since you're shy, I'm going to woo you a bit before we start our lives together. You have the pips by now, I assume."

Mycroft glances sidelong at the envelope on the counter. Sherlock nods. Mycroft inclines his head fractionally. They needn't say anything more. Mycroft will have every aspect of the envelope and its contents analyzed by nightfall.

"That orange was delicious, by the way," Jim adds wistfully. "Yummy. Good ones are tough to come by in prison. I should feed you oranges, by the segment, that would be a nice gesture after I pull all your teeth. Whatever, the point I'm trying to make is that you've probably figured out by now that the pips are the start of the game I made for you."

"Game?" John says.

Sherlock's brows furrow.

*Game?* his brain echoes, it not being capable of much else when watching Jim smirk at him via YouTube.
What game?

John Hector McFarlane, he ponders, the name of the incarcerated arsonist from the text message echoing in his mind. McFarlane had protested his innocence, he remembers. The unhappy John Hector McFarlane, he'd called himself. No one believed him.

Jim leans forward. "Did I forget to tell you I was going to make you a present? Aren't the best presents the ones you make yourself? I heard that somewhere. And you are the cream of the crop, so I worked on this present forever. I should say presents in the plural, really. It's a series of problems. Leading to a final problem. You'll love it. Ugh, I've outdone myself, it's brilliant. And the prize is one I think you'll enjoy trying for. I do enjoy watching you trying. Watching you dance. Sorry, one second, can you get this for me?"

Sticking his tongue out, making the snake twitch incidentally, Jim reveals a chewed piece of gum. A badly trembling hand, that of the security guard, Sherlock knows from the sleeve edge, enters the frame from the camera side. It plucks the gum from Jim's mouth, from off the tip of his pink tongue, and then disappears once more.

"Dead," John says flatly. "I haven't fought terrorists in ages. I am actually looking forward to this now."

Sighing, Jim cracks his neck back and forth. "Better. Sorry about that, rude to talk with gum in your mouth. What was I thinking. Anyway. This'll be the best game, the greatest game I've ever conceived. We've never properly played together, I wasn't exactly warned about you when I killed that little bitch Carl. But now we're going to play. Are you excited yet? Are you all tingly?"

Jim uncrosses his legs, leans forward, and crooks his finger conspiratorially. The camera dutifully zooms in. Up close, the snake's fangs are salivating around the apple, dripping with poison. Jim's lips quirk in amusement. "I'm giving you cases to solve. You love that, eh sweetheart, ever since Carl and the pool? I didn't want that to be our only tete a tete. You're going to get the first phone call soon. There are going to be some hostages involved. Whoops. Did I forget to mention that? Sorry. BOOM! So, if you can't solve these riddles for me, people will die. And that would be, for them, admittedly sort of a shame. But more than that, if you do manage to win the day, I'll give you a prize."

Coughing ostentatiously, Jim stands, leaning his face into the camera so it's terrifyingly enormous. His voice drops to a happy whisper. "If you win, I'm going to torture you to death. Surprise! Not really."

Mycroft huffs an angry breath through his flared nostrils.

Jim taps the camera lens a few times with a neatly manicured finger. "And if you don't win, I'm going to torture your new pet to death first. You can watch. Well. I say can. You'll have to watch. So John Watson better fucking pray you are on your game, precious. I don't take you cheating on me lightly. Best of luck, angels! Cheerio!"

The screen flickers to black, then freezes. The video is over.

Sherlock closes the laptop and sets it very carefully down.

Mycroft clears his throat.

John, Sherlock discovers when he looks at him, is unfazed by this threat. John simply raises his eyebrows as if all that was only to be expected and was in fact rather duller than it might have
been. It sends a deep rage thrumming through Sherlock's chest that this man, this extraordinary little man, should be endangered because he helped Sherlock and Sherlock was unable to let him go. But sending John away now clearly will not keep him safe. If Sherlock hadn't been such a fucking idiot at the Friesland, this may not have happened. But it's too late for them.

No, that isn't quite right. It's too late for Sherlock.

But maybe, if he can be brilliant enough, it won't be too late for John.

Sherlock experiences a sensation he can only explain in his head through a metaphor, that of the moment when a finished but previously non-electrically engaged construction site becomes a fully powered skyscraper. He has been, he can only conclude, plugged in. Sherlock is live now, wired to the network. He might not handle the abuse well, but a game? A game he can only assume has been rigged? A game in which John Watson's survival is the goal? Sherlock Holmes was built for this, born for this.

Jim Moriarty is a sick fiend, but he was also perfectly correct. Sherlock adores problems. Cases. And ones in which the stakes are staggering are the ones he is best at. Every second from now until this game ends will be spent being amazing. And John will be there to see. Sherlock is sparkingly aglow with purpose, with the sense that his Fate is set and it is the right one, that it could not have been otherwise even though it will be very painful, that this is the reason he exists.

"I'm going to win," he says to John.

John smiles tightly. "Whatever happens, we do it together. And I'm not about to let him touch you. Trust me on this."

"You're not playing mind games with a madman, Sherlock," Mycroft admonishes. "Forget the text, forget that photo. We will hide you and hide the doctor. We will put you both deep underground, and in the meanwhile I have every competent agent in England on the hunt for James Moriarty, and I will ensure that you both will be--"

"If you can't keep him in prison, how do you expect to put me in a prison and then keep him out of it?" Sherlock scoffs.

Mycroft's lips turn down in an arch of disgust that Sherlock suspects is mostly self-directed. It's rather less satisfying that it should be. Mycroft, Sherlock realizes, enjoys being bested about as much as his sibling. And even apart from matters of pride, Mycroft's version of caring is possessive, invasive, intrusive, conclusive--he must have imagined that the steps he had taken were in every way sufficient. To discover that they were not must be distasteful.

Sherlock's phone rings against the tile of the bathtub, a grotesquely shrill sound. He glances down, startled.

NUMBER BLOCKED

After a few rings, Sherlock reaches for it numbly. He is acutely aware that this moment is the moment his life begins to end. But it has happened, finally. He can function. He will function for John, and he will have lived for something. It won't all have been in vain.

"Hello?" he says very softly, answering.
The caller is a female, and she is weeping in terror. *Hello, sexy,* she says, and Sherlock knows exactly who is speaking to him, feels it in the sick lurch of disgust in his bones. Following a brief conversation in which it becomes increasingly obvious that the woman is strapped to a great many explosives, *Twelve hours to solve my puzzle Sherlock, or I'm going to be so naughty,* Sherlock scrambles from the bath and into his bedroom, flinging the robe away and diving for his clothing.

"Text Lestrade that I need to meet him at the Yard," he calls over his shoulder to John, who followed after while Mycroft makes a phone call. Mycroft, Sherlock can only assume, believes that recapturing Jim Moriarty is the solution to this problem, and thus is smarmily berating someone who is not hunting for him quickly enough. That isn't how this will work, Sherlock knows. Jim had too many years to plan and too much motive.

"Right," John says. He whips out his mobile. "When?"

"Now. Instantly. We have twelve hours. And ask him where John Hector McFarlane is awaiting trial."

"Who?"

"Arsonist. And tell him we need a trace if possible on the call I just received, and a bomb squad, and--"

"Whoa there."

"Are you doing it yet? Is it done?"

"Call...traced...bomb...squad...fucking shit, really, Sherlock? There. Sent."

"Do something for me?"

"I'm here to be used."

Sherlock pulls a collared shirt over his arms, fingers sailing over buttons. "Pull up any information you can find archived online from the papers regarding the McFarlane case. Happened three months ago. Search terms like arson and the name McFarlane should work immediately. I think the victim's name was Jonas something. And punch my brother in his fat guts while you're at it."


Sherlock buttons his trousers and moves on to his shirt cuffs as he obliges. He walks over to where John is standing, preternaturally calm but with a tense look about his weathered eyes. He'd run his hand anxiously through the back of his hair when he asked about the bomb squad, and it's ruffled and perfect the way everything else about him is, and it occurs to Sherlock that he's now perfectly able to reach out and smooth it for him, pausing a moment to gently rub the blond strands between his fingers. He does. John sighs and leans into the touch.

"Speaking of your brother," he says with a wary little glance at the closed door.

"Must we?" Sherlock wonders, pulling John closer.

John's brow hits the center of Sherlock's chest with a gentle bump. He stays there, just breathing, for several seconds too long.

"What's the matter? Other than a ruthless killer and a ticking time bomb, I mean?"
John puts his hands on Sherlock's waist and looks up. His corneas are a bit glassy around the edges. "So. Your brother...if he was in any way right about me taking advantage of you, then. Christ. I'd just. Never forgive myself."

Sherlock slides possessive arms around the smaller man, as angry as he is comforting. John tucks his head under Sherlock's chin, sagging against him a little. "Mycroft is a meddling diplomat with delusions of grandeur. What did I say to you this morning?"

"Um. Several things," John tells Sherlock's neck. "Including that we didn't shag. When we did."

"I said I want to see every mood and expression you're capable of, and the entire range of your emotional and mental and physical capacity, from black to white and nil to infinity and then record it all over again with different variables at play and explore changes in your responses due to the myriad permutations and the order in which new factors are introduced."

"Oh. Yes, you did. Verbatim, I think. That was...very flattering."

"Well, it was true," Sherlock says quietly into the shell of John's ear. "You're worried that you're using me as some kind of living fucktoy when all I want is to learn you and study you and get as far inside you as I possibly can. I'm an adult man, I'm not remotely a virgin, I know martial arts, I'm a fair to brilliant boxer, you aren't forcing me to do anything that wasn't my own idea, and I've never been with anyone before whose pleasure actually mattered to me. Shouldn't my desire to be with you physically be as valid as anyone else's? Are you of the opinion that my mind is somehow unable to process the concept of consensual sex simply because my body doesn't work like yours? That's frankly insulting. I may be a freak, and this may admittedly have worried me a great deal, but it's because I was concerned over how you'd see me when you knew I was defective."

"You," John says very clearly, fisting his hands into the back of Sherlock's dress shirt, "are not defective. You are a fucking marvel."

"Well, then, what are you asking? Is an erection somehow a requirement for rational thought? Do I seem slow-witted to you?"

John laughs. "Your mind is...fine. Best I've seen. Well. The morphine does not help. But you're right. I'm sorry. I really...this matters to me. Getting it right. I didn't mean to imply you were helpless."

Running his fingernails up and down John's back, Sherlock purrs, "Make it up to me?"

"Yeah," John answers, hissing a little when Sherlock's nails hit the base of his spine. "Yeah, that would be acceptable. Make it up to you. Yes. I'm sure that more than a basic apology is in order here. What can I do for you?"

"You," Sherlock says with his nose in John's hair and his lips ghosting over his earlobe, "are going to stop this bomb with me and then find the nearest private location and watch me get on my knees and open your trousers and take your pants down to your thighs and then open my mouth and suck your cock until I've learned just how you like it and you're begging me to finish you, pleading, and then you will watch me keep my eyes fixed on you, only on you, while you come down my throat. Because that is something I'd like to do."

"Okay," John gasps, chuckling. "Ah. Would you really?"

"Yes."

"You're sure about that."
"Yes."

"Um. You don't have to. But. Nope, we covered that, oh god, yes, yes, I will fuck your face, your bloody gorgeous face, all you like."

"Splendid," Sherlock says, pleased, planting a kiss on John's temple and disengaging them. "Now, stop distracting me. There is a woman wired to explosives somewhere and I can't concentrate while you're obsessing over sex. Off to uncover the secrets of the unhappy John Hector McFarlane."
"I didn't kill Jonas Oldacre," John McFarlane protests wearily, his eyes glazed with despair. "I didn't even know Jonas Oldacre until he walked into my office in the City and asked me to alter his will for him. He was an old flame of mum's, back in the day. I'm not a murderer."

"Like hell you aren't. Your fingerprints were all over the murder weapon. Bludgeoned to death with a hammer. What this world is coming to, I don't know," Anderson sniffs.

"It's coming to certain proof that reverse evolution exists, and that the most brainless specimens tend to be hired by the Yard," Sherlock remarks. "Can we discuss this in the proper order, please?"

Sherlock, John, Lestrade, and Lestrade's loathsome forensics tech Anderson, who worked the case, are sitting around a white plastic table in a fluorescently lit beige room in the south London facility where McFarlane is being held. Styrofoam cups full of bad coffee rest before Lestrade and John. The murder suspect is flaxen-haired and handsome in a washed-out, negative way, and his hands are lightly trembling. There's a certain weakness about his mouth that makes Sherlock skeptical he is capable of tying his own shoes, let alone murdering a near-stranger. He's a solicitor by trade, and was asked suddenly and without warning by the dead man to create a will naming himself--McFarlane--the sole beneficiary of Oldacre's fortune, which was made some time ago during the boom in the construction industry. Back when Oldacre was still in love with McFarlane's mother. This all interests Sherlock to no end, for which he is grateful.

Jim Moriarty, after years of crude torment, is no longer boring. He is fascinating.

The detective is also grateful that, by the time they obtained Met clearance to see McFarlane and found Lestrade and called the bomb squad and read up on the case, he was no longer high. He makes a point of never being high when he is working, not merely because if Lestrade were ever to find out, he'd likely go ballistic (Lestrade is small-minded the way most policemen are about such matters as chemical manipulation) but also because, when confronted with a new problem of note, Sherlock's brain sparks and glimmers like one of those glass balls filled with blue live wires of electricity that shoot to your fingertips when you touch the surface. Being high would be superfluous. Sherlock is positively aglow.

"Oldacre engaged you to alter his will, claiming he'd no other relations or close ties and that he had always held something of a torch for your mother," Sherlock says. "Then he invited you down to his construction company in Norwood after hours to introduce you to exactly what sort of business you'd be inheriting."

"Suspect by his own account arrived at Oldacre Urban Solutions at around nine in the evening," Lestrade confirms. "Oldacre gave McFarlane here a tour, then opened a safe in the office and they went through more paperwork. There was a few hundred quid in cash in the safe."

"And McFarlance killed him over it, as well as the inheritance. This is a waste of time," Anderson groused.

Lestrade stands, crossing his arms in a judicious pose. His boyish face is grave in a way Sherlock has never seen before. And that didn't happen when he was told his case was bolloxed. It happened sometime previously. He looks...he looks anxious. Drawn. Lestrade never looks this worried. And he keeps shooting little flickering glances at Sherlock. He's doing it now. Almost as
if he's concerned about... no. That can't be right.

The bomber, of course, Sherlock concludes, he's worried about death and destruction.

"I can be as wrong as the next detective, which is what seems to be the case here," Lestrade sighs. "Sherlock has to sort this, or a woman dies. I don't call that a waste of time, Anderson."

"It's sorted already!"

"Yes, sorted by morons," Sherlock says coldly, "or else I wouldn't be here, or do I have to explain again that Moriarty is tied to the case somehow? We've been over this. Are you deaf or brain damaged?"

"Do I really have to take insults from a psychopathic freak?" Anderson demands, his hawklike face purpling.

"I'm not a psychopath," Sherlock snaps.

"Prove it."

Sherlock can't, and it hurts that he can't, in this juvenile conversation with this juvenile man over this juvenile taunt, it hurts not to have been taken into the mental health clinic by his frigid snob of a father and tested and thus know whether he's psychopathic or bipolar or borderline personality disorder or merely an asexual genius with an addictive bent, it hurts and burns and aches in front of John with his gentle face and his eyes beginning to crease angrily, it hurts like a stone in his chest, so he puts on his haughtiest glare and wills Anderson to die on the spot. Anderson chuckles nastily.

"Now, there's an expression worn by a psycho if I ever saw one."

"I may want to kill you right now, but that is a manifestly logical urge when confronted with cockroaches," Sherlock hisses. "I am not a psychopath."

"I notice you didn't say you weren't a freak, though."

"Oi, watch the tone," John orders gruffly, clapping his hands together. "And the word choice. You know, watch the speech. Just watch everything from here, the lot of it, there's a good lad."

"Why the hell should you get shirty about it?" the tech sneers.

"Dunno. Hobby of mine, the shirtiness. You'll want to look out for that. I also tend to chin people who push me too far. So look out for that too."

"Sherlock, you can't bully him into listening to you. Anderson, shut it, you're giving me a headache," Lestrade sighs.

"Why should McFarlane have killed his benefactor when he could just wait it out and inherit a fortune?" John questions thoughtfully.

A mottled flush of pink covers the suspect's face. McFarlane's mouth opens, but nothing emerges.

"He's in debt to his eyeballs," Anderson reports, going to the coffee pot and pouring himself a cup. "Lawyers and their bright ideas about stock trading. Classic."

"That doesn't mean I just upped and snuffed someone," McFarlane cries. "And he tossed me that hammer and I caught it, he said that it was the hammer that struck the first nail in his first building,
that's why my prints were on it, I didn't--"

"What did Oldacre's holdings come to in the end?" Sherlock questions.

"Less than they might have done," Lestrade admits, leaning back against the wall. "We found out a week or two back that he'd transferred a major portion of his assets to a charity."

"Recently?"

"Yeah. To a nonprofit foundation called Cornelius Group. Fella might have wanted McFarlane to inherit, but apparently not that large a fortune. Reasonable, I guess, since they didn't actually know each other."

"Why now?" Sherlock steepled his fingers before his lips and closes his eyes. "Oldacre was fifty-eight. Why make a new will, donate a significant sum to charity, as if he were an old man?"

"Might have been terminally ill and not told anyone," Lestrade says easily. "People do that sort of thing all the time. Tie up loose ends, give loved ones a leg up. Seemed like a lonely enough sort, if his ex's son was the only person he could think of to inherit. He wanted to make things right with the mum, maybe."

"Why?"

"Sentiment, I s'pose."

"No." Sherlock shakes his head. "No, people don't relieve themselves of all their worldly possessions and give the remainder to the offspring of their former lovers."

"Well, this bloke did sure enough."

Sherlock is silent, eyes still gently shut. He is in the garden of his mind palace, the grave garden where no flowers or vegetables grow, the garden where corpses from the cases he has worked on since childhood are laid out end to end in silent rows on the soft green grass, with paths between the bodies, waiting there for Sherlock until he needs them. Dozens of dead men and women, arranged like petunia beds.

"The body was found in a pile of lumber at Oldacre Urban Solutions, doused with chemicals and charred past DNA recognition. You ID'ed the corpse with dental records?" Sherlock's eyes open and dart to Anderson, who has seated himself across the table once more, coffee cup steaming.

"No," Anderson admits.

"Excuse me?" Sherlock drawls.

"I said no."

"Laziness, or did you forget how that's done?"

"I said bludgeoned to death with a hammer, you lunatic," Anderson shoots back. "The jaw and teeth were smashed to pieces. Totally useless, the coroner told us."

Oh, Sherlock thinks, huffing out a small breath of air.

The others stare at him, a bit wide-eyed. Sherlock has no idea what face he's making, but he knows he is exceedingly pleased by this news.
Clever.

That is so very, very clever.

Fixing things for people, Jim said. Dear Jim, will you fix it for me to get away from it all. Dear Jim, for an extra charge, can that include revenge against the woman who once threw me over for another man?

Dear Jim, help me to fly.

Remarkable.

"Something other than a whim made you identify Oldacre," Sherlock muses. He smiles enigmatically, which always infuriates Anderson, which is always satisfying. Anderson duly scowls. "What was it?"

"His ring was intact. He always wore it. Titanium. He was also wearing his steel-toed boots, which were in bad shape but enough to give us a clue."

"You," Sherlock intones, shaking his head sadly as he rises to his full height, "have no clue whatsoever."

"Sherlock?" John says, curious.

"That man is innocent," Sherlock declares, pointing a long finger at the unhappy John Hector McFarlane. The young solicitor's blond head raises hopefully. "Why should McFarlane kill a man with a hammer and then viciously shatter his teeth and jaw? There would have been blood. A lot of it. There would have been work involved. A lot of it. All this over a stranger?"

"That doesn't prove--" Anderson attempts.

"Shut up and learn something if you are capable, which I sincerely doubt. McFarlane had definitely not visited Oldacre Urban Solutions previously. A convenient lumber pile he might have found on his own, I grant you, but the exact chemicals capable of destroying a mutilated corpse? You think he entered a strange environment, killed a man, took his time over bashing his face in, not a bit worried over being discovered, and then just happened upon the right materials for arson? McFarlane is guilty of being framed by a criminal mastermind, and of being bad with finances. But he is entirely innocent of murder."

"What are you on to, then, Sherlock?" Lestrade urges with an encouraging half-smile, propping his hands on his hips. "We're after a different murderer?"

"Correct."

"Any idea who that might be?"

"Jonas Oldacre."

Anderson's lip curls up in disgust. "You think a suicide due to a terminal illness or some such killed himself with a hammer and then dragged his own corpse to a wood pile and lit himself on fire?"

"No. Only you could conceive of such a ridiculous notion." Sherlock turns up his coat collar as John stands. The sleuth heads for the door and throws it open.
"Anderson, take McFarlane back to his cell. Sherlock, where are we off to?" Lestrade asks.

"To Scotland Yard. To find the Norwood builder," Sherlock says as he sweeps out the door.

It takes hours.

Hours ticking along like the time bomb they know is out there, hours sweating like racehorses, hours piling up up up up up one after another like the bricks walling in the doomed man in the Poe story Sherlock read at John's suggestion.

Techs discovered CCTV footage of Oldacre leaving his construction company quickly enough, and the time stamp proved that he was alive when the fire started. Jim Moriarty, Sherlock is certain, came up with the master plan of providing Oldacre with a corpse which would then be rendered identity-free and dressed as the construction company owner. Oldacre's money by then would have been transferred almost entirely to a fake charity by the name of Cornelius Group, which Sherlock is reasonably sure has since been emptied into yet another account, but they are waiting on the bank for confirmation.

Once provided with a new identity, Oldacre would simply have vanished. Into thin air, with a fortune, some of which would go to Moriarty. And John McFarlane would be punished for a crime no one committed.

"Elegant," Sherlock whispers.

"Sorry?" says John.

Sherlock is sitting before a computer next to John as the other Yard officers fly around them in a flurry of activity, scouring airline records and CCTV and everything else they can think of. The detective's fingers are flying over the keys in search of relevant social media. Jonas Oldacre had been on Facebook but not Twitter, and interestingly, he had made passing mention of Morocco a few weeks before his death--about never having seen it, and wanting to. The police are duly researching flights around the time of Oldacre's "death" from London to Casablanca as Sherlock continues digging for leads.

Meanwhile, Sherlock's brain feels like a lightning rod, sucking energy from the skies and from the very static in the air around them. He hasn't been this impressed by a case in years.

"The frame job," Sherlock answers. "Elegant. The vengeance, the escape all in one. Moriarty is good at this."

When John doesn't answer, Sherlock glances at him. John's lips are doing peculiar new things which Sherlock duly catalogs as he tries to comprehend what has put his colleague in a snit.

"Not good?" he asks at last, returning his attention to the screen.

"Bit not good, yeah," John admits. "I mean, this crazy son of a bitch might want you to think it's a game, but we both know it's just a way to fuck with your head some more. And meanwhile, real people are getting hurt."

" Doesn't make it any less elegant," Sherlock mutters. "And at least it isn't boring. And no one has been hurt yet in any meaningful fashion."
"What about the unidentified corpse?"

"What about it?" Sherlock is scrolling through Oldacre's timeline, eyes taking in everything at a glance.

"Sherlock, Jesus, they could have murdered someone. Someone else, I mean. That person, whoever it was in the woodpile, died."

"Factually true, but irrelevant. I texted Mycroft. The grave robbing trick appears to have been practice in anticipation of sending me the severed head--when a pattern emerges, it always behooves one to follow the trail of said pattern to its fullest extent. The corpse was an ad executive who died three days before McFarlane was framed. Heart attack. He was a divorced father of two who cheated on his taxes. Mycroft says the perpetrators didn't even bother to hide the fact they'd snatched the corpse just after burial. Left an empty coffin and a hole in the ground, as they did with Carl Powers. I was meant to find the link."

"All right," John sighs at Sherlock's elbow, "that's better than it might have been. But you shouldn't... I'm glad you seem all right after--better than this morning, anyhow. Everything's going to be fine. But I'm a little disturbed that you're enjoying this so much. I mean, this crime is pretty sick. Just...so personal. Oldacre wanted McFarlane's life ruined, and his mother's by proxy."

"Uniquely vindictive," Sherlock concedes absently, eyes flicking over pixels.

John is silent for a while, and then sighs again. "He'd probably have let her know somehow he was behind it, later. Just to rub it in that much more. It's disgusting. No wonder Moriarty took the job, it's right up his street. Watching someone suffer."

Sherlock stills. He remains frozen for exactly four seconds. Then he whirs to John, catching him by the shoulders. John's deeply blue eyes widen in surprise.

"John Watson, you are brilliant, you are fantastic, yes, thank you, thank you, oh, you are perfect."

"What did--where--"

"Lestrade! Quickly!" Sherlock bellows, pushing and elbowing past startled detectives and technicians and finally racing into the hallway where Lestrade is having a quiet word with Sally Donovan.

"Yeah, what is it, Sherlock?" Lestrade asks, interrupting her. She frowns but subsides.

"McFarlane's mother's house. It's wired, probably in multiple rooms. Video feed, audio. Search it. Carefully. There will have been some sort of repair work recently--bad cable, the wireless not working, something like that. Find the bugs and trace them to Oldacre. He wants to watch his punishment as it unfolds, don't you see? This is obsession at its darkest. He wants to watch Mrs. McFarlane falling apart without her son. Find where the camera feed is going, use my brother's technical people if it's faster, and I guarantee you'll find Oldacre."

Lestrade's face lights up. "Let's move, people, you heard the man," he calls out, and then they are running again, out of the Yard, into a police car, John at his heels racing straight and steady and without a cane, John cradled in the detective's shadow even though Sherlock hasn't looked back and cannot see him.

John.

John who wouldn't let Anderson call Sherlock a freak even though he manifestly is one, John
whose insight into human nature may have just given them the lead they desperately needed.

John who is in terrible danger.

_John._

Sherlock swallows the lump in his throat as he dives headfirst into the police car and the sirens start blaring.

"That was incredible," John says breathlessly.

The chase led them to a hotel not far from Heathrow Airport. Oldacre hadn’t been present at first, but they had prevailed upon the hotel staff even without a warrant and waited exactly twenty-seven minutes before his return with a boxed sandwich and three pornographic magazines. Oldacre turned out to be a wizened, wiry man with a truly odious face—crafty, vicious, malignant, with shifty, light-grey eyes and white eyelashes. Sherlock had loathed him on the spot.

There had been rather a lot of bother afterward. The arrest, Oldacre protesting tearfully that it had only been a practical joke, Sherlock dashing with John again at his heels down to the office and appropriating the hotel’s computer to log into _The Science of Deduction_, posting to his forum that Oldacre had been found and arrested for falsifying his own death.

And then, as Sherlock cannot for the life of him forget, no matter that he has tried to delete it three times now, there was his phone instantly ringing and the voice of the hostage at the other end.

_Well done, you,_ she'd said, sobbing.

Sherlock stares into his glass of neat scotch. He's sitting at the darkened hotel bar with John, both with necessary drinks in their hands, recovering as a football game plays in silence on the telly above them. The detective in the recent absence of Lestrade and his team feels triumphant but lightheaded, as well as a bit sick. Because that had been touch and go for a moment. He'd stopped the clock, but with little time to spare. And then he'd listened to a victim of Jim Moriarty's weeping frantic, terrified tears into his mobile.

_Come and get me,_ she'd gasped.

It was horrible.

John, just to his left, is watching the match but thinking about Sherlock, Sherlock knows, while he sips his own glass of spirits. The doctor keeps saying things like _really unbelievable_ that have nothing to do with blocks or goals.

Sherlock shoots the rest of his drink.

_Where are you? Tell us where you are,_ Sherlock had said with seeming calm.

He wasn't calm, though. He wasn't even close to being calm. She'd sounded half dead of fear. She'd sounded just precisely the way Sherlock will doubtless sound in Jim's company, after two or three years of--

"You okay, mate?" John says, glancing at the empty glass. "Fancy another?"
Standing, Sherlock throws twenty pounds on the marble bar and tugs at John's sleeve. "Come."

"What, now?"

"Now."

John downs his own whiskey, and he follows.

Five minutes later, they are back in Oldacre's room on the third floor. It is now dark. The sliding door to the balcony remains open, as it was before, and Sherlock shuts it. He draws the cheap maroon curtains and flicks the bedside lamp on. The Norwood builder's laptop he'd been using for surveillance of Mrs. McFarlane was seized instantly, but Oldacre's toiletries are still in the loo, the sandwich still on the table, his clothing still in the drawers. Hateful traces of a hateful man. Sherlock can't give a damn at the moment. John is still in the tiny foyer when the hall door slowly clicks shut.

"Why did you keep Oldacre's key card?" he wonders. "He left it on the table when they arrested him."

"Sentiment."

"Are you...collecting more evidence? I thought we'd--"

In a single fluid motion, Sherlock spins John around and brings his hands up against the wall, lacing their fingers together.

"I...oh," John breathes as Sherlock's mouth descends to the back of his neck. "That sort of sentiment. Right."

John tastes like lemon there, like London rain, like the sweet and salty crust of a perfectly baked pie, like the desert wind, Sherlock registers as he mouths across John's nape. His tongue emerges, questing, and John's breathing quickens. Then Sherlock has John's fragile, snappable spine between his teeth, biting softly before going back to dragging kisses, and John chuckles in a low register.

"This is a bad idea."

"No," Sherlock purrs, "this is a very good idea."

"We could go home--"

"Boring."

"If Lestrade comes back--"

"He won't. Shut up."

Backing away a little, Sherlock unlaces their fingers and pulls John's light green coat off his back. It hits the badly carpeted floor. Next is a long-sleeved cotton shirt, and he strips that off too as John continues to face the wall. Then Sherlock shrugs out of his Belstaff and goes back to what he was doing before, this time with an arm snaking around John's naked waist and his other hand sweeping up John's warm breakable, vulnerable ribs. John's forearm hits the papered wall, and he rests his tousled head against it with a highly pleased sound humming through his perfectly formed nose.
"Don't ever stop doing that," John sighs.

"Ever?"

"Um. You are hereby granted permission to do that for years. If not decades."

"I want to tell you something," Sherlock murmurs against the freckles on John's shoulder, running his fingertips strongly up and down the small man's sides.

"Yeah?"

"Because you didn't want Anderson to call me a freak..."

"Ugh, could we not talk about that wanker right now?"

"...Even though technically he was correct. And that was...good. Good of you."

"If you mean _freak_ like a bloody giant diamond or a rare breed of mountain lion, fine," John growls possessively, lifting one hand behind himself to brush at Sherlock's curls. "If you mean it like the Elephant Man, I _will_ slap you."

"And because you helped solve the case," Sherlock adds. His breathing is growing laboured. Why is that? Why, when he is only kissing John's back, when he is only running his sensitive lips over the raised skin of the exit wound, why does he feel like his chest is too tight? Why does he feel like the crying woman, shivering and vulnerable and liable to explode at any moment? "That was brilliant, the remark about watching suffering, brilliant. So I want to tell you."

"So tell me."

"I'm telling you now. Are you listening?"

"Yeah," John breathes. His voice is gentle, caressing, like a warm summer breeze. "Yeah, I'm listening pretty hard right now."

"Good, because I'm telling you, I'm telling you now, you have to listen to me," Sherlock repeats, helpless to stop himself.

He reaches blindly around as he's tasting John's shoulder blades to unbutton and unzip his trousers. Tucking his thumbs into the waistband of John's pants and pulling forward away from his body slightly, he tugs down in a smooth motion, freeing John's cock into the air. Dizzy at the fact that he can touch even more of John now, he crowds forward, passing his palms up and down John's strong thighs, curving them back to the swell of his arse and kneading as he returns to lightly kissing his neck, sweeping his hands forward over the soldier's hips and then sinking them down toward his pelvis.

"Okay, yep, that's, ah, arousing," John pants.

"Are you listening?" Sherlock demands, growing jagged-edged and desperate.

"Yes, I promise, I swear I am."

Gently, Sherlock flips John around and his back hits the wall, his body swaying slightly due to the constriction of the clothing pooling at his thighs. Sherlock hits the floor. He hears John suck in a small breath of surprise, but that's senseless, John was warned this would happen. Perhaps he'd forgotten.
Sherlock nudges between John's knees. He's at approximate eye level with John's arousal now, musky and darkly flushed and pulsing in tiny echoed heartbeats, and Sherlock wonders how anyone can stand sex when they're aroused at the same time as a loved one, it would be awful, how could anyone contain such feelings while wanting to have an orgasm in the same time and space as the object of their total devotion? It would be like the collision of atoms that precipitates a nuclear event, it would be a pair of racecars colliding at full speed, it would be gruesome. It would end him entirely. Nosing into the soft nest of hair, Sherlock breathes in.

"Oh god," John, gasps. "You are, uh, actually going to do this. Christ. Sherlock, will you take your shirt off, please?"

Pressing tiny kisses into the soft skin of John's thigh, Sherlock fumbles with buttons. His hands are shaking.

*Why are your hands shaking, you done this plenty of times with total nitwits, you ridiculous creature, he'll think you're frightened and stop you, and you aren't, or not of him, not of giving him what he wants even if he won't ever tell you he wants it, not of learning him better or taking him inside you, you're only concerned that the throbbing in your chest might literally break your heart.*

Wrestling his shirt off and tossing it aside with the rest of the rumpled clothing on the floor, Sherlock wills himself to breathe deeply. In and out, in and out, like a normal person. A sane person. Like a person who likes doing this with people to whom they are attracted. It happens every day, all over London, between stupid people. *Nice* people. This is no different on a technical level.

Reaching up, he cups John's thighs just where they meet his arse and then slowly skims his mouth along the hard ridge leading from John's hip to his pelvis. John's hands come down to card very softly through his hair again.

"Are you going to say something unbearably stupid like *do you really want to?*" Sherlock asks a bit unevenly.

*Because if you did, I think at this point it might actually finish me.*

"Nope," John says, and Sherlock can hear a smile layered on top of the bottomless affection.

*Thank god,* Sherlock thinks, letting out the breath he was holding. "Are you *thinking* something stupid along those or similar lines?"

"No." John brushes his nails across Sherlock's scalp. "I'm thinking you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Sherlock's eyes wince shut and he buries his face in John's smooth thigh, trying to force the trembling to stop. How John could imagine that to be true is beyond him completely, but it's too much, he's not aroused and isn't ever going to be by this sort of thing but somehow it's already devastating, it's--

"Hey, hey. Sherlock. Baby, look at me. Just because you really want something doesn't mean you can't change your--oh, *fuck.*"

Sherlock has only the tip of John's cock in his lips, his right hand lightly circling the heated flesh, both aiming it and caressing it, thinking *it's perfect he's perfect* and *I'm not supposed to have this* and making every practical effort he can not to have a stroke then and there. He pulls off with soft suction and mouths over the tip again, tasting briny moisture, lapping at cells produced by John,
who he loves so much that it just might kill him. When he swallows them, they will creating new cells inside Sherlock, and John will be more a part of him than ever. John shivers violently when Sherlock leans in further, pressing the tight, hot skin against the roof of his mouth.

"Oh, shit, that is perfect, god, yes, thank you. Please, just like that. Jesus, Sherlock. Oh my god."

In his momentary nervousness, Sherlock hadn't hazarded a glance up. Now he does, angling his eyes ceilingward to meet John's partly shadowed face. John is watching proceedings with such an expression of tenderness that Sherlock exhales a muffled little moaning sound.

"Your mouth. God, Sherlock, your mouth. You're..." One of John's hands leaves Sherlock's hair, and he traces his finger around where his prick is encircled by Sherlock's lips, reverently following the bow of the detective's mouth. He looks very sad suddenly. He looks as sad as Sherlock has ever seen him.

"What's wrong?" Sherlock questions, pulling back a little. John's fingers follow his lips as if to lose contact with them now would be ruinous and Sherlock catches two, tonguing up the first knuckles, scraping his teeth along the tiny ridges as John watches in a sort of pained awe.

"I can't believe you," John whispers. "I still can't believe you. I try, trust me. But. It's all so bloody unreal. Before I moved in, I thought every morning that probably I'd only dreamed you before I double checked on my phone. And sometimes before that day at the Friesland I'd wake up in your bed alone and think it was maybe my flat, just my flat, and I invented you, that being so isolated had just...snapped me. I didn't, though, did I? You're here."

This, Sherlock thinks as his eyes shut again and a deep shudder goes through him, is completely unacceptable. Pull yourself together, Sherlock Holmes. It's sex. It's just sex.

Don't panic.

Sex doesn't alarm you.

Orgasms and feelings, though, Sherlock realizes. He should have known as much, deduced it about himself. Both orgasms and feelings alarm him tremendously.

Tightening his grip and diving forward once more, he begins to bob his head in earnest. John gasps, and then sighs luxuriously, muttering "God yes, Sherlock, amazing, fuck, you're amazing, please," as Sherlock takes him further down his throat. Reaching up, Sherlock cups one side of John's arse firmly and pulls him in that much deeper, earning a growl from the doctor, who is sliding bonelessly down the wall.

Sherlock increases the suction for long moments, tongues at the slit as his fingers tighten and pump during others, worships the person before him thinking only, I love you, are you listening, are you hearing that, because I do, I love you, listen to me telling you that I love you. It's when John's thighs start to tremble and his panting breaths grow faster that Sherlock makes a truly shocking realization.

He doesn't want it to stop.

Pulling off with a strange sound he wasn't aware he was capable of, Sherlock kisses John's belly, kisses his upper thigh and the crease of his leg, running his left hand all the while over John's skin, the right still circling his cock, but now without discernible pressure. John's hands in his hair tighten, knead lovingly, not hurrying him, just stroking, letting him delay the inevitable, and Sherlock remembers being yanked by the curls on multiple occasions and wills himself not to fall
to pieces. He kisses everywhere and nowhere for long minutes until he can breathe relatively
normally. Then he plunges down on John's now painful-seeming erection again, all the way and
without warning this time, and John makes a noise like he's dying.

"You're so bloody good," John moans. "You're a fucking miracle, you are. So good, Sherlock."

"It's important to be good," Sherlock admits without thinking, raising his head.

"Why?"

"Because the better I am at it, the sooner--"

Sherlock stops himself milliseconds before the utter train wreck of a statement he'd been about to
make emerges to ruin everything.

--the sooner it's over.

"The sooner you'll want me to do it again," he says, meeting John's eyes.

It's the truth, which is the only reason Sherlock gets away with it. John laughs, tracing his fingers
over Sherlock's left ear.

"I will never stop wanting you to do this, if you like it," he says softly. "When and where you
want."

Sherlock could collapse in relief. But that won't do, so instead he smirks his wickedest smirk and
says, "Where I want? Is that wise?"

"God, Sherlock, I don't give a shit if it's wise. Yes. All right? Train stations, public parks,
banking queues. Yes. My answer to your question, supposing the topic is blow jobs, is now
officially yes."

For a little while, Sherlock stares as John rubs a thumb along his cheekbone. But the moment
arrives all too quickly when Sherlock cannot look up at John any longer, cannot see him smiling
and approving from above, radiating fondness and patience.

So Sherlock takes John in his mouth again, fully aware he's hiding, and this time means to finish
what he began.

It doesn't take long. A minute or two (imprecision in time measurement, what has become of you,
appalling), deep pushing of his head while stroking firmly over John's sack (but I don't want to end
it even now, I never want it to stop, and at this point in my life every time may be the last time), his
lips starting to feel pleasantly battered and his throat growing sore (he could do anything he wanted
to me and I'd probably thank him for it, how ridiculous) and John is shuddering and muffling a
thin cry with one hand as he comes, thick and pulsing hotly, down Sherlock's throat. The
detective swallows most of it. A little remains in his mouth and he swallows again.

John's legs are shaking, Sherlock realizes seconds later, and he seems about ready to collapse. So
Sherlock staggers to his feet and slides his arms around the small doctor and in a few stumbling
steps tips them together onto the coverlet of the neatly made single bed by the door, rolling them
fully onto the mattress.

Slowly, silently, John recovers his breath. Then he shifts to rearrange them, lying on his back and
pulling Sherlock half on top of him, Sherlock's leg thrown over John's disarrayed trousers, John
planting small kisses along his brow.
It doesn't take long for John to realize there is something very amiss.

He is not the only one shaking. Sherlock had thought that the tremors would go away when it was over. They haven't. He's shivering as if it's freezing in here, and the room is perfectly climate controlled. And now John has noticed.

"Sherlock, what's the matter? That was...I don't have words for what that was. Did I hurt you?"


He can feel John freeze in horror, *no no no no no, not like that*, so Sherlock scrambles to his elbows, hovering over the doctor's lined face.

"I wanted to tell you, I wanted for you to hear me, I needed you to realize, but then I think I said the wrong thing," Sherlock babbles. He's past any semblance of coherence now, but maybe John will still understand and the frown between his dark eyes will disappear. "I mean, I meant that as well, what I said to you, it wasn't a lie, god it wasn't, but I meant to tell you..."

Biting his lip for a moment, Sherlock leans down. He kisses John feather-softly, on his cheeks and his eyelids and his forehead. He kisses him as if he were the most precious thing in the world now, because it's true. And John needs to know.

When Sherlock pulls away, John's eyes are very bright.

"Did you hear me?" Sherlock whispers. "Were you listening?"

"Yeah," John replies hoarsely. Reaching, up he pulls Sherlock's head down, and kisses him ever so sweetly between his eyes. "Yeah, I was listening. I heard you."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I just want everyone to know I get excruciatingly busy at times, but would never leave this tale unfinished. :) Thank you for sublime patience.

By the time they arrive back at Baker Street, Sherlock feels like an out of tune piano wire that's been viciously twanged.

He'd sat next to John in the cab, his phone in hand, checking its screen for sudden doom every other minute despite the fact it hadn't buzzed. Anxious and unsettled, refusing to shoot John darting glances and forced to stare resolutely out the window instead, Sherlock monitored the small doctor in his periphery. Reflected lights from the glass danced across John's pensive face like malevolent spirits.

It had been grotesquely unpleasant.

John was withdrawn throughout the entire taxi journey, a wild thing that had retreated partway back within a hard shell. He'd first fallen quiet about ten minutes after the encounter in Oldacre's room, after the brief recovery and the buttoning of shirts and the subdued exit from the hotel, a quiet that Sherlock couldn't quite lay his finger on. It made him want to push at it, like a tongue against a sore gum, until he understood what the quiet meant. The quiet worried him immensely, and Sherlock isn't the type to fill silence with chatter unless in a highly manic state. So instead he'd studied his...colleague? lover, now? does it count if he's the only one having an orgasm?... as they passed through dark streets shrouded in a mist like a veiled threat.

"Do you have a fiver?" are John's first words in twenty minutes as he pays the fare in front of 221B.

Wordlessly, Sherlock flicks a twenty in his direction and twists his long legs out of the cab, keys already in hand.

Sherlock unlocks the door. The trembling vanished soon after John vowed he was listening, leaving a stillness behind that feels like pictures Sherlock has seen of towns after tornadoes have decimated them.

This development is not merely puzzling but infuriating. Sherlock is an extremely methodological person, and sex has never affected him this way. Despite his depth of feeling watching John stroke himself luxuriously in their warm nest of sheets and the subsequent eroding of the detective's barricades, he is surprised; this sensation of hollowed-out longing, of need for reassurance, of desiring to repeat an experiment only just concluded, is sinister in its force.

Sex is meant to be a small, forgettable, ugly interlude, not a momentous and beautiful one, messy and gut-wrenching as some of Sherlock's favourite Charles Ives compositions. Sex is meant to leave him temporarily disgusted, not fundamentally altered.
He had known it would be different with John, and it is different. It's miraculously so. What he hadn't accounted for—*idiot that you are*, Sherlock thinks with ripe scorn—was that a different category of biological act would affect Sherlock's brain in previously undокументed ways.

John's footsteps approach along the concrete, steady and quick.

Suppressing a shiver, Sherlock turns to him, their door partway open. Wings of his mind palace are as dim as if fuses had blown and others are lit up like carnivals, garish and over-bright. He isn't ready for Moriarty like this.

He isn't ready for *anything* like this.

"I'm popping down to the shop for a sandwich, we've nothing in and it's far too late for takeaway," John says quietly as the cab drives off and he joins Sherlock at the steps. "Fancy anything specific?"

Sherlock shakes his head *no*.

"You really have to let me feed you, you're running on fumes."

Sherlock shrugs.

John's brow creases, an affectionate if annoyed expression. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm not the one who fell into a silent funk for twenty-two minutes," Sherlock says coldly.

John raises his eyebrows. "Yeah, you were Mr. Chatterbox just now. I could scarce edge a word in. Come on, Sherlock, we're both well knackered, and hungry even if you don't know it, and now there's going to be another bloody..." John gestures at Sherlock's phone, still in hand. "Countdown. Unless we're lucky, and Mycroft has nailed the bastard by now. I'm buying you a ploughman's."

"I'm not eating it."

"I'm buying it anyhow."

"As you wish."

A brief, brilliant smile flashes to life on John's face and disappears just as quickly.

"What?"

"Nothing. Back in a tick, call if you need me."

Trudging up the seventeen stairs to flat B, Sherlock allows his fingertips to glide along the textured paper. When he reaches the top and has shed his coat and scarf and suit jacket and checked their rooms for absent signs of suspicious entry, Sherlock only makes it a few feet towards his armchair—

*It's beginning to be my armchair in a way it never was before the other armchair suddenly became John's armchair, as if furniture only truly belongs to me via the contrast of another piece belonging to him instead, as if furnishings were a continuum from his chair to his kitchen sink to our foyer to our bedroom to my sofa to my chair, shut up, god, can your hear yourself, just SHUT UP about all of this—*
Before lowering himself into a little heap before the fireplace. None of the lights are on, but he can't be arsed over them.

Listlessly, Sherlock rolls his head toward the bathroom where his morphine yet resides. Then to his bookcase, where the cocaine is hidden.

_You can't_, he thinks, and suppresses a pathetic little sound.

Now the first test is through, Sherlock is beginning to understand that he must be ready on a hair-trigger to dive back into The Work, poised to face the Yarders who'll help and hinder him, and thus he cannot so much as flirt with the concept of shooting up. Under normal circumstances, if he were merely preoccupied by a single complex case, doing without the drugs for a few weeks wouldn't be a problem. He's gone sober for as long as two months, when he took apart the Netherland-Sumatra company. But the notion that he _cannot_ take the drugs in the motionless spells between hectic interludes of activity chafes at him, takes the faint undercurrent of desire to escape that's always pulsing beneath his conscious thoughts and ratchets it to a high-pitched whine of longing.

His skin is too tight. His skull is too small. When he closes his eyes, all he can see is John's face with John's finger reaching for Sherlock's over-swollen mouth.

_You're crashing_, Sherlock thinks detachedly.

_Interesting._

_Why so early?_

_You always crash, though. Inevitable._

_Soon the mice will flood the basement and you'll have to shore the laboratory against mould again._

Sherlock occasionally wonders why mice flood a locked underground bunker of bitterness and regret shored up like Fort Knox when he's spiraling downward, and how mould can creep across the perfectly sanitized steel walls of his mind palace's lab, but has given the question up as a lost cause. When he crashes, they arrive, the mice and the mould, and that's all there is to it.

_The game is still on, you know. You'll have another challenge any second._

_Push past it._

_How?_ he thinks helplessly, twisting both hands in his hair.

John takes the stairs two at a time on his return, an urgent tattoo. The door creaks open.

"Sherlock? Sherlock! What the hell are--Jesus, Sherlock, turn the lights on as a bloody signal for god's sake, even if you aren't using them."

The sleuth makes no reply. Sherlock's eyebrows tense at a sudden flare of electric illumination, then at the unwelcome hiss of plastic rubbing against plastic as John sets his bag on the table and removes the contents.

"You all right over there?"

"Hmm," Sherlock replies.

John approaches with two triangular packages in his hand, having turned a single lamp up. It
glows cozily bright, as if Baker Street is a cave and they are safe here from the wolves and the witches. They aren't, Sherlock knows, but it would be very pretty to think so. Dropping easily into a cross-legged position on the carpet in front of where Sherlock lies curled on his side, John holds a sandwich out in either hand.

"Egg salad or cheese and tomato?"

Making a face, Sherlock sighs.

"Pick one."

Sherlock props his head up on one hand and gestures at the cheese and tomato. After opening the package, he takes a delicate bite to shut John up and then consigns the food to the floor. His senses are tuned so high at present, everything tastes overwhelmingly of salt and plastic wrapping and he forces the cold lump down his throat with a grimace.

"So," John says, chewing. His voice is hesitant but firm.

*And here we have it,* Sherlock muses, pressing at the edge of the tomato with his finger. There's no juice, only mealy flesh.

"You were right, I was...thinking. Earlier. So were you, but. Yeah, you were right. Anyway."

*I refuse to assist you in saying what you don't wish to tell me and know I won't like,* Sherlock thinks, aiming an entirely blank expression at the doctor as his heart flutters.

John coughs lightly. "OK, out with it. I, um. Well, we've talked about. You know...sleeping arrangements before, and not really got anywhere, but you're taking the bed tonight because you look fixed to pass out right in front of the hearth, and you need as much sleep as he'll allow us, and I'll be taking the sofa."

Sherlock's lips part. The thundercloud surrounding his mind palace crackles dangerously, forked lightning hissing and spitting in wicked tongues. He re-swallows a small trace of bread that refuses to go down. John continues to eat mechanically, a mulish look to his shoulders.

*My mind is made up,* his posture says. *I dare you to alter it.*

For at least thirty seconds, no one speaks.

"Well, if that's what you prefer," Sherlock says icily.

"I do, yeah." John looks relieved, rubbing a hand through his hair. "So...no objections?"

"To you sleeping out here and me sleeping in my room? I'd never dream of questioning your personal choices over such an intimate matter. We're our own men with our own set of preferences, after all."

"Wow, and here I thought you were going to be in a massive snit about this," John sighs.

"Whysmever would you imagine such a reaction?"

He brushes crumbs from his hands. "I'm sorry, not to imply that you're oversensitive. Just...thanks a lot for understanding."

Oh, how it hurts.
Stretching onto his back beside the uneaten sandwich, Sherlock cups his hands behind his head with one knee pulled up. He can physically feel his brain crackling, whips of white lightning bolts zigzagging from synapse to synapse. John can tell, obviously, and would prefer a decent night's sleep to resting beside a twitchy drug addict who cannot take his medicine even though he needs it, they're only chemicals, chemicals that when properly balanced treat specific symptoms.

And anyhow John got what he wanted earlier, so Sherlock's immediate presence isn't at all necessary.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Sherlock says with what he considers remarkable feigned calm.

John's lips press forward in a thoughtful pout. "Eat your sandwich. I know it's dodgy, but it's too late for anything else. Sorry, no? You deduced this would happen? I'm not surprised you did, actually. And...that makes it easier for the pair of us, I hope."

Sherlock swallows again. The bread in his dry throat is maddening, stifling. There is a giant iron slab crushing his heart. Jim Moriarty once sent him an image of a man in the seventeenth century being pressed to death. *This is what that feels like, when the ribs begin to bend and creak and give way.* The carpeting under the back of his hands chafes unbearably, the weight of his skull pinning them in place.

"Easier?" Sherlock asks, his tone leaden. "I suppose so. Most of the men I fucked were never in my bed in the first place, and the ones who were took up unnecessary space. Easier. You could term it such, I agree."

Mouth sharply twisting, John shifts onto his other leg, hovering closer above Sherlock's face. Sherlock shuts his eyes to get rid of John's warped expression of concern. "What do--"

"It's *easier*, I grant, to get a leg over and not bother with the rest of it, never mind that I apparently seem to enjoy the rest of it and never had it before. The experience was novel, the rest of it, but it's fine, if making you come is what I'm good for, you needn't suffer through any superfluous unpleasantries. Not when you've been so deeply reluctant to force the same upon me, so very courteous despite my shortcomings. It's a trivial matter, after all. I like being useful and I've slept alone for my entire life, barring extraordinary circumstances that were more often distasteful than otherwise. Now we've reached an understanding, allow me to say I think it more than equitable you seek me out if and when you want me. *It's fine, John. You needn't have been so loath to broach the topic.*"

Silence follows this short speech. Sherlock is dimly aware he's breathing hard, and wonders why. Someone else is breathing hard too, and that someone by process of elimination must be John.

After a few seconds, when he thinks he can, Sherlock hazards a glance at the army doctor.

John's lips are parted and his lungs work raggedly. The fingers of his left hand press into each other, brush across themselves over and over again, a movement far more exaggerated than his usual brief flex of muscles.

*Something is terribly wrong,* Sherlock knows despite the heavy chains wrapped around his brain.

*You've hurt him again.*

Sherlock blinks, bemused and aching.

*How can you have hurt him when he didn't want you and you agreed to it?*
Sherlock reaches a hand toward John's knee and the smaller man flinches backward like a gutter cat.

"Don't touch me," John hisses.

Yanking his hand away as if he'd been careless with one of his burners, Sherlock regards John with wide eyes that refuse to fully focus.

His flatmate is a silhouetted crouched creature, an animal that encountered bloody misadventure, eyes raw and dark blond hair disheveled. John pushes so he's up on his knees, rests his weight on his calves. He stills himself visibly, pressing one and then both hands over his lips before drawing a long breath through his nose and dropping them to his thighs.

"Let me get this perfectly clear," John says in a voice like the scrape of gunmetal.

"John--"

"No, you will shut the fuck up right now, Sherlock Holmes, while I sort this."

Jaw tightening, Sherlock nods. John's eyes spear into his like physical weapons.

"You said your..." Wincing, John clears his throat. "You said you didn't want to talk about your other sex partners, but that they were about expediency and not affection. You, meanwhile, have the libido of a Jaguar, and I mean the car not the jungle cat. Sexy as hell, thrives under proper care and maintenance, but not driven to procreate. Ergo, getting your rocks off was not the bargain you were striking. I don't want to know about them if you don't want to tell me," John insists hoarsely, palms up. "But let me posit that you...you weren't having sex for its own sake. Is that fair?"

Sherlock nods. The final bit of sandwich has finally gone down, but his throat has been left scratchy and raw as canvass. He wants John to press his palms over his throat, John with his warm hands that twitch fitfully as he lowers them back to his knees.

"I should have put the brakes on this whole thing when I realized you didn't define sex the way I do," John continues in a wrecked voice. He's looking at Sherlock as if looking at Sherlock hurts him, and that makes Sherlock long to unzip his flesh like stepping out of his beloved coat. "Right. So what you just said to me was, and I more or less quote, 'John, since you shot your load down my neck and aren't interested in me now that we've tried penetrative sex, I'm completely fine with turning this relationship into an interminable series of bargaining chips the way eight-year-olds trade apples for oranges when they unpack lunch from their mums. You get all the orgasms during the sex I want no part of, I settle for you making me tea, never mind I initially hoped that I could hold out for mutual affection. Carry straight on.'"

Momentarily, Sherlock is struck speechless. "I didn't..."

"Didn't you? Really, didn't you?" John demands. "Because it would admittedly be pretty insulting if you thought I was through being good to you now that you've swallowed my come."

"That's not--"

"You said sex with me--with me, Sherlock, not with any of the other fucking twats you've shagged--was about closeness for you. It's about that for me too. So tell me, and I have to say, I am extremely curious as to your answer here...was what happened at the hotel, when you wanted to tell me something, about doing a chore for me along the lines of scrubbing the loo? Was that a favour?"
"No, I didn't mean--"

"There aren't a lot of shades of grey in this conversation, if you follow me. Either you regret it, the telling me something, or you don't. And if you do regret it, there isn't enough bleach on earth to make me feel clean again."

"I don't regret it."

"That's a relief, then. Because I had the distinct impression you wanted me back."

"I do want--"

Sherlock's wrists hit the floor before he even realizes that he is reaching desperately for John. Gasping, he lifts his head and drops it again. There's an army veteran straddling his torso, hovering up on his knees above Sherlock's slim waist. Deliberately, carefully, John disengages his iron grip from Sherlock's wrists and twines all their fingers together, forcing Sherlock's hands back into the carpet when he's through. It's a more intimate hold, but hardly less impossible to break. The static in Sherlock's mind parts somewhat, gives way before a slicing thrill that's half mortified he caused this transformation and half admiring of the transformation itself.

"Did I or did I not just tell you not to touch me?" John rasps.

Sherlock nods, the wind stolen from his lungs. He shifts his hands experimentally. Nothing comes of the effort. John quirks a broken smile at him.

"You're touching me, though," Sherlock breathes, intrigued.

"And if you object, I'll stop. Instantly. If you looked remotely fussed, I'd be stopping already, but you don't, and you seem to listen better when I have a piece of you trapped. Any objections?"

Tilting his head to and fro, Sherlock traces John's fingers in his as best he can.

"Smashing. I haven't had any painkillers for hours, by the way, so forgive me the short fuse. But this is still the part where I'm sorting this and you're listening, yes?"

"Yes," Sherlock manages to whisper.

"Good. Now we come to my favourite part." John blinks hard and takes a deep breath, tightening his grip on Sherlock's fingers. "Two nights ago I came home from hospital after you threatened to murder a Soviet smuggler for me and after dismantling my gun, I woke up in your arms. That was...never mind what that was to me. The next night, you got yourself knocked cold with chloroform and after putting you to bed, I dismantled my gun and hid a piece in the microwave, and when I opened my eyes in the morning I was wrapped up in you and I was happy, all right, Sherlock?" John's voice has thickened considerably. "Are you sensing a fucking theme here?"

Closing his eyes, Sherlock allows shame to wash over him. He nods.

"You want to tell me what variable changed this morning?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "Go on," he husks. "You deserve it."

"If you say so, don’t mind if I do. As of this morning, there is man on the loose who wants to hurt you and then end you, and I will not dismantle my gun, not even if it means sleeping on the fucking staircase or upside-down like a sodding fruit bat," John snarls. "I made you a promise and my gun from now on stays within a foot or two of my hand fully loaded, end of discussion. This is non-
"negotiable. We're at war here. Meanwhile, do you think I want you to come back from taking a piss at four in the morning and get shot in the face for your trouble?"

"You won't," Sherlock insists, eyes riveted on the possessive pulse in John's throat.

"I might," he hisses. "Might is enough."

"That isn't who you are."

"You don't know me," John grates out. "That's why we're having this wonderful conversation. It's why you don't trust me to stay, don't trust me to be kind to you, why I thought at first you were either cracked or a fancy of mine--we barely know each other, Sherlock. Hell, I barely know myself. I sure as fuck don't know who I was three weeks ago before tackling Abernetty, I can hardly remember now except for the vaguely blank agony of waking up in the morning, but do you want to know what my relationship with my gun was like then, Sherlock? I used to taste it. Frequently. I once tried to murder a woman who saved my life, and I had bugger-all to occupy myself other than relive that and even prettier memories every night and then dream my way through one grey day after another."

"Why are you so angry when speaking of it if all of that changed?"

"Because a swaggering bastard escaped con is trying to take it away from me," John replies, his eyes murderous. "And the worst bit is, all together now, I could easily accomplish his job for him if we sleep together. I'm not risking you. I won't risk you."

"I'm sorry for misconstruing your intent," Sherlock forces out. "But that incident with the nurse was something you did, not who you are as a man, and anyway none of this was about you, it was about me."

"How so?" John questions, frowning.

"It's just that no one's ever wanted..." Sherlock makes the grandest gesture possible with John still immobilizing his fingers.

There was Patrick, god remember Patrick, who used to carry drugs in his glove box whenever he wanted to play and lit up like a full winter's moonrise when he found you walking back to Montague Street in the snow on Christmas Eve. You said you didn't want to see him and he said it's the hols, you'll be partying, you'll need more than you think, and when you said no thank you he said he was lonesome and you looked lonesome too, why shouldn't two lonesome people listen to some music and share the heater, and you got in the car and when it was over and he'd given you the drugs you didn't need you asked for a lift back to your flat and he laughed as if that were the funniest joke ever made before chucking you out and driving out of the alley he'd parked in.

By that time, it was dark and properly Christmas and all the streets were empty.

"A relationship?" John prompts when Sherlock is silent for long seconds. "No one ever wanted what you just called...all the rest of it?"

"Me." Sherlock bites his lip, forcing his expression clear. "No one's ever wanted me."

The hard knot of anger and hurt on John's face softens, melts into a sweeter ache, and Sherlock absolutely cannot bear it so he rushes to fill the void. "Well, one person did, back when I was younger, but I didn't want him and he didn't quite follow why that should have been a problem...so the whole thing fell through rather spectacularly. I told you that you weren't using me. You aren't. I want you, everything to do with you, I just..." Mortified, Sherlock stops when
his voice breaks, and he heaves an overwrought sigh. "I've never had meaningful sex before and I think even though I wasn't aroused the dopamine levels involved, not to mention oxytocin and vasopressin...I'll have to study it further. Some sort of hormonal glitch led me to miscalculate your motives."

"I, um. I think they're called misunderstandings by the layman," John says softly, sounding faintly amused despite his gravity.

"That's less precise, but yes. And you're the doctor here. Please don't stop sleeping with me," Sherlock whispers.

John's left hand abandons its hold, reaching out to trace Sherlock's cheekbone gently. "Sherlock, that's--"

"Don't tell me I'm mad, I know it already," Sherlock gasps, turning his face into the touch. "I just don't know what kind of madness, and it's only a little left of center. All I know is that the mice and the mould are coming and that I can't have any drugs and that you won't hurt me."

It's as if a switch had been flipped. The soldier is gone and John's right hand likewise deserts its post, brushing against the edge of Sherlock's eye, staring clinically into the pupils.

"No, you're wrong, they're all wrong, that part isn't what's wrong with me," Sherlock grinds through his teeth. "I know a hawk from a handsaw, for god's sake, I just...my brain is an extremely complex organism, so I allow it to be incredibly visual. The method of loci, you've heard of it? My brain operates on too many levels to hold a single linear thought or inner monologue, so I put them in rooms. The basement is trying to forget what I just told you about the boy when I was younger, and the library is sifting through Moriarty letters, and the lab is working through spectrum charts on how best to codify your eye colour. It's not a symptom, it's a system."

The light from the edge of the room has lost some of its nimbus effect, illuminating the doctor in a warm wash rather than a halo. John swings his leg back over and settles next to Sherlock, leaning on his left palm above the sleuth. To Sherlock's immense relief, his right hand comes to rest in the open collar of Sherlock's dress shirt, gently stroking the skin. John's face is reflecting too many emotions to calculate, angry loving fascinated frightened grim determined joyful wronged.

"You somehow didn't delete Shakespeare, if you know you're but mad north-northwest."

"You can't leave me just so you can be alone with your gun," Sherlock begs, not caring how desperate he sounds. "I won't be alive that much longer."

"Yes you fucking will," John vows fiercely, dropping his elbow to the floor and brushing his hand through Sherlock's curls, tenderly tugging them. "That's the point."

"No, the point is that I gave something up, I was frightened of being with you, of you coming to harm by it, and I did it anyhow," Sherlock cries. "That's the fucking point. I'll trust you, I'm sorry, you like me for some unfathomable reason and my flat is nice and I'm reasonably confident in saying that I cured your limp because I'm dangerous. So you'll probably stay for those practical reasons, I'll trust you to do that, but...being with you in the first place is me risking you. You don't understand. I'm risking you right now, after the Friesland, with Jim Moriarty out there in endless permutations of time and distance, waiting. So sleep with me. Risk me back. It's only fair."

The words take a moment to sink in. John tongues across his own lower lip, considering. His eyes wander, dark as the depths of space. "Why are your hands still like that?"
Sherlock stares back at John, baffled. His hands are exactly where they're meant to be, their backs flat against the carpet.

"You said don't touch me and I'm not."

"Christ," John sighs. He rubs at his eyes wearily. "You're right. You're right, you're right as can be. But Sherlock, I'm not with you for practical reasons. I'm here for sentimental ones."

"Sentiment is just a chemical defect," Sherlock whispers. "How can I trust a defect?"

"Do you trust your not entirely dissimilar...chemical defect?"

Nodding, Sherlock attempts a pathetically executed smile.

"Oh for fuck's sake, come here, you brilliant creature."

A slight rearrangement of limbs and they're stretched out head to toe against each other, Sherlock's arm snaking under the crook of John's shoulder around to his back as the doctor presses his lips to Sherlock's brow, both the doctor's hands stroking through Sherlock's hair and down his chest. Sherlock wonders what a battery recharging feels like and surmises this might be similar. Perhaps the mice and the mould will hold off coming until after the next card is played. Or perhaps even if they do come, he can stay like this, his head nestled into the crook of John's neck. Sherlock pushes closer, breathing in.

"I'm sorry," John whispers, nails lightly scoring Sherlock's neck as he tucks his nose into Sherlock's hair.

Sherlock marginally shakes his head. "I was extrapolating from an erroneous and, objectively speaking, insulting data set."

Making a small grunt of agreement, John kisses Sherlock's crown. They stay like that for a while, sharing molecules. Somewhere, Sherlock thinks, probably under John's left thigh, a past-prime cheese and tomato sandwich is being crushed. All this is very satisfying.

**Begone, hateful pre-packaged sandwich. Begone, distance from John Watson. Begone Jim Moriarty, and trouble us no more.**

"How could no one have ever wanted you," John whispers at length. "That's backwards on a level I've not seen since infiltrating a Taliban terror sect. Rampantly insane. Those people, whoever they were, make me want to twist something until it, um. Gives. If you get my meaning."

Sherlock pauses. But it's worth a final shot, so he plunges in. John said he was right, right as can be, after all.

"Are you going to sleep with me, then?" the detective hazards.

It doesn't work quite as Sherlock thought it would. First of all, there are rules.
1) Wake John before you leave the bed, no matter what the reason, and be speaking with him as you return to the bedroom.

2) All physical contact must be naturally occurring—in other words, no pranks.

3) Don't touch the gun.

4) If John has a nightmare, back away physically and speak in a calm, quiet manner with hands raised.

5) Don't touch the gun.

Second, Sherlock can't get comfortable.

The moon sends its syrupy blue rays leaking past the edges of his curtains, but Sherlock is wide awake.

He'd taken John's warm, furry forearm and wrapped himself around it for naught after the doctor rolled onto his back. Then, knowing John wouldn't mind, Sherlock had shucked all his clothes off (until every inch as naked as he generally sleeps) and draped himself, ever so softly, over one of John's legs.

To absolutely no avail.

The veteran's proximity and his quiet hums of welcome are every bit as comforting as Sherlock had known they would be, but Sherlock's brain still ticks whirs buzzes zooms grinds pulses with the hum of far too many thoughts for one human to handle.

Three times Sherlock, who never needs sleep, who hates sleep because sleep is like dying only sooner than he needs to, is almost asleep and his body jerks itself awake as if reaching the end of a bungee cord.

After the third time, he feels like crying.

After the fourth time, John, who is still clad in pyjama bottoms and a white V-neck, reaches out to brush his hand down Sherlock's rigid bicep.

"Try something for me?" John asks quietly in the almost-darkness.

"I can hear the mice," Sherlock whispers.

And he can. They itch in his ears every time begins to drift off.

John clicks on Sherlock's bedside lamp and the taller man can see the gun there, sitting cold and polished and promising on the bedside table. Scooting up, John lays three pillows behind his back, spreading his legs wide where the plaid is exposed below the downturned coverlet. Sherlock feels more naked suddenly but doesn't mind. It's nice, like accidentally sharing a water glass. John pats the sheet between his lower legs.

Sherlock studies him.

"Lie down with your back to me," John instructs, yawning. "Presumably if I've let someone into my crotch, that lucky bloke is both warm and not a target. C'mere."

Sherlock edges over carefully and lies with his back to John's chest. After a comfortable hum, John
switches off the lamp and shifts his hands up.

John's left hand he uses to cover Sherlock's eyes in the near-total dim.

John's right hand he uses to cover Sherlock's mouth.

"Better?" he asks. "Should I keep doing this?"

Sherlock calculates.

The pale nightglow wasn't keeping him awake behind his eyelids, but the knowledge of it was, the distances between star systems. It was too vast to stomach and it had kept him alert. The words under his tongue weren't keeping him awake, but the pangs that he should announce them were, words like *he hated me, I think, even though he fucked me, and if you don't forgive what I thought of you, I'll die, and you'd never hurt me, not if your gun was to your head.*

Now, with his head on John's chest and John's currently-steady hands over his lips and eyes, he nods.

All is well. Or at least, sensory-wise, *all is John.*

"As you wish," John whispers in his ear.

"Didn't I say that earlier?" Sherlock asks, pulling his mouth free by tugging at John's wrist. "Why did you smile?"

John grins widely against his temple, shielding Sherlock's lips again. "I smiled because I fancy pancakes for breakfast. Shut it. Goodnight."

Sherlock plunges into a blackness deeper than he'd thought possible earlier that evening, strung on a high wire as he'd been and thwarting death at every turn. In fact, he doesn't wake a single time, or not consciously, until his phone goes *ping* at eight fifty am the next morning. Softly shifting the still-present John, who lies plastered to his back and murmurs something reassuring, Sherlock opens the text message.

It's a photo of another newspaper clipping--this time from the *Sun*, and from two full years ago. The headline reads:

MARRIAGE OF JULIA STONER, REAL ESTATE HEIRESS OF STOKE MORAN, PREVENTED BY HER TRAGIC DEATH.
"I get that he hates you personally, yeah, and I get that he's a right scrote. For what he's done already, for what he means to do, but why the dancing about with hostages and the like? It's all far too complicated. I mean, what's the point, why would anyone do this?" Lestrade demands, ruffling his grey hair into a peak.

"Because I'm not the only one who gets bored," Sherlock answers slowly.

Sherlock and John made haste for the Yard following the arrival of Moriarty's second clue because, while Google and Sherlock's more obscure databases had delivered them the sparse facts of the case (the names and the dates and the parties involved), due to factors like the Stoner family's vast wealth and thus their corresponding desire for privacy in their dealings, Sherlock was unable to dig up any revealing data whatsoever. Even Mycroft's sources--briefly distracted from their hunt for Moriarty himself--had sent along only barest details. The Stoners, following the death of Julia Stoner (CEO, Chairperson of the Board, and 51% shareholder of Stoke Moran Properties) had simply hushed the whole thing up and gone on with their lives.

"You don't get bored like this, mate, or I'd not have sworn on as part of your honour guard."

"I never asked for that," Sherlock snaps.

"Dead right you didn't, and you're welcome."

"This is not my fault!"

"Of course it isn't, but just how many bloody times do we think it's going to happen?" Lestrade asks, his expression grim. "The semtex and the snapshots? Because it's pretty relevant to my job, yeah? So--forever and ever amen, until we've caught the tosser?"

*Or he catches me first*, Sherlock thinks.

But John won't like that. So he doesn't say anything, and he turns away.

"Erm," John says slowly, fidgeting where he sits before Lestrade's desk. He glances at Sherlock, who gazes pensively at a sickly grey London sky from the office window. Sherlock can see John's reflection. "Well, considering the five little, what were they, dried seeds of some kind?"

"Pips." Sherlock studies ghoulish shimmers in the perfectly polished glass, his hands steepled prayerfully before his chin, fingertips twitching in the elegant parabolas that best calm his mind. "Orange pips."

"Right, yeah, Sherlock thinks Moriarty sent them as a warning this was a sort of countdown of some kind."

"Countdown to...?"

"To Moriarty finding himself in the deepest, darkest hole on the planet for the rest of his life, supposing his life continues," John replies sharply.

"Damn right you are," Lestrade agrees hastily. "So...the fact we haven't got a hostage yet doesn't
mean we won't find ourselves in a tight spot all too quick, we're thinking. Right, then. Sherlock--"

"Data, data, data!" Sherlock snaps, twitching toward the pair. "I cannot make bricks without clay. I ought to be solving this by now, and you--"

"Oi, settle down, Dimmock will be here in a tick with the complete file, he's fetching it now."

Lestrade holds his hands up. "But seeing as he worked the case, his memory ought to serve you better than any of our paperwork. Cagey lot, from what I hear, the Stoners. Not to mention that Roylott character. Hardly knew him myself, ’cept for the little was leaked into the papers, but he was one gobby son of a bitch."

Sherlock closes his eyes.

He has no data. Soon there will be a call on his mobile instead of a text, and he ought to be miles ahead of the game by now, his brain is shimmering in readiness for action without any facts to feed it, it feels like a racecar revving continually and never leaving the starting gate, pitched to higher and higher whines of energy. Why did Moriarty give him a head start? Why? For the sport of it? Is his archenemy watching them even now, alive in the light fixtures and the desk drawers, laughing at Sherlock's readiness and impotence?

This is all scraping like the claws of small rodents across his skin. Sherlock is standing there useless in the middle of a miserably dull room when two years ago, Julia Stoner died, and he burns to know why.

At least his mind palace seems to have righted itself in the onset of a case and the aftermath of a shockingly sound night's sleep. Even if everything else is presently unbearable.

If Sherlock tilts his head in the darkness with the sunlight seeping into his eyelids from Lestrade's window just so, he can be back where he was this morning.

Sherlock rolled out of bed, sleep-eyed and dream-dazzled, staring at the text. But despite his habitual voracious absorption of all criminal news and the efficiency of his mind palace's library and its card-based data retrieval system he implemented at age twelve, he could recall nearly nothing about Julia Stoner of Stoke Moran Properties--only that she died, and that her death had been ruled due to natural causes.

John was blinking slowly awake himself, meanwhile, scratching his nails over the cotton covering his chest and yawning into the back of his hand. His leg shifted as he stretched it, and Sherlock discovered that he had slept there, first cradled and blinded and muffled and then simply curled over on his side, nestled with his head to John's gently sloping chest propped on the pillows, for nearly seven entire hours uninterrupted.

Unprecedented.

Shifting his cramped muscles, Sherlock realized that despite the constricted positioning or perhaps because of it, he'd felt unfettered by the inside of his head for once. As if he'd been transported to a neighbour's house for a sleepover, and would have to walk back through the meadow and over the stile and up the hill and down the lane to find his palace again.

Astonishing.

Pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, John made a vague nod at the phone in Sherlock's hand. "Another one?"

"Undoubtedly--it's a headline referencing a death."
"Know anything about it?"

"Nothing whatsoever."

Reaching for the painkillers John left next to his gun, he dry swallowed one with a grimace. Sherlock's heart clenched painfully.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine. Bit sore still, nothing to whinge over. I'll help you set to work after I put the kettle on."

John didn't move, though. He sat there, stretching his arms and shifting his torso, looking inexpressibly pleased about something as he stared back at Sherlock. The morning light turned him sunflower-golden, a little king seated in a throne of pillows. Sherlock felt his heart twist again at the memory of the night before. At the memory of John's gentle face collapsing and his strong fingers latched defensively into Sherlock's against the carpet. At the memory of being cruel to John, howsoever accidental that was. The act simmered in his chest like a chemical burn, for all that John was likewise unintentionally hurtful.

"You've just said you're all right," Sherlock pleaded.

"What?" John yawned again.

"But you're not putting the kettle on," Sherlock pointed out.

This was the reason he avoided sleep at all costs, he remembered. Sleeping forced him to do ordinary human things like state the obvious when Sherlock is no ordinary human.

Chuckling, John touched his lip to his tongue. "Right, working my way up to that."

Another pause fell.

"You seem..." Sherlock attempted.

"Dead chuffed?"

"You tell me."

Pushing the covers aside, John stood up and padded barefoot in undershirt and pyjama bottoms to where Sherlock stood stark naked, shallowly breathing with his mobile in his hand. For a long moment, Sherlock thought John was about to embrace him. He didn't, however. The former soldier raised his hands like a sculptor evaluating a piece of marble, passing his palms down Sherlock's bare torso without touching his skin.

It lasted for several seconds—to the point at which Sherlock no longer felt like a block of stone, but an already completed nude being examined by a collector.

No, not a collector. The artist. Knowing, not admiring.

No.

Perhaps both at once.

"I get that you don't experience fear except for the occasional, uh, chemical malfunction," John said dryly. "But imagine being someone ordinary, and imagine being afraid of yourself more than
anything else. Of walking into a triggering situation and watching something, you know, just
insanely ugly spill out of you without warning, of being terrified of nothing so much as the man
you've become. Instead of being afraid of something that makes sense, right? Like a psycho killer,
for instance. You didn't fix me and I'm not better and I'll have more nightmares and I'm scared
witless of hurting you. But thank you for not, um, letting me cede control to my problems. They're
dictatorial wankers. I can follow orders as well as the next soldier, but I fucking hate being told
what to do. There's a difference. And I've come to detest sleeping alone too, for what it's worth."

Sherlock stood there, speechless, studying John with his hands not-caressing, but really they were,
tracing the contours of his musculature without contact, reverent and disbelieving as if he'd never
been to medical school. The not-touch prickled along his skin like static. Uncertain suddenly,
Sherlock shifted his eyes to the bed.

"Nope," said John cheerily. "I was keen as mustard over being told what to do that time. It led to a
brilliant orgasm and like you said, you're not a wanker. Well. Only very occasionally."

"What are you doing?" Sherlock whispered.

"Right now? Nothing. We have a case. Later?" John's left hand gripped his bicep and his right
Sherlock's thigh just under the curve of his arse, gripping firmly enough to hitch Sherlock's breath
in his lungs. Stepping in, the doctor planted a row of almost imperceptible kisses along the hollow
of Sherlock clavicle. "I am going to spoil. You. Rotten."

Sherlock wonders--he wonders like the steady thrum of his heartbeat--just what that could possibly
mean where a defective specimen like himself is considered.

"Right, sorry, sorry," Detective Inspector Dimmock announces to the room, hastening inside with a
precariously balanced file folder and a carton of four coffees. The door swings shut behind him. "I
have everything we came up with right here, precious little as that was. Care for a--"

"Coffee will not solve our present problems," Sherlock hisses, snatching the file away from
Dimmock and ignoring the offered takeaway cup.

"Well, it'll solve one of my present problems," Lestrade admits, reaching. "Right, give it to us from
the start, Detective. We're going to knock this fucker for six, yeah, Sherlock?"

Sherlock silently flips through pages of the report, bracing himself for an assault of Dimmock. He
doesn't loathe DI Dimmock, certainly not the way he loathes Anderson or the way Sally Donovan
clicks out the K in the word freak. Dimmock isn't infuriating because he's vicious, he's simply
hideously average. Dimmock wears nice suits because he thinks they will make him look incisive.
Instead, the suits make him look as if he's compensating for a lack of talent, which is exactly what
he is doing, of course, which rather defeats the purpose. He has straight, bland hair and affects a
bland expression he thinks makes him look wise when in fact it makes him look uninterested. His
jaw is nearly always tensing in frustration when Sherlock speaks, and worst of all, his dimples are
oriented at entirely the wrong angle on his smug, youthful, uncertain face. It's maddening.
Sherlock could simply take Dimmock's head in his hands, remold it, and explain to God where he
went wrong.

Dimmock gets into his "delivering the report posture," whipping his jacket open to place
competent-seeming fists on his waist.

Sherlock, turning his face to the window again, rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

"One of my first cases as a Detective Inspector," Dimmock begins. "It had a certain nasty feel to it,
I admit, though there was nothing to find. Felt off, you know what I'm saying, but I had only been on the force for--"

"Detective Inspector, if I wanted to know more about your personal history, it would only be because I'd finished grinding my own teeth to dust with a sanding tool," Sherlock snarls. It's a reference to a Moriarty letter admittedly, but rather a good one, and he isn't going to be afraid anymore, he and John agreed, so he patches the insult together as if it doesn't send a small shiver through him. "Discuss the murder."

Dimmock gapes when Sherlock pivots back to him. "How do you know it's a murder, then?"

"Never you mind," Lestrade sighs, rubbing his temples. "Talk."

"Fine," Dimmock sniffs. "We were approached by a Ms. Helen Stoner, younger sister to the dead woman and CFO of Stoke Moran Properties. She said that her sister Julia Stoner, the chief executive officer, was in hospital and that it was foul play over a dispute to do with the company. It seems that a Mr. Grant Roylott, the ladies' stepfather, had been given a large minority portion of stock in Stoke Moran Properties following the death of their mother. He was pushing pretty hard for a buyout, seeing as the economy isn't what it once was and the sisters had taken the same lumps everyone else in the market has. He bullied, he blustered, they said flat no, they wouldn't break the company their mother built from the ground up and sell it off in pieces, and then Julia Stoner fell ill."

"Who stood to inherit Julia's money when her property was shelled out?" Lestrade asks cannily.

"The family," Sherlock says quickly, nose still buried in the report. Anything to keep Dimmock from talking. "She was a career woman, an entrepreneur, unmarried previously and only engaged to her fiance for two months before she died. Her wealth went to her only living relations--her stepfather Roylott, who now owns nearly half the company, and to her younger sister, the firm's financial officer. The younger Ms. Helen Stoner still holds the reins, of course, simply because she inherited a majority share from Julia Stoner."

"But that's motive anyway, right? For the stepfather? And...then what?" John sits forward, eager and serious, a small piece of sandy hair falling in his face. "Roylott had her attacked or something? But you never traced anything back to him?"

Dimmock sighs in frustration. "No. Julia Stoner just...died. In hospital. Cause of death was ruled acute onset anaphylaxis."

John blinks and cocks his small head. "How long did that take?"

"Two hours, I think. Bloody awful luck, it was."

"What were her known allergens?"

"That's what seemed queer to the sister. Why it felt a touch off to me too, as I said. She hadn't any previous."

"Peanuts, soy, mould, bees?"

"Nothing like that. She'd never even had hay fever before."

"They gave her epinephrine, of course?"

"Not soon enough for it to do any good."
John frowns, tapping his palms against his thighs. "Wait, so she’d no known allergens, and the sister cried foul, and the case just...just what, went away? Acute allergic aversions can onset very quickly, sure, if immune circumstances are wanky enough, but what did the autopsy say?"

"Who is this?" Dimmock demands of Lestrade, smoothing his tie as if that will somehow give the question more weight.

Lestrade merely raps his pen against the edge of his paper coffee cup. "Dr. John Watson, colleague. Of sorts. Kind of. Like Sherlock is a colleague. Of sorts. This is his division, the doctoring, go on."

Glancing at Sherlock, John gauges how interested the sleuth is in the medical aspect of the case, lest he be wasting their precious, precious time.

Sherlock can see him above the file folder but doesn't look up, merely angles an attentive brow and makes a small humming sound to continue.

But in reality, he is positively ravenous for more of this. He is not going to miss out on Dr. John Watson, M.D., not on his precariously balanced life Sherlock isn't. John Watson when he is haggard and strained is a thing of painful beauty, a mud-drenched soldier fighting his way out of a ravine with tooth and claw, leaving bloodied pieces of himself behind as he rages onward. John Watson when he is poised and in his element, Sherlock is discovering with a glee that threatens to send him floating gently away from the floor, is a masterpiece of orderly forcefulness.

The nimbus which had obscured John the night before when Sherlock was crashing threatens to return as a benevolent force, John simply aglow with newfound purpose and regained confidence.

I did that, Sherlock thinks, if only by virtue of having an insane nemesis, and allows himself to be unabashedly happy if only for a moment.

"The autopsy was inconclusive," Dimmock admits. When he's flustered, a messy set of lines form on his brow. Sherlock is positively giddy that John put them there. "Her nervous and respiratory systems shut down completely, as if a severe toxin--or, as they concluded, allergen--had been introduced."

"See, this doesn't..." John sighs in a longsuffering manner, running his left hand up and down the back of his neck. "How old was Julia Stoner?"

"Forty-one," Sherlock answers from behind the police file, pacing a little.

"Christ. I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's extremely unlikely for an adult onset allergy to strike without warning after the age of around thirty-five. And it's pretty difficult to live your whole life without encountering a honeybee. Anyway, what was the allergen?"

"We don't know," Dimmock says helplessly.

"And of course it couldn't have been poison instead, why would a policeman warned of foul play suspect poison, more likely it was a particularly stroppy tree nut gone on a murderous bender," John mutters, leaning back in his chair.

Sherlock looks up fully, unable to stop himself if he'd tried. He apparently loves this small, almost unbearably bright war veteran to the point that he is losing motor control. John's face is well worth this disturbing revelation: he glares with superb nonchalance at Lestrade's desk.

"She was alone in her corner office," Lestrade points out reasonably, sipping his coffee. "That part I remember. There was no one there."
"Doesn't mean ratshit," John scoffs.

"Does when the CCTV shows her sitting perfectly happy one second, then getting up from behind her desk and collapsing. There was bugger-all for us to find. I take your point, Doctor, but her office was whistle clean. If Dimmock had found a poisoned dart sticking out of her head or a deadly snake wrapped around it, I'm pretty sure he'd have mentioned that to me." Lestrade winks at his coworker.

"Airborne toxin? Surely I'm not the only bloke here aware those exist."

"Negative." Dimmock shakes his head. "I thought of that too. The atmosphere was tested. Perfectly clean."

"Was this office inside Stoke Moran headquarters, then?"

"Right you are. South Colonnade, Canary Wharf."

"A locked room mystery," John says slowly. His eyes meet Sherlock's. They are steadfast, but they are also rippling with concern. "You...you love those, you said. When you texted me. Before, um. All of this."

"I do love them," Sherlock admits.

"How good is this one?"

"So far?" Sherlock muses. "About a nine."

"The only thing near as good as serial killers are locked rooms, you said," John remembers regretfully, rubbing at his eyes.

And Jim Moriarty gave me one tailor-made to intrigue me, to excite me, the identical sick fuck who plans to keep me awake whilst using a rib separator on my torso so that he can taste a piece of my heart gave me a beautiful gift.

Almost unwillingly, Sherlock remembers this morning.

John's lips finished meandering over Sherlock's clavicle, traveling down his breastbone to the hollow between his pectorals, just barely firm enough not to tickle. His left hand slipped from Sherlock's bicep and under it, round to his upper back, raking with light nails, while his left palm drifted upward, cupping the base of the detective's arse cheek in a gentle but possessive hold.

"I, ah," Sherlock said, then cursed himself for inarticulate babbling. Though it wasn't his fault, not precisely. It was John's fault. John was setting off arrays of ivory sparks as his hands and lips wandered. "That is, spoiling me in the fashion I think you mean isn't precisely possible given my personal limitations."

"Wrong. Bang out of order. You don't have limitations," John breathed against his sternum, tasting it with the tip of his tongue and with the edges of his thin, so very thin lips. "You have preferences. Christ, Sherlock, everyone does. I prefer not to be shat on or dressed as a furry animal. We're even, OK?"

"That's globally different. I'm an asexual male."

"And I'm a Cancer. July seventh, sign of the crab--or did you not delete star signs? You seem to have a weird thing about planetary--"
"For god's sake, I don't have preferences, of all the idiotic terminology, I have a sexual orientation which--"

"Doesn't preclude sex. We proved that. Scientifically." John smirked against the hollow of Sherlock's neck, running his thumb down Sherlock's lumbar curve until the digit began to disappear and the taller man gasped aloud. "You like science. Sod that, you love science. And you, um. You said you'd decided to trust me. Yeah? You've been brilliantly topping me for days now, and god it's the fucking sexiest thing I've ever seen, but I need you to trust me back so last night doesn't happen again. OK?"

Sherlock exhaled, relieved. So that's what this was about. Not feelings at all. Just...the messier ramifications of sex. Nothing to worry over in the slightest. At the simple negotiation of terms, he was an adept. In seconds, they would be through with this conversation and back to Julia Stoner's doubtless untimely end.

"I do, I trust you, of course you can fuck me if you want to," he said, tracing the wings of John's shoulder blades with the hand that wasn't clutching his phone.

John paused and looked up, a puzzled line between his eyes. "I...have been fucking you. All this time. Just so you, um, know. Ever since the ordering me about."

"No, I'm not talking about alternate definitions of sex as we were last night. I mean if you want to properly fuck me, you can. I never mentioned it before, it hadn't come up. But I trust you. And I've done it, several times in fact. So since you want to, you can."

Shifting his weight, John adopted a patient expression, sighing a little through his teeth. "OK. So you're telling me you like prostate stimulation? Which is fine, by the way, perfectly normal."

"I know it's fine, but god no," Sherlock returned hastily, recalling the first time it felt as if he'd been split in half with a cleaver from the back up to the brain, "but if it's shallow--"

"Shhhh," John advised, returning his lips to Sherlock's neck with a smile and a tender suck. "Shut up, Sherlock. Be still. I really just. God, you are simply the maddest, fittest--I cannot wait to spoil you. It's like the road to worse than hell was paved with good intentions, and there was a glitch in the paperwork somewhere, sorry-sorry-didn't-mean-to-shoot-you-and-then-scramble-your-brains-for-wanting-to-do-your-part-for-humanity, that kind of thing, but then they sorted it, and spoiling you is my bloody reward."

"Is this really the best time for--"

"Oh, brilliant, I was wondering when you were going to ask me that question rather than just assume I was buming about."

John pulled away, keeping his hold on Sherlock's back, bringing his other hand up to cup the side of his face. The atmosphere of the room seemed to chill by at least three degrees. It was as if a fateful wind had just swept through Baker Street, bringing inescapable change and calls to foreign glory. John's eyes, which had been half-hooded and sensual, turned in seconds to severe blue pools.

"You and I are going to win this," John said fiercely. "We will be brighter and braver and better than him--all right? Then we will live our lives, however we choose to live them. But I won't watch him turn you into his puppet and I won't let you forget that he's been conditioning you for years, years, Sherlock. What did you call it a few weeks ago, a Pavlovian repetition of a childhood response to something something?"
Sherlock managed to nod despite his shock. "To threat of pain and death."

"Right, so all that bunk you told me about lower brain functions and animal responses? You weren't just winding me up, I've come to realize. Jim Moriarty has spent decades tormenting you like a cat with a mouse and just because now it's a game and prior to now it was abuse, that does not mean that this isn't still abuse, and I won't allow this twisted fucking bollock-brain to think he can switch you on like a sodding clockwork monkey and watch you dance for him, not if I have a say in it, not for your good or my good or the good of any of the innocent victims in this shit show. Do you hear what I'm fucking saying to you, Sherlock Holmes?"

"Yes," Sherlock breathed.

"Now, are you ready to sort a hostage situation while your colleague puts the kettle on?"

"Yes," Sherlock said, slowly smiling.

"Fantastic," John grinned, kissing his shoulder. "You're fantastic. Did you know that?"

"Are you still going to spoil me, then?"

John's grin turned gradually predatory. Hawklike. It was...less disconcerting that it should have been.

"What do you think?"

John stares at Sherlock in the pale light of Lestrade's office, one agile eyebrow lifted.

He's right, Sherlock comprehends. It's a gorgeous locked room mystery, an intricate and vibrant one, an inexplicable gift from a purely malevolent party. A party that wants to eat bits of Sherlock for dinner.

"I'm considering the source," Sherlock vows to John, returning his eyes to the report. "I promise."

"You'd damn well better be," John says softly.

Sherlock's mobile rings.

They've already wired it to a tracer and to Lestrade's phone, lost no time in doing so upon arrival. Thus, when the number is blocked, Sherlock exhales, drops the folder on the desk, and slowly brings the mobile to his ear. Lestrade nods, readying his office line. Dimmock nods just after Lestrade, attempting to look relevant. It fails spectacularly.

John leans forward, angling a look at Sherlock that says, waste him, mate.

Sherlock remains expressionless. But his panic recedes, curls in on itself and dissolves, and he pushes the answer key.

"Hello?"

For a long moment, silence on the other end of the line echoes through Sherlock's ear and Lestrade's speaker phone.

"It's all right that you've gone to the police," a grotesquely shaking male voice assures him.

Closing his eyes briefly, Sherlock wills himself to remain focused.
He finds, to his own surprise, that he can.

So that was the reason Moriarty gave me a head start. He wanted to see if I'd repeat myself when I went for help, whether I'd long-term colleagues at the Yard and who they were and if they were willing to stick their necks out more than once to capture a deranged murderer.

"Who is this?" Sherlock grates, feeling his stomach revolt even as his brain whirls into action. "Is this you again?"

"But don't rely on them," the quavering voice reads from the pager Sherlock knows rests in the man's hand. "Clever you. Too clever. I wanted to tango with you, dearest, and you're turning our romance into a club rave."

John's lower lip pushes straight up into his philtrum, creating a frown that is as unsurprised as it is homicidal. The static of the speaker phone delivers the low hum of a busy intersection, car horns and shouts vaguely audible. Dimmock and Lestrade look on expectantly, the same expression of concern on Lestrade's face he exhibited during the Norwood builder business.

After a little thought over an answer, Sherlock remains quiet.

"You aren't laughing at the gift I've made you, are you, pumpkin?" the near-sobbing young man inquires. "Carl laughed at me. So I stopped him laughing. None of your playmates at the Met will be laughing when I'm through with them."

"You've stolen another voice, I presume," Sherlock replies, refusing to take the bait.

"This is about you and me," the anonymous man who is actually the escaped Jim Moriarty chokes out.

Breathing heavily through his nose as disgust crests over him, Sherlock opens his eyes to see John is standing now. Not a foot away, nearly touching, watching Sherlock intently with his strong arms crossed over his black jacket. He looks very military of a sudden.

It helps.

Sherlock exhales. The traffic sounds are growing into a cacophony.

"Where are you?" the detective questions. "What's that noise?"

"The sounds of life, Sherlock," the kidnap victim says still more shakily. "But don't worry. I--I can soon fix that."

Lestrade makes a furious, helpless gesture. Dimmock pales.

John rocks on his toes for a moment, quite calm.

Sherlock says nothing.

John nods his approval, expression a professional blank.

"You got my last puzzle in nine hours, my clever little love," the young man concludes. "This time, you have eight."

The line goes dead.

Sherlock experiences the alarming sensation that the room around him has exploded into a flurry of
activity while he remains stationary, a rock lodged in a waterfall's edge. John glances at the policemen, but otherwise he doesn't move either. At first. After a few seconds, he brushes his fingers over Sherlock's wrist, then tucks his hands back into his elbows.

"I take it you questioned Grant Roylott?" Sherlock hears himself ask as if from far away. "I hadn't got quite that far. What did he tell you?"

"Mostly he cursed at me, sometimes shook a beer bottle at my head," Dimmock says irritably. Lestrade is on the phone to his team, calling in Sally Donovan and hateful, hateful Anderson. "Said I was a fucking liar and relations between him and his stepdaughter were perfectly loving. Claimed he'd even paid for renovation of her corner office. He had done, too--that part checked out."

Sherlock's eyes snap wide as can be.

"He what?" Sherlock growls, rounding on Dimmock. The Yarder flinches back, startled.

"He...redecorated," the policeman confirms, voice quavering. "There was nothing dodgy about it, I searched every inch, you have to--"

Sherlock is yards out the door by this time, coat swirling, John close in his wake.

"Where are we off to?" John questions lowly. "To search the deadly office, I take it."


"What else, then?"

"To save the life of Ms. Helen Stoner," Sherlock answers, forgoing the lift to take the stairs out of Scotland Yard two at a time.
"This is madness!" Sherlock seethes in the direction of world's most posh and implacable male secretary, who is now flanked by two of the world's most (Sherlock is certain) slab-jawed and meat-headed security guards.

Traffic from the Yard to Canary Wharf moved similarly to the year-old treacle at the bottom of a forgotten jar, despite Lestrade's deft use of sirens and Sally Donovan's admittedly apt navigation suggestions and the brevity of the physical distance as the crow flies. None of these advantages helped in any way. At several points, as a matter of fact, Sherlock considered leaping out of the police car and simply sprinting to his destination. The car progressed as glue does down a slope. All the while, Sherlock had willed the vehicle to move as if his mind could apparate physical matter. If anyone's brain could manage it, Sherlock has thought in occasional moments of supreme self-satisfaction, his superior organ surely would make the furthest strides in that direction.

But far worse has since occurred. Now Sherlock and John and four Yarders--Lestrade, Dimmock, Donovan, and hateful hateful hateful Anderson--are staring into the smug, self-righteous faces of capitalist complacency. This in spite of the salient fact that the CEO of Stoke Moran Properties died mysteriously two years previous.

It's excruciating.

*Human complacency is excruciating,* Sherlock corrects himself. *Not death as such.*

The sand is running through the hourglass, and all the detective can think of is the certainty that death and chaos await when the final grains slide through.

Here within the lobby of Stoke Moran Properties, Sherlock is surrounded by towering green glass windows, polished black marble floors, calming water elements that make him want to scream, peripheral witnesses to murder who are as ignorant as they are blind, varying levels of Metropolitan Police stupidity, and John Watson.

John Watson meets Sherlock's eyes, winks in a display of solidarity without humour, and turns away again.

The secretary is called *Something-Terribly-Modern-To-Do-With-Initials Something-Trust-Fund-Baby-esque* (Sherlock can't recall details, only the gist, he deleted the name instantly on principle) and Sherlock wants to punch the Dior glasses off his perfectly shaved face and take him by the neatly spiked black hair. This human waste of good tailoring is flanked by two nameless goons in dark suits with chests about as wide as their respective torso lengths and ostentatious ear buds to which they occasionally listen attentively.

*Mass sterilization,* Sherlock thinks in a blind rage, *isn't really such a bad--*

"All right, enough is enough," Lestrade growls, putting both his hands up as the secretary opens his mouth to say something asinine. "I've a hostage situation to deal with, so warrant or no warrant, we're taking a look in Ms. Stoner's corner office and I don't want any more lip about it. Move aside. I mean now."

"Sir, as I have already explained," intones *Letters-That-Make-No-Sense Public-School-Name,* "the
late Ms. Julia Stoner and now the very much alive and well Ms. Helen Stoner's office is wired into a coded alarm system. I cannot access it. These gentlemen you see before you cannot access it. The most talented code breaker on god's earth cannot--" 

"Thank you, my title's never been officially proven but I'm quite keen to have a go," Sherlock hisses. 

"You can play diva at the scene of Ms. Stoner's death, freak," Sally snaps. "Right now we're gaining access to this office before someone gets killed."

"If you don't think that's at the forefront of my mind--" 

"Bang on target. I don't think that's at the forefront--" 

"Well, because the way he looks in that coat is generally at the forefront of his mind," Anderson drawls meanly. 

"Oi," John snaps, slapping Sherlock's Belstaff lapel as he takes a vicious step towards Anderson. "I'll just stand here watching you lot toss off, shall I, while the world burns?"

"Open the damn door," Lestrade says to the guards in a tone like a ticking bomb.

"I can only repeat that's impossible," the secretary protests, edging back into the close proximity of his protectors. "I don't have access to the security system. Only Ms. Stoner does."

"This is part of what drove us round the twist last time," mutters Dimmock, the fine webwork of lines appearing from temple to temple above his brow. "The late Ms. Stoner was alone in there when she died. As in, completely."

Skin tingling as if he'd just stepped out of an ice bath, Sherlock forces himself to breathe, thinking, you aren't grateful. You aren't. Not in the slightest degree. It's still abuse, no matter what form it takes. Recall what John said? It's sick, is what it is. It's perfect though, isn't it, for all that it's twisted, god isn't it sublime? Just perfect. I can't quite bear that my eventual murderer gave it to me, because it's simply perfect. Dead for no reason, motives abounding, room locked from the inside. Perfect on every level, perfect like ancient London roads that still twist today into Archimedean spirals, perfect like the first booming crack of a thunderstorm, perfect like Chopin, perfect like--

John is staring daggers at him, Sherlock realizes. The sleuth, pinkening slightly, rounds on the most convenient target, which still happens to be Nonsensical-Hipster-Acronym Parents-Own-Stables-Of-Thoroughbreds, whose tanned sockless feet are shoved into expensive Italian boat shoes and whose trousers are just that fashionable degree too short.

"Let me into Ms. Stoner's office," Sherlock purrs at him, "or not only will these seemingly friendly law enforcement officials become extremely disagreeable, but I will circulate an email to every employee of Stoke Moran Properties regarding what sort of clubs you frequent over weekends. That is, unless you're tied up at the moment."

The secretary pales very pleasingly. String-of-Symbols Silver-Spoon apparently isn't quite comfortable yet with discussing the bondage lifestyle, Sherlock concludes.

"But I can't," he insists in a quiet, high whine. "If only there were--"

"What on earth is going on here?"
The group pivots at the cultured female tone. Sherlock discovers a slender, elegant woman, her heels clacking across the marble, removing her short maroon trench coat as she approaches them. She wears a simple black sheath underneath with eye-catching cap sleeves. Her face is warm but unreadable in the private manner some successful businesswomen develop, and her handsome features and strong figure all indicate a woman in her early thirties. Her hair, however--her dark hair is shot through helter-skelter with streaks of grey, like waves across the surface of a dark pond.

"I said what's going on?" she repeats, halting before the groups facing off. She forces a friendly smile, directing it at the tallest man present in a calculated fashion. "Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Sherlock Holmes," Sherlock says, extending a hand. "And we're attempting to save your life, Ms. Helen Stoner."

Exactly eight minutes later, following a debriefing during the trip across the lobby and up in the private lift, they stand in the threshold of Helen Stoner's private office.

Sherlock sweeps inside, coat ruffling, eyes dancing over inanimate objects.

He hates the room instantly.

The floors are done in a burnished hardwood that looks as if it would melt in your mouth like sweet caramel. There are no walls for three quarters of the space, only floor to ceiling windows admitting the bright burn of the cresting late-autumn sun. Rich curtains adorn the windows at tasteful intervals, a sleek bar presides in a sunken area done in darker furnishings, a fully outfitted working fireplace towers above a seating area, and an intimate conference table rules over another corner. At the back of the room--where it should be, in order to impress the impressionable--is a great desk. Behind the desk is an ostentatiously ergonomic chair, seemingly of the pivoting or rolling variety for easy motion.

Sherlock detests this room with a passion.

"It's simply terrible, and I cannot apologize enough for the behavior of my employees," Ms. Stoner sighs, laying her coat over the looming CEO chair's back. "Hostages. To think of it. I--I can't imagine. And here you are on behalf of me and my sister. You must try to forgive us, and our staff as well. But I can assure you there is nothing to learn, Mr. Holmes. I've made my peace with the past. I must do, you understand, in order to manage the future with any dexterity."

"Tell me about everything I cannot learn, in that case, and start at the beginning," Sherlock says coldly, starting in examining the drapes. Lestrade, Dimmock, John, and Sally shift to listen to Ms. Stoner even as they keep an eye on Sherlock, while Anderson regards the sleuth with a sort of riveted revulsion.

"My sister experienced a sudden...attack in this room," Helen Stoner reports. She shivers. Sherlock knows of a sudden, from the forced neutrality of her tone, where the grey in her locks came from. Helen Stoner loved her sister dearly, but chose to walk forward rather than go mad with past uncertainties. Sherlock admires the detachment if not the decision.

Meanwhile, there is nothing wrong with the curtains.

They continue talking. Sherlock continues searching. Occasionally Lestrade or Dimmock interject. Precious time passes.

"Yes, Grant Roylott can be difficult," Ms. Stoner admits as she pours herself a generous gin in the
sunken lounge, the others refusing. She sips it. "I'm sorry, my nerves are never quite the same in this room. Silly, isn't that, as it's perfectly safe? Grant built it for my sister--and now by proxy for me, I suppose--as an apology to her."

"You were meant to take the space over when you yourself became chairperson?" Sherlock notes, scrutinizing a ridiculously expensive Chinese vase.

"Just so," Ms. Stoner sighs. "Grant offered me use of it at once, but I couldn't have borne the memories two years ago. Now, however...I'm through with anchoring myself to Julia's memory."

"You suspected your stepfather back then," Sherlock observes dispassionately.

"I did." Ms. Stoner brushes her hair back from her expressionless face.

"You don't any longer?"

"There was no evidence of wrongdoing. I refuse to drive Stoke Moran Properties into the ground due to my own paranoia."

But she didn't answer my question, did she, Sherlock thinks darkly, diving for the conference area.

"What did you mean when you said Grant Roylott built this room as an apology?" Lestrade inquires.

"He knows his manner can be crude and his habits wasteful. His early life was notoriously difficult and spent partly overseas. Not that that excuses him in my book, of course. And don't even get me started on his notions of where the company is headed. But we were all in the same bed and, since family must lie close financially speaking, he made a grand gesture to put the past behind us when he built this room."

"You don't like it here," John observes cannily. Quietly.

"No," Ms. Stoner says, her finely plucked eyebrows raised as she studies the ceiling. "My sister died in this room. I don't."

Meanwhile, Sherlock curses under his breath. Because there is nothing wrong with the conference table.

But he is saving the best for last--the desk where Julia Stoner died.

He has time.

He has time.

Six hours, in fact. Six hours of the sand grains tumbling over each other down the curve of the glass.

And if Sherlock is very, very honest with himself, now that he is actually inside this room, this hideous wonderful room, he wants to enjoy this puzzle, this oh so very enjoyable conundrum, for just a little while longer.

"Your plans to retain the company within the family remain unchanged?" Dimmock inquires.

The first intelligent question of your entire career, Sherlock thinks, his nose buried deep in the small sink at the bar. There ought to be balloons. How inconsiderate of me.
"Oh, we never really wanted to sell it off," Ms. Stoner prevaricates with a wave of her diamond-studded hand. "Even Grant admitted so, after the terrible loss of my sister. We were forced to draw together again, and I must admit the effort he has made since that dark time proved...surprising."

"Ms. Stoner, it's foolish to ignore a murderer in your midst due to the fact his presence may prove a strain on familial and financial relations," Sherlock hears himself observing.

The silence behind him is not shocked precisely.

It is thick, however, and it is grim.

Sherlock glances up from where he now kneels at the edge of the executive desk, caressing the curved mahogany leg.

Ms. Helen Stoner has turned white, white as the sun-glints reflecting off her astronomically expensive windows.

"Why do you say that?" she whispers. She downs the remainder of her gin and strides away to pour another. "We put this behind us. The police found nothing. Nothing," she adds in a wracked shout, hurtling the word at Dimmock. Sherlock can't even feel pleased, her hurt is so raw. She dumps the gin bottle's pour spout into her glass and watches it fill. "I held this family and this company together after Julia died. I did. With my bare hands, it seemed. And now you're telling me her death wasn't some freak of nature?"

"Any idiot could see--" Sherlock begins.

"You're telling my stepdaughter what?" snarls a new voice.

Grant Roylott stands in the doorway.

Grant Roylott cuts a powerful and suavely dressed figure. But he's a brute of a man, Sherlock realizes instantly, I mean to say, who in his right mind would widen his stance for intimidation purposes within a doorway he can already barely squeeze into? Sherlock may adore drama, but he loathes overkill. Grant Roylott is enormous, clearly belligerent, marginally drunk, hate pulsing from his swollen eyes. His face is scored with leathery lines. Too many tanning beds and too few real hours of leisure, too much pleasure and not enough starshine, too much time on Barbados and too little over books, too many instances screaming bloody murder at his stepdaughters and too few asking them what he can do to assist the standing of Stoke Moran Properties.

Dear Jim, Sherlock pictures him writing, please fix it so I can butcher my in-laws' company and make a fortune to last me the rest of my days.

Helen Stoner backs away. But she doesn't shy away, Sherlock notes in fascination. She prowls behind the desk, placing herself in the position of supreme power. A queen in a sharply tailored black dress presiding over her realm.

"You," she hisses, voice shaking. "This room is perfectly safe, everyone says so. I don't know what to believe anymore. All I know is that before I started proceedings to become the official chairperson of the board, you never cared where I worked. And now you insist upon my presiding here."

Roylott's eyes are purpling in vexation. "Fuck every last one of these suspicious-minded vultures. Circling our family like carrion crows, they have done since poor Julia passed."
"Oh, please," Sherlock scoffs before he can help himself.

"And who the *fuck* are you? Another Scotland Yard ape?"

"Is that really your best guess?" Sherlock sneers.

"He's an enthusiast," Sally mutters.

"A consultant," John puts in.

Roylott advances a bit further into the room, devils dancing in his eyes.

"Can't you see what this business means to me?" he demands of Ms. Stoner. "What it means not to be hounded by idiot policemen and queer vigilantes? You have every right to be afraid, but not of me, darling. I *loved* your sister. I love you too."

Roylott has overplayed his hand.

Sherlock sees it. He sees that John sees it. Everyone but Anderson sees that Lestrade sees it.

Knowledge flows downhill like water until everyone is left with one simple truth they cannot deny, even if they don't know the rest of the story yet.

The purple veins and the bulging eyes tell them Roylott is lying. The half-clenched fist tells them Roylott is lying. The throb at his neck tells them Roylott is lying.

Helen Stoner collapses into the chair behind the desk at the realization her suspicions were correct all along. The chair doesn't so much as tremble. "Dear god," she murmurs. "Oh, Julia, Julia..."

An electric current shoots straight up Sherlock's neck as he recalls the chair didn't swivel when she set the coat on it either.

The chair looks like it moves.

It ought to move, for practicality's sake.

Chairs of this nature generally do.

But *this chair doesn't move at all.*

Ms. Helen Stoner emits a high-pitched shriek that slices through the room like a razor blade.

"Sorry, sorry," Sherlock gasps, setting her down in the opposite corner. She adjusts her skirt, wobbles on her stilettos. "It's the chair, it must be, it doesn't move, *it ought to move*, why doesn't it--"

Roylott blasts a great bellow of atomized anger into the executive suite and steps swiftly to his left, gripping the fireplace poker in his huge fist. The Yarders, cautious of escalating the situation, back away, Lestrade calling, "Steady on! Everyone stay calm!" and Dimmock chanting some line about no one getting hurt. Ms. Stoner's teeth appear, a reaction of animal fright.

"Mate, put that down," John--who is now nearest to Roylott--says quietly. "This will all be a lot easier if you--"

Roylott screams in drunken fury, the iron poker sailing slowly over his head.

Or perhaps, Sherlock concedes to himself in retrospect, it only looked slow to Sherlock.
He doesn't remember doing it, and that's vexing. Gaps in Sherlock's near-eidetic memory tend to occur only through the influences of drugs or deletion. All he knows is that an iron poker is plummeting straight for John's *delicate shatterable* skull, and that Sherlock's heart just leapt clean out of his chest, and that his two palms where he caught the poker following his second mad leap of the last minute are bound to bruise spectacularly, and that he is *boiling* with outrage.

"Fucking try that again," Sherlock snarls, squeezing the metal between his fingers in black fury. He tosses it aside, and it falls with a *clang*. "I dare you to try that again, in order for you to see what happens to your spine."

Stunned silence ensues.

"Oh," cries *(Random-Letter-Generator Peerage-Grandparents)*, who has appeared in the doorway to check on his boss and seems about to faint.

No one says a word.

"What?" Sherlock snaps. Roylott is backing away, a tremor in his thick fingers. "Haven't any of you idiots seen self-defense employed before?"

A pause follows this question.

"Um," John says in a quivering voice. He chuckles suddenly, a tiny explosion, and then pulls his hand down over his mouth. "Sorry, um. Yeah. Yes. Yes, I, ah, have seen self-defense employed before. Affirmative." The army doctor giggles again, swaying, and some of the terrified rage lodged in Sherlock's chest eases. "In combat, and, yeah, in London too, and back when things got a bit manky down at the pubs during uni. Sure. Know what I haven't seen before today though, Sherlock?"

Sherlock, dumbfounded, shakes his head.

"A person," John attempts, now gasping with laughter, "who bent an iron fireplace poker in, in sodding half, and didn't even notice himself doing it."

Despite his brilliance, it takes Sherlock two hours to find the trap hidden in the chair which is so grotesquely fixed to the floor.

Just underneath the right chair arm, nearly invisible to the eye, a tiny loaded syringe waits to stab the hapless individual who forgets the furnishing doesn't swivel.

Despite Sherlock's aptitude for chemistry, it takes him another three and a half hours in the labs at the Yard with techs buzzing about him like hornets to emit a strange gasp and then slump back in his seat.

"What?" John is instantly at Sherlock's side. "You found it? What?"

"Snake venom, from an adder of some kind," Sherlock whispers, eyes riveted to the equipment before him and the readout. "I can't believe it. I can't. They never traced it because he poisoned her with *snake venom.*"
John folds his lips together and doesn't say anything.

*Perfect,* Sherlock thinks against his will, his eyes falling shut. *It was the perfect crime.*

It takes a minute flat to post results to Sherlock's website.

It take six seconds for Jim Moriarty to call Sherlock back.

The detective listens to his cell phone, all eyes in the clean, bright lab upon him. Lestrade's, Dimmock's, John's. This time they aren't wired in. So they wait on the independent consulting detective for news.

After a brief time has passed, Sherlock simply thumbs off his mobile and sets it on his work surface.

"You okay?" John says urgently. "That was him. What did he say?"

"Nothing of importance," Sherlock says softly, then tells the Yarders the address to which they must flock.

He cannot say the words aloud.

Sherlock will never get these words out of his head. But he won't say them aloud, not to John. Never. The bitter end will come, and it will go, and John will never hear these particular words.

*We were made for each other,* the horrorstruck male hostage whispered before the conversation was over.

The problem is, Sherlock now realizes Moriarty truly believes this. He trusts that he knows Sherlock. And will know him better. Inside and out. Every organ, every nuance, every nook and every cranny.

When he thinks about how caught up he was in the locked room puzzle, how admiring of its grace and symmetry, Sherlock gags once and then shivers from his head right down to his knees.

"C'mere," John calls from the hallway.

Sighing, Sherlock continues what he has been doing for half an hour now--staring at his hands, sitting at the kitchen table at 221B, disgusted with just about everything he can think of, willing himself not to use drugs. John already forced half of a smallish plate of pasta left over from Angelo's into him, and fed him paracetamol, and fusscd ineffectively over the darkening stripes on his hands before abruptly departing for parts of Baker Street unknown. What more could the man want?


"But I'm...tired," Sherlock admits rather petulantly.

"I know. I'm not a genius, but I know. Quick march."
Puzzled and exhausted, the lights of Baker Street winking on as the amber sun fades, Sherlock follows John into the loo. He realizes belatedly that a hot bath has been drawn, and the steam is beginning to fog the mirror in delicate wisps.

"What am I wanted for?" Sherlock says rather faintly.

For an answer, John guides him until his thighs are against the sink. The smaller man slides Sherlock's suit jacket off, revealing a subtly striped white dress shirt which has now seen better, crisper days. John hangs the jacket over a dressing gown hook on the door and then begins smoothly flicking Sherlock's buttons open.

"I might not know very much about you, but I've been your flatmate for long enough to know you're a pussycat when it comes to personal hygiene," John explains softly. "And what with the chloroform, and the pips, and the rest of this complete bullshit, you're past due."

Sherlock looks down at himself as his shirt parts under John's hands. His skin is dull and greyish. He passes his fingers through his own tangled hair. John is correct.

Sherlock is a catastrophic train wreck. He is nothing save dust and debris.

*We were made for each other,* Jim Moriarty says in Sherlock's head.

*No,* Sherlock thinks fiercely, slapping the phrase into a locked steel file cabinet in his laboratory where necessary but hideous data resides and turning the key.

John folds the shirt, sets it on the counter top, and after kneeling moves on to Sherlock's shoelaces.

"I can do that," Sherlock notes. "You're still hurt."

"I'm also well up on my meds now we're home. Do you prefer to do that?"

He shakes his head. *Home,* Sherlock thinks. John called it *home.* Sherlock wishes he could feel the moment more keenly. Everything is muffled dreadfully. It's snowing at his mind palace, snowing great fluffy cotton drifts of white nothing.

"I'll crack on doing that myself, then, 'ta very much."

Vaguely, Sherlock registers his shoes and socks being removed, and sooner than he thought it possible, John is upright again and gentle hands are undoing his trousers.

"You've undressed me twice now. Peculiar. People don't generally undress me," Sherlock recalls within his haze.

"No?" John's eyes dart upward and one side of his slim mouth tilts with them. "Poor buggers. Why not?"

"I don't let them," Sherlock realizes for the first time.

"Lucky, lucky, lucky me," John murmurs, hooking his thumbs into Sherlock's waistband and sliding his pants south along with his trousers. "Step up."

Complying, Sherlock kicks off the remainder of his clothing. Stifling a yawn he fears might crack his skull wide, he pulls a folded flannel from the stack.

"That's not for you. Give it over. And pop in the bath, you'll be freezing like that in seconds."
Eyes drifting at an alarmingly languid speed back to John, Sherlock pauses. John stands with his hand out for the cloth. Slowly, Sherlock turns it over, mystified.

Then Sherlock steps aside and sinks into blessedly hot water, water that burns his calves and tickles his thighs, making a low throaty sound he knows is unusual for him because Sherlock is very keen on self-observation. He has to be, to avoid unwanted chemical reactions to emotional stimuli. Constant vigilance is required. The shimmering water floods around him, pools, licks at the porcelain, laps at his torso, caresses his backside, and Sherlock feels ashen strain leaking from his pores into the clean hot liquid.

"Budge over a bit."

The detective's eyes open. John is smiling, the wrinkles along his eyes fanning out. He's pushed up the sleeves of his round-necked cotton shirt, and his jeans have been rolled up several times, revealing his shins. He's folded a towel in quarters and set it on the edge of the bathtub.

Moving over as best as a tall man can, Sherlock raises his eyebrows. Nothing about this makes an ounce of sense.

John sits, his feet in the water, perpendicular to Sherlock and a bit behind him, and releases a happy gust of breath.

"Right, that's what was wanted," John sighs. Sherlock can feel his toes wriggling along the edge of his thigh. "Christ. I am brilliant. You might do me one better in the intellect department as a general thing, but you have to admit that right now, I am the brilliant one. What a fucking day."

John dips the flannel in the water and runs it up Sherlock's spinal column. Sherlock sucks in a startled breath.

"What?" John pauses instantly. "Not good?"

"No, no," Sherlock says breathily, eyes wide. He feels the nerves along his back begin to spark, sharing their impossibly sensitive signals with his entirely overwrought brain. "I mean, yes, it's...good."

Sherlock looks up. John, grinning, brushes his dry hand across the gooseflesh that instantly formed over Sherlock's shoulder and bicep, warming them. "Good. I, uh, freely admit to you, in that case, that I was sort of hoping you'd say that."

Allowing himself to smile, Sherlock's eyes slam shut again when John goes back to stroking the rough cloth up his back. Up and down, up and down, gentle circles at times, at times lingering along his shoulder blades or dipping laterally over his ribcage. The permutations are random, impossible to track. It's as pleasurable as it is alarming, since after about three minutes of this activity occurring in companionable silence, Sherlock wonders whether his skin might be melting off. When he opens his eyes momentarily, he is fine, however, epidermis intact if aglow. The sleuth decides that darkness is better for cataloguing this experience, as it is unprecedented and likely unrepeatable under the circumstances, and drops his eyelids with a faint sound through his nose.

A slicker feeling meets his skin along with a very familiar muted lavender scent and Sherlock grips his knees lightly. *Soap.* It's only soap. John Watson is washing him. Holy fucking Christ.

"How are your hands faring?" John wants to know in a darker voice.

Sherlock peeks at them as the flannel sweeps across the nape of his long neck, provoking a pleased
shudder. They're fine. Two purple welts, but nothing near approaching what John's entire side still looks like.

"They're--oh god," Sherlock moans when the cloth starts swooping down his arm toward his fingers. "Sorry. Fine, they're fine. It doesn't hurt."

"I bet it does, actually," John says wryly.

"It, ah, it doesn't," Sherlock gasps, eyes flying open again.

John is meticulously cleaning his hand, scrubbing more firmly along the wrist, turning the injured palm over and pressing impossibly light touches to it, moving on to the spaces between Sherlock's fingers where Jesus, oh god, no one has ever touched that skin prior to now--

"I know I said so already, but that..." John shakes his head, smiling. "It was spectacular. You'd already been so bloody brilliant about the chair, getting Ms. Stoner away from it, and then...I was ready to dodge him, you know, but you probably saved me a broken bone or three, and you were saving me in general, I think, which is, how shall I put this, um, fucking hot, and then you bent a poker in half like it was something you do every morning before coffee and scones. Like it meant nothing. I cannot explain how...fuck me, Sherlock, that was the single sexiest thing I've ever seen. No, strike that, I was wrong. Apologies. Another sight tops that list."

Jealously flickers at the base of Sherlock's brain stem. "Which?"

"This one." John drops Sherlock's hand, rinsing it, and then sets his lips over the clean knuckles in a leisurely kiss before resuming. "You, in a bath. Very nude. I am the happiest bloke in Westminster."

Sherlock swallows hard, fighting tidal waves of feelings he cannot process, and closes his eyes again.

John doesn't stop. He doesn't stop anywhere above Sherlock's waist, and then he says, "Duck your head in for me," and Sherlock shakily obeys by leaning backwards entirely, blinking for several seconds up through still-hot water, and then he emerges like a newborn creature and John pours a bit of shampoo into his hands and rubs them briskly together and--

"Fuck," Sherlock groans, his forehead dropping like a stone to his bent knees. John's fingers knead into his hair, nails rubbing delicately against his scalp, "Fuck, fuck."

He can hear John laughing quietly behind him. "If I were a betting man, and I am a betting man, I'd say you liked this part."

"Oh my god," Sherlock exhales as the kaleidoscope sensations jet along his central nervous system. Now he truly is melting. There will be nothing left of Sherlock, and John will unplug the drain and that will be sorted and he will have died much more pleasantly than he ever expected.

"I'm going to erase everyone who's ever done this before," John remarks.

"No one has ever done anything remotely like this before in my life."

John hesitates, then resumes at a still more leisurely pace. His voice emerges deliberately casual, and that twists something old and scarred within Sherlock's chest. "Your mum did, I promise. Bet you twenty quid. That was admittedly a long while ago, though. We'll make up for lost time."

They do.
By the time the water begins to cool, John is facing him and Sherlock's feet are spotless and his soles still tingling, his legs are burnished into alabaster columns, his thighs are quivering, and his mind palace is shining with such blinding intensity that all the snow is melting. There is a fierce ache in his chest whenever Sherlock opens his eyes, whenever he sees John doing this. It's as if his heart is being torn open.

He never wants it to stop.

"Right," John says in a happy lilt, passing the flannel into Sherlock's hand. "You finish up and I'll see what I can do about making a cup--"

"Don't stop," Sherlock says hoarsely.

John turns back, a sharp line between his brows. "What do you--"

"Don't," Sherlock repeats very clearly, "stop."

John's eyes widen into rough twilight seas. His tongue smooths over his bottom lip, retreats. "You mean--"

Sherlock spreads his arms for leverage, tucks his shins beneath himself, and kneels up a bit, expectant. "Or don't you want to?"

"Oh, fuck, Sherlock, that is--" John winces, laughs, then winces again. "It, ah. Oh god. Look--you, you don't have to--no, we covered that. I mean, Christ. This is...already, uh. You'll be the death of me at this rate. Sorry, bad joke under the circumstances. Um. I just--"

"You've done it before," Sherlock drawls, his confidence swelling in the wake of John's flusterment. "It's only transport, John."

"Of course I have. Many times. *In a medical setting*. Not like this, this is *not* transport. Fucking hell, never like this."

John's eyes are uncertain, wondering.

Sherlock drops the flannel into the water with a *plish*. "Well, if you don't want to, then there's nothing I can do, you simply don't want--"

John has snatched the cloth back a second later and his other hand is around Sherlock's shoulders, lips on his brow, *beautiful, so beautiful*, Sherlock thinks, John's mouth skimming over his cheeks and his neck as John says, breathless, "You need to be sure," before he pulls back to study Sherlock's face.

Smirking in return, Sherlock raises a challenging eyebrow.

John returns his hot lips to the detective's jaw and reaches under the water between his legs.

Someone, Sherlock realizes a few seconds later, is making happy small whimpering sounds, and he's reasonably sure it's not John. He bites his lip in his teeth, hard enough to feel stabbing pain.

"Oh, fuck me, no, no, please keep doing that, don't be quiet," John gasps with his mouth against Sherlock's temple, moving the cloth lower still. Sherlock twitches helplessly, flinging arms out to grip John's thigh and the other side of the tub. "Make that exact noise for my entire fucking life."

Releasing his lip, Sherlock pants a little, marveling. He widens his knees to the edges of the tub. It
shouldn't be any different than when he does this to himself every morning. It shouldn't vary, so far as sensation is concerned. The nerves should register the same data. Identical input, identical results.

It's the distance between two star systems.

"God, oh god."

"Am I hurting you?"

"Do I sound like you're hurting me?"

"No. Keep talking, please keep talking to me, you're making me fucking insane."

"There, right--fucking hell."

"Sherlock, I can't keep doing this for long."

"Why?"

"Because I'll come in my pants like a sixth former and you'll laugh at me for years."

"I won't. I won't--god--I won't mind."

"I can't arouse you like this, can I? Tell me I can't, please say that I can't."

"Not, nnnngh, possible, not if you were magical, but thank you for asking."

"Baby, if you could see yourself, hear yourself, I can't possibly--"

"I wouldn't care. Obvious. Oh."

"Yes you would, it would be...data. Very. Very. Positive data. Christ."

"I'll have to trust you on the subject."

"OK, I am stopping," John moans about a minute later. He gradually drags his hand away, leaving light, tender touches with the cloth. "I am stopping right this instant."

"Why now?"

"Because you are shivering all over and look like you're going to pass out. Take a deep breath for me. Come on, now. Just--no, slowly. In and out. That's it. It's all right, love. Just...slower. Yeah. Like that."

John drapes the flannel over the spout and switches the drain open. The tepid water recedes. Sherlock is vaguely aware that he is on his knees, eyes wild, clutching John's leg and the porcelain edge for dear life, and that his existence as he knew it previously is forever shattered due to a very simple exercise that shouldn't matter, it shouldn't matter, but it means whole universes and Sherlock thinks possibly his heart is splintering to pieces.

"Was that you spoiling me?" he growls.

John covers his frozen hand with his fingers, uses the other set to brush a wet curl back from Sherlock's damp brow. "Yeah. I mean...a little."
"There's more?"

"Not if you don't want there to--"

"I'm not tired any longer," Sherlock hisses.

Tugging, John deftly releases himself from Sherlock's death grip. He doesn't go far, though, only sets wet feet on the floor to reach for a towel. Brushing it over Sherlock's hair as the last of the water slips into oblivion, John regards Sherlock with a look the taller man can only describe as ravenous.

"I'm not tired any longer either," John concludes at length, biting at Sherlock's chin. "Fuck the pips, and we'll sleep when we're dead. You need to come to the bedroom with me. Now."
Chapter 17

Sherlock, after snatching the towel away for efficiency's sake, manages to make it to the bedroom intact and reasonably dry despite the fact his limbs feel like so much moulded jelly. John, who Sherlock recalls showered that morning after Moriarty's text, follows apace. His footfalls behind Sherlock's still sound like an unexpected blessing, despite the fact he has now grown to anticipate their presence.

When they arrive in Sherlock's bedroom, all dark now without and all alight within after Sherlock clicks the table lamp on, he realizes two things. One, that they've never entered this room together for a particular purpose other than sleeping; and two, that Sherlock is woefully unprepared for whatever is about to happen. He experiences a flutter of not entirely unpleasant nerves. They dissipate quickly, replaced by the headlong, pulsating desire for more of this which feels very nearly like chasing a man bearing a loaded firearm up an otherwise empty stairwell. Everything is echoing for some reason, touches reverberating in clear clean ripples along Sherlock's skin.

John said to trust him. John seems to trust Sherlock, after all, and for no good reason, so Sherlock is determined to return the favour. It isn't even very difficult. That shocks Sherlock, makes him cast blindly about for his cynicism as if a limb had been amputated.

"I haven't any condoms," it occurs to him.

John, who is shucking his shirt off, looks momentarily surprised, and then exasperated, and finally rather sheepish. "Whatever you suppose we need condoms for, we don't," he says rather ruefully. "I'm clean, Sarah and I were tested before we started sleeping together, and when we decided not to be exclusive, I started up being tested whenever necessary. Physician, heal thyself has never been an issue for me." Sherlock bristles at the mention of Sarah but holds his tongue. "As for you, well...you're clean too, thankfully. So whatever you're thinking, we're fine."

Sherlock raises his eyebrows to their fullest height, tossing the towel in the corner and sitting on his bed after pulling the covers all the way down. He is desperately curious as to what this could mean.

"Yeah, about that," John sighs, dropping his jeans and pants to the floor without a hint of self-consciousness. The giant bruise has turned greenish at the edges, rendered in beautiful thunderstorm colours. Sherlock detests it. If it were possible to lean forward with his mouth open and suck the bruise and the hurt into his own skin, he'd do it in a heartbeat. "You didn't exactly suppose I'd let you blow me in a strange hotel room without being marginally safe, did you? It's, um. Oh, bugger this, out with it. I'm sorry, I'm sorry in advance. You said I want to. Outside the clinic that day. That you wanted to...you know. Be with me. Or something. Even though I didn't know what that meant. So I texted Sarah and asked her to rush your STI screen. The rest of your bloodwork will be done next week."

A warm feeling spreads through Sherlock's chest, amber-orange tendrils creeping outward. He grins. "I mentioned being amenable to a sexual relationship and you rushed through my testing without telling me and then read my results yourself?"

A pinkish tinge rises over John's cheeks. He scrubs at them with his palm. "I guess that's pretty much what I did, yep. Are you...wait, you're not in a strop over it, thankfully. Or don't seem to be. But I sincerely apologize. Setting doctor-patient confidentiality aside--"
Sherlock shakes his head and holds out his hands. "I think it's brilliant," he whispers.

"That I lied to you by omission and then forgot all about it, I was so unconflicted?" John smiles wryly. "That's not brilliant, Sherlock."

"That you wanted me."

John walks slowly to the bed and takes Sherlock's offered hands. He pauses to kiss along the welts on his palms, ever so softly, a mere brush of lips that Sherlock can feel down to his toes, before crowding naked between Sherlock's legs and kissing his brow. John slots their faces together and simply breathes for a moment. The skin of his elegant little nose caresses the side of Sherlock's longer one, a gesture so intimate it brings a rush of longing with it. Longing for what exactly, Sherlock doesn't know. He only knows he wants John like this, wants more of him than this provides, wants to have him like this forever and not merely for the next week or two before all falls apart.

"When I think about the first time we shared this bed," John murmurs, "you crashing off a spectacular high, you stupid, stupid ponce, and me not having slept at all the night before because I felt like such a prat for running away from you, and I think about all the things you told me about yourself, and then I look at you right here in front of me..." He pulls away a bit, shaking his head, brushing his hands through Sherlock's damp curls. "Of course I rushed your tests, you nitwit. Look at you. God, just look at you. You're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. Then you talk, and it's like you have my libido on voice command. I can't get enough of you."

Sherlock swallows. This burns, this knowledge, and the burning spreads. "Since when?" he asks, greedy.

"I...ha. Well. To be honest, since you took me to dinner in exchange for tackling a criminal. I have never been more devastated to learn that the word coffee meant literal coffee."

Smiling, Sherlock wraps his hands around John's thighs, pulling him closer.

I wanted you too, from the moment I saw you, he thinks, breathing against the skin of John's belly, I didn't even know who you were, but I knew you were marvelous from the instant I encountered you, something rare and priceless, the way you helped me and then didn't turn away afterward, the way you so improbably stayed, I wanted rainy mornings and the radio playing Tchaikovsky while I opened a wine bottle, I wanted to scour the papers for crime while you did the crossword with your feet in my lap, I wanted chases through filthy streets and clever escapes and daring rescues five days out of seven, I wanted to show you I'm amazing even though in some important ways I'm not enough. I just didn't realize I wanted this part too.

"Spoiling me is not going as I expected," Sherlock admits a little unevenly, raising his neck and running his nose along John's chest.

John's eyes wrinkle. "How so?"

"The only people who've ever bothered with touching me were mortally offended when they couldn't arouse me."

Eric. God in heaven, Eric was the worst of the lot. Brought an amazing stock of barbituates over to Montague Street, not your drug of choice but you weren't in a position to be picky at the time, were you, wanted a blow job, and in the middle of it said he'd be much more turned on with a hot dick in his mouth and flipped himself over on the bed in the sixty-nine position and tried to get into your pants. After your saying it wasn't necessary a dozen times, Eric said it was necessary for
him, and went to work with hands and lips to try to get you hard. After ten agonizing minutes of you feeling like the most spectacular failure in the universe, awash in mortification that you couldn't do this one simple thing every other clod in the cosmos could manage, Eric accused you of being straight (which made no sense whatsoever), and only pretending to be queer for sympathy (which made even less sense), lost his erection, blamed you for the loss, and tossed a sack of colourfu pills on the disarrayed bedsheets before storming out.

"Why would I want to arouse you?" John asks calmly. "You don't like being aroused. That would be like making bouillabaisse for a man with a shellfish allergy. Also? Um, your exes? They were spectacularly ignorant gits and are probably all dead by now, supposing Darwin's theory of natural selection was remotely accurate."

Sherlock presses his lips against John's breast where the doctor's heart is beating, rapid and eager, under the vulnerable scratchable tearable skin. He can't absorb all this fully at the moment, has to file so much of it away for later, is forced to float along the surface of these small interludes lest their intensity rip him apart. Later, he will take John's tone of voice and measure it in decibels and hertz, when his senses aren't drowning in data. Later, he will place the memory of lancing heartbeats into safe metal centrifuges in his lab and separate out their single elements.

"I haven't kissed you in nearly enough places," John says with a wicked sort of glee in his voice.

Freezing, Sherlock hears his own heart thump against its moorings.

"Hey, hey there, do you think I'd do anything you've expressly said you don't want to participate in?"

"No," Sherlock admits.

"No wonder you were so bloody keen to top me, you're suffering from prolonged exposure to complete morons. You don't mind if I touch you, you said. Anywhere, you said."

Nodding, Sherlock traces the jut of John's hip to where his stiff cock stands out from his belly. He moves to examine it, wants to stroke it, to study the soft texture and the lovely small veins that have swollen beneath his tongue, he is proud of John's penis in a strange fashion, the strength of it, thinks I did that, he's hard because he was touching me, but John bats his hand away.

"I can deal with that later," he says easily. "So I can touch you, and that's pretty brilliant. What I'm thinking is that I should touch you with my mouth. I think that is one of the more spectacular notions I've had in at least ten minutes. C'mon, lie down. On your stomach. Get comfortable."

Breath quickening, Sherlock moves to drape himself along the sheets. He rests with his thighs a little apart and crosses his arms beneath his head, eyes to the side, watching John approach on his knees.

"Fuck me," John marvels, straddling Sherlock's bum. "I would have serious problems if I were you. I would never leave the mirror. I'd just fucking stare at myself, marveling at, you know, the miracle of creation. Being allowed to touch you is like being allowed to hang the Mona Lisa in my bloody bedroom."

Strong hands touch Sherlock's shoulders, kneading. He can feel the muscles, softened by the heat of the bath, unraveling yet further. John's palms are warm and worn, his fingers sure. Their confidence is entirely unsurprising, John has already patched the detective back together more than once, but there is a difference, Sherlock is learning, between knowing something to be true and feeling it, for the kindness of the unnecessary and unsought touch makes his chest ache. Then
Sherlock feels lips press to the nape of his neck and he pulls in a breath. John's tongue emerges, tastes the knobs of his spine, which sends a current from his head straight to Sherlock's feet.

*A capite ad calcem*, Sherlock recalls when he begins to float away and attempts to tether himself back to terra firma with schoolboy Latin.

Widening his knees and backing up a little, John presses his mouth to Sherlock's back. He hums on occasion, on occasion scrapes with gentle teeth, takes long minutes to move from place to place, mutters little words like *gorgeous* and *lovely*, makes it past Sherlock's ribcage and settles around his kidneys, lapping at the skin. He stops to blow air across the moistened flesh, and when Sherlock shivers, John grunts in satisfaction and moves further down. He nips at the very base of Sherlock's spine and then lower, nearly between his cheeks. The touch is possessive, feels like a benevolent version of branding.

The locked box in Sherlock's mind shivers and shakes.

*We were made for each other*, the hostage whimpers at Moriarty's behest. Sherlock can hear it even within the steel drawer of the file cabinet.

*Stop it, stop it, stop*, Sherlock thinks, wincing.

"Hey," John says, tracing the crease where Sherlock's arse meets his thigh with his fingertips. "You all right?"

"Fine," Sherlock rasps, glancing back. "Don't stop."

Smirking, John drops his head and plants an open-mouthed kiss on the crest of Sherlock's bum. Then his lips are replaced with his teeth and he bites the swell. Hard.

Before he can stop himself, Sherlock is laughing helplessly, chuckles rumbling in waves through his chest. People aren't meant to laugh during this sort of thing, whatever this sort of thing is, he is dead certain of that, laughter is completely inappropriate, but he can't stifle it. It's embarrassing.

"Did you just *bite* me?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"How long have you wanted to do that?"

"Ages," John sighs, sounding like the cat who stole the cream. He bites down again, and Sherlock tries to rein in another fit of mirth. "Sodding ages. I have been wanting to bite this arse of yours for a very, er, lengthy period, especially considering the brevity of our acquaintance."

"Was it worth the wait?" Sherlock gasps.

"Well. I don't know whether you're aware of this, but your backside is perfection. It is, and I say this in all seriousness, a fucking Italian opera of a backside. When I first noticed it, I realized I was in serious trouble. And now come to find out it's delicious. I could *live* here and never miss the outside world," John answers happily. He runs feather-light fingers along the crack of the detective's bum.

"You don't have to be so careful about telling me what you really want," Sherlock mentions, feeling positively lit from within thanks to the accumulated and ever-rebounding sensations. "I told you I don't mind if--"
"Sherlock, I am not remotely interested in putting anything in your absolutely bloody magnificent arse."

After thinking briefly, Sherlock manages to settle on the question that's actually nagging at him.

"Why not?"

_Everyone else was, after all._

John pats the firm hill of flesh. "Oh, is _that_ what's got you bothered? Christ have mercy. You complete clot. Because no matter how careful I was, no matter how much time I took, I am not a small man and inevitably it would be painful and nerve-wracking for you, which means that inevitably it would be excruciating for _me_ throughout the entire ordeal. You see? I'm, um, very selfish. Yep. This is all about self-interest."

"But--"

"Sherlock. Shut. Up."

He kisses his way down and around both of Sherlock's thighs, pulls his tongue along the backs of his knees, kneads at his calves with his fingers before caressing them with his mouth. Sherlock doesn't know whether it takes minutes or hours. Time is leaking, his consciousness of its passage dissolving like a Dali clock. When he reaches Sherlock's feet, John pulls himself up a little, pressing into the arches for long minutes until Sherlock feels as if his spine has been replaced with soft royal blue thread.

"You want to turn over?" John asks at length.

A little frisson of fear tickles along Sherlock's neck at the thought.

_Even if he says he's not trying to arouse me, what does it mean, how does it reflect on him, what sort of failure as man will he inevitably feel like when he sees I'm entirely unaffected?_

"I don't know," Sherlock admits, and the anxiety in his voice is probably mortifyingly obvious.

A pause follows.

"C'mon," John says, tugging on Sherlock's ankle. "Unless you want me to stop. I'll stop the moment you say, but I'm out of territory."

_You know how badly this is going to end,_ Sherlock thinks in despair.

Resolved to keep his face neutral, Sherlock tucks his arm underneath himself and executes a quick roll. His eyes are closed. When he opens them, John is kneeling by his feet, staring at Sherlock as if he were a glass of water in the desert. He smiles, scratches idly at the back of his neck, brushes his hands down Sherlock's shins. His eyes are painfully blue, his erection now shining at the tip.

"Hello, perfect creature," he says softly. "How do you feel?"

Sherlock shakes his head. He doesn't allow himself to speak, couldn't bear for the knot in his throat to come undone and ruin everything. He ought to feel happy, not gutted. He doesn't know what's wrong with him.

_But then, something has always been wrong with you_, he reminds himself.

"Should I stop?"
Shaking his head again, more violently, Sherlock attempts a smile. He's not certain how well it goes, but John surges up to kiss along the line of his throat, across the tops of his shoulders, to trace his breastbone and the hollows of his neck with an eager tongue and fingers trailing after, his knees between Sherlock's parted legs, his caresses and the very slight sandpaper texture of his evening stubble lighting brushfires in Sherlock's tender skin. The hard knot in the sleuth's chest is unraveling at alarming speed. He checks his mind palace and where all was blazing illumination before, melting the fresh white snow, now the walls and cornices are covered in fairy lights beyond the remaining drifts, tiny pinpricks flickering like stars, like the individual nerves of his skin John is causing to fire singly and in groups.

John comes to Sherlock's right nipple and pauses thoughtfully before laving across it with the tip of his tongue.

"Fuck," Sherlock hisses, sensation careening up his spine and tingling in the roots of his hair. The spark comes to rest there, fading only very gradually, crackling along his follicles.

"Good version or bad version?" John asks, sounding merely curious, rubbing the spot softly with the pads of his index and middle fingers.

"I honestly have no idea. Good, I think. But...I don't know. Strange. Intense."

"We'll take our time with that, then," John concludes, pushing himself up and downward. "Rain check." He drops kisses along Sherlock's taut belly as he goes, rubs his hands along quivering sides as if calming a thoroughbred. When he settles between the sleuth's legs, he draws his mouth all over the crest of his hip bones and the pale flesh of his upper thighs. Glancing up at Sherlock, he smiles, rests his cleft chin on the detective's pelvis lightly.

"You hate masturbating, but do you ever touch your bollocks? Shake them out after a long day in pants, that sort of thing?"

"I'm ace, I'm not dead," Sherlock answers, glibly uncomprehending until John settles himself on one elbow and ever so gently rolls Sherlock's sack in one hand.

Sherlock's eyes slam shut even as his mouth opens.

He is absolutely certain he has never made this sound before. Sharper than a moan, far less pained than a cry. His hand shoots blindly down to push his fingers into John's hair as the army doctor kneads a little, strokes the skin and pets the coarse hair and slides his fingers back behind the balls, teasing along the ridge he finds, never pushing, the touch just strong enough not to make his subject squirm.

Fighting back the uncontrollable noises he's making, panting a little, Sherlock wrenches his eyes open. John looks abundantly pleased, as if a feast has been laid out before him. He looks down at Sherlock's balls in his small hand, at Sherlock's long, slender cock lying across his thigh, and takes a deep breath as if he cannot believe where he finds himself. Sherlock wonders whether crying during whatever-this-is would be worse than laughing, because he can hardly force air into his lungs when he studies the purity of the affection on John's weathered face.

Surely doing both during one session would be absolutely unforgiveable.

"You're not disappointed?" Sherlock challenges.

John's eyes, the colour now of winter storms, dart upwards.

"How could I possibly be disappointed in the living Greek statue who lets me sleep in his
"You could be," Sherlock choking out. "Trust me."

Shaking his dark blond head, John nuzzles his face into the nest of curls and Sherlock gasps as if he's drowning.

"The people you're thinking about are utter wankstains and I'm not disappointed," John says when he comes up for air, dropping another light kiss to the bollocks he's holding. "Listen. I was having sex with plenty of people before I met you, and I liked them, I don't take advantage, but I didn't...they weren't in the same category, Sherlock. They didn't send me a hundred million mad text messages per hour that made me feel as if my piss-poor life had just been hijacked. They didn't turn up to my office disguised as a doctor and transform it into a crime scene. They weren't brilliant, and biting, and underneath all that bloody decent through and through. They never played the violin. I couldn't fall asleep with them. They didn't want to know absolutely every sodding thing about me. And if they'd watched me fall into a dry dock, they'd probably have registered some concern, they were good people, but they wouldn't have...done what you did."

"I didn't want to do that," Sherlock rasps. "I'd have stopped it if I could."

And it would have been safer by light years for you if I'd managed to.

"Yeah. I know you feel that way," John admits. "I don't take offense to that, I understand what you mean by it. Or I...probably do. I tell myself I do. But look--I invaded Afghanistan, mate. I'd not trade you. All right? We don't have to talk about it, but you're not a consolation prize. Never fucking assume that. Did you think that? God, Sherlock. I was at the end of the line when you arrived."

And I'm nearing the end of the line now, Sherlock thinks, feeling his eyes water and violently blinking.

John leans his face down again.

"I wouldn't trade you, here in this bed with me," he says very quietly. "Not for anyone else."

John places a tender, lingering kiss on the smooth skin of Sherlock's cock where it rests peacefully against his thigh. It isn't chaste. But it isn't impure either. It's the most incalculable thing Sherlock has ever witnessed.

"There," he says, looking wryly delighted as he rises, settles his weight back against his calves. "I've kissed you in heaps of places now. I'll save some for later. We can get a properly good bottle of wine, get pissed, have ourselves an ear party next week. One more spot, you pick this last time."

Choice of location, Sherlock thinks distantly. Yes, that would be nice.

Generous of him. Thoughtful.

Perhaps you should say something?

Sherlock cannot breathe.

Finally he manages to heave in a draught of air without dissolving into tears, letting it out again slowly. John seems a bit concerned, granted, but he's still smiling gently. He doesn't realize that this has wrecked Sherlock, peeled off his skin even as John was kissing it worshipfully, that he has
left the detective a mass of open nerves with an oversized, engorged heart in the center of the barbed-wire tangle.

Pushing himself up with shaking hands, Sherlock gets to his knees and crawls forward until he mirrors John's position from a mere few inches away.

"I know where you should kiss me," Sherlock says.

_Fuck the world, bring the asteroids, raze the planet, I will have this single thing for myself even if it destroys us._

John gives him a bright smile. "Cracking. There is not a single place on your entire body that I wouldn't be chuffed to--"

Sherlock closes his lips over John's mouth and the doctor instantly stills.

The fourth dimension, which is that of time, has already disintegrated so utterly that Sherlock is no longer any apt judge of it. But he recognizes that John remains quite motionless for several seconds, a small huff of surprise from his nostrils the only sign he is aware they are kissing. John's breath is gentle. It caresses Sherlock's philtrum. John's lips are warm and firm and smooth, Sherlock registers, and they fit under the sleuth's broad bow of a mouth like a key sliding into a lock. The act feels tender and sore, aglow with strange heat, the way Sherlock's palms feel, the way the bruise along John's side must.

Pulling away, Sherlock frowns.

"I may have done that wrong," he concedes. "I don't...I don't know how that's done in the technical sense."

John gapes at him, stunned. His hands lift and he cups either side of Sherlock's face, nudging forward until they are practically sharing the same space.

"Don't you?" he rasps. "And why on earth..."

"We can leave it there, if you like. A single experiment. I merely...no." Sherlock shakes his head at the word _merely_. "I wanted to know. Needed to know. We needn't repeat--"

"Shush. That was amazing," John whispers, eyes still wide. "I'm sorry, I, um, wow--you took me by surprise. Was that all right by you?"

Biting his lip, Sherlock nods. He feels lighter and freer now that's done. He's been wanting to do it for ages, and John took it fairly well. He doesn't seem suddenly demanding or entitled. He doesn't seem superior and critical. He seems...the same. He seems like the only man in the universe who actually _chose_ Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock is still fighting not to curl into a weeping little ball over that revelation, but this new development feels like a triumph. He wants to capture the moment for posterity, post it on The Science of Deduction.

_I kissed John Watson and he didn't leave._

_Fuck you, Reggie Musgrave_, Sherlock thinks for the first time in his life, and a half-smile quirks onto his face.

"OK, OK, I am going to have to ask...shut up, John," John tells himself, flinching. "Right. Obviously since you did that, you wanted to do that. Can we do that again?"
The smile on Sherlock's face widens, and John laughs aloud in response. Perhaps laughing during whatever-this-is might be allowed after all.

John angles his own head and shifts Sherlock's slightly in loving hands, fitting their mouths together again. The angle is better. *Of course it is, John actually knows how to do this, John is normal.* Now their lips can slide in tandem, now their noses aren't in the way.

"Oh," Sherlock breathes a few long seconds into the kiss, his mouth moving against his friend's.

"Fucking *oh* is right," John mutters desperately, tightening his benign hold on Sherlock's face, thumb caressing his ear.

"Am I--"

"You are doing this perfectly."

"But--"

"Less talking. Oh my god, your mouth, your stupidly sexy mouth."

It is entirely confined to a movement of lips at first, of sharing the same breath. Their lips stroke, nip on occasion, drag to and fro. Sherlock is rapidly growing lightheaded. He is reusing air which John already filtered through his own lungs, he is lost in the sweet simplicity of it, his skin is about to split with the fullness of John wanting him, he remembers Reggie and feeling complimented and is suddenly fiercely glad that went spectacularly wrong, because now it means *he has never kissed anyone like this,* and maybe John doesn't want to fuck him, and other men have already been there and taken their fill, but this is something Sherlock can give to John as if he were innocent when that is manifestly not the case, when he has been pierced many times by needles and strangers.

It's possible that this is pure, he realizes. If so, perhaps this counts for more. Pure things are more worthy, he recalls. If he wants to give John everything, maybe this is more important than fucking. It's a concept worth exploring. He'd not have crossed the street to shake hands with the men who took him, but this is like presenting a gift.

"I thought you didn't like kissing like this," John pants, mouthing across the side of Sherlock's face momentarily.

"I've never been kissed like this."

"Never--"

"Once. He hated me. It lasted less than three seconds and put me off ever since. This is only for you," Sherlock admits fiercely.

John's eyes do something shadowy and complicated. Then, with a tender snarl, he returns his lips to Sherlock's, shifting one of the hands cupping his face to knead into his hair. When John's mouth opens this time, his touches playing symphonies in the detective's bloodstream, Sherlock wonders what John tastes like on the inside and darts a cautious tongue within the damp cavern. John instantly groans into the kiss and slides his own tongue alongside Sherlock's.

Something akin to an avalanche thunders in Sherlock's ears.

It's electrifying, the taste of John, vague lush green apples and a richer note like clove. He tastes of *himself,* bright and dark and ferocious and wonderful, and *to think,* Sherlock marvels, *I could have died without ever experiencing this.*
"Now I get to keep you," John growls around the parrying of their tongues, running his thumb along the edge of Sherlock's rosy mouth. "Right? Is that what this means? Or just--fuck, can it mean that? Please? Now you're mine. Say that you're mine. Say I can keep you, please say it. I know you need an army doctor really badly right now, for good reason, I just. This part will all be over soon, and then--fuck, and then. I'll still want you, can't you see that? And I know I'm ordinary and more than a bit fucked up and you're... You're a miracle. I'm asking anyway. Please. Can't this mean you're mine, a little? Can I keep you after?"

After.

After.

After.

The lock cracks and the cabinet drawer opens.

*We were made for each other,* Sherlock hears, this time in Jim Moriarty's actual purr as opposed to his terrified victim's whimpers.

"Hey, no, no, sorry, don't go there, wherever that is," John urges frantically, taking Sherlock ample lower lip between his teeth. "Back to me, back to me. Forget what I asked. Erase. Delete. Come on back, love. Right here. God, you're fucking incredible. You're to die for. I *would* die for you, I think."

"Don't," Sherlock gasps, agonized. "Don't say--"

"Sorry, sorry, never mind. How about I'd fucking put a bullet in the brain of anyone who tried to hurt you? And gladly. No one is going to hurt you."

Sherlock risks a glance at John, whose eyes burn into his like coals. Almost by accident, his eyes wander down to where John is now lightly stroking himself, no longer able to ignore the painful pulse of his arousal. His penis is thick and pearly with moisture, and John passes his fingertips up over the head and exhales loudly.

"That isn't your job," Sherlock snarls, covering John's hand with his own.

"Of course it is."


"OK, fuck, fuck," John growls. "Yes. Yours. Completely yours. I'm so close. Jesus, I'm not kidding, I'm nearly there, how did that happen. Or. Never mind, I have a theory on that front, and it involves surveying miles of unclaimed detective." John laughs briefly. "All right. Here we go. If I'm yours and you want to be fucked so badly, I will, um, cheerfully oblige you. Your wish is my goddamned command. Put your knees together. Yeah. That's it. A bit tighter, keep your legs flush. Fuck. We don't even need lube at this point. Up a little, off your heels. Ready?"

Sherlock would have said *ready for anything,* but that's the moment when John pushes his wet cock between Sherlock's thighs. For a moment he stays there, both men trembling.

"Oh god," Sherlock moans, staring down at where they are easily, painlessly joined. "God, what made you think of that?"

"I am extremely clever," John husks. He takes both hands and buries them in Sherlock's hair. "Hold very still."
"Still? I can't help but suggest that isn't the point of--"

"No talking," John, gasps, chuckling. "Voice. I told you. Your voice. I can't. This."

"Are you broken?" Sherlock asks, awed and aching with affection.

"Maaaaaaybe," John drawls, rolling his brow against Sherlock's shoulder blade.

Sherlock breathes deeply, splays his hands across John's back like wings, a protective gesture. Every time John seems about to fall apart, Sherlock feels as if he gets a piece of himself back. John needs him still, so he stays still.

After a few more moments, John sighs shakily and looks up.

"Right." His lips twist into a self-deprecating smile. "You want to watch me fucking your nice clean legs until I come all over them, or do you want to go back to the kissing? Because I am about to explode, so this needs planning."

"Kissing," Sherlock demands.

"You are so goddamn smart," John announces, and buries his tongue in Sherlock's mouth as he begins to drag his cock back and forth.

Their momentum is such that the smallest things mean volumes, the lightest touches set them aflame. Sherlock presses his fingers to their mouths, simply to feel what kissing is like with another set of neural receptors, and it must be all right because John did the same earlier, and John curses violently. The slap of his prick between Sherlock's legs is the most erotic and gracious version of sex he's ever encountered. And all the while John wants him, wants Sherlock and no one else, wants his peculiar mind and his questionable habits and his imminent death and his hopelessly inadequate devotion.

It is the sort of miraculous event that Sherlock wishes would go on forever. But sadly, while Sherlock could maintain his lack of arousal indefinitely, soon John's slick thrusts between his legs grow erratic. Sherlock flexes the muscles in his thighs, well aware of their strength, and John shudders. He cries out into Sherlock's open mouth as he comes, moving his cock in broken spasms, clutching Sherlock's hair in a death grip as the detective feels warmth landing on the backs of his calves.

John shivers for a long time. Sherlock attempts to hold him upright, one hand around his waist and one cradling his neck. After what seems an eternity, John looks up, wrecked and comprehensively beautiful.

"Sorry," he whispers, sending soothing fingers through Sherlock's hair. "Did I hurt you?"

Sherlock shakes his head, entirely overwhelmed.

"Mine," he says with gravel in his throat, touching where John's cock is softening between his legs. John smiles so wide that it makes his eyes go glassy.

"All for you," he says, kissing Sherlock again. And again. And again.
Sherlock's eyes are open to the great darkness of London four hours later, wide awake in the middle of the night. The sheets are nearly still wrapped around them, but the blanket is mussed, Sherlock's right foot exposed a little to the air. John is splayed along his side, his soft head tucked into Sherlock's neck, breathing evenly. Asleep. Every so often he twitches in concert with his dreams.

Every time, Sherlock strokes his hands along John's warm skin. Every time, John settles back into peaceful slumber.

It is as meaningful as the sex was. Merely registering along an entirely different spectrum.

Then, with a sound like a hundred cannons, the house explodes.

The pressure in the room changes instantly along with the shift in the soundscape, the clatter of thousands of bits of debris. Sherlock feels himself being thrown by the blast, his limbs no longer his own. He cannot move. He cannot see. The roaring in his ears turns piercing, escalates into a high hiss that sets his skin crawling.

Stunned, paralyzed, Sherlock opens his eyes to acrid dust and the stench of petrol, suddenly on his stomach with a heavy pressure against his back.

Words are being spat above him, but he cannot understand them. *Ya,* he thinks he hears in a harsh, panicked voice, and *ya* again. Just when he realizes he is being taken hostage by Moriarty's thugs at last, that isn't the case at all. A single small hand is checking him over for injuries. The other small hand is extremely heavy and rather too cold and too hard. There is a gun in it, Sherlock deduces.

"John," Sherlock breathes, suddenly aware with a fiery tingle that the situation is a very volatile one.

"Delta woesah," John orders in a steady snarl, and the pressure is released. John swings himself off the bed. "Harahkat macowa."

Turning onto his side in a daze, Sherlock watches the muscled naked man approach the door of their bedroom. The army doctor is a shadow, like a paper cutout, all planes and sinews and the glint of metal at the end of his arm. He's breathtaking. John waves a palm and Sherlock dutifully flattens himself. Then John kicks the door open and like a born predator is through the portal, turning on a pinpoint to aim his weapon at the source of the blast, covering them both.

"Shit, shit, shit," Sherlock hisses, clambering out of bed and throwing his arms into his blue gown after snatching it from its hook. The red is far too long for John, but it's the closest to hand so he grabs that too. The sound of the explosion emanated from the sitting room. Smoke curls through the open door. Sherlock coughs, the hiss in his ears subsiding a little. This is very bad, very bad indeed. Anything could happen, but most of the probabilities list toward the terrible. He is just contemplating the wisdom of throwing all caution to the wind and following a PTSD sufferer into an actual urban war zone when John's footfalls sound in the hallway, returning.

"Le maa saara raaza," John says more easily, though his tone is grim. He holds out a hand. Sherlock hesitates.

"I don't speak Pashto," he says slowly, perfectly at ease though his heart is racing. "You want me
to tell you I'm not a threat to you now, according to our agreement, to act in a submissive manner, as if I'm a capture or a diplomat to be protected, but you know perfectly well who I am, you recognize me. I don't need to pretend to be anyone else. You were checking me for injuries just now, but I'm fine. I'm fine. I promise. You're merely stuck on the wrong continent. Say my name. Sherlock."


"Now try English."

Realization settles, a tense expression of caution around John's mouth.

"Like this?" he asks, hesitant.

"Precisely," Sherlock approves.

"Jesus Christ," John sighs, rubbing his face far too viciously.

"There we are. Don't apologize, you're about to, but you needn't, everything is fine, you thought I might have been hurt and you--"

"I know what I fucking thought and it is not fucking fine!" John shouts, face contorted. "Nothing about this is OK, Sherlock! Are we fucking clear on that point? Not in my head, and not in our flat. Now, what I just said was come with me, so fucking fall in line."

Whirling on his heel, John in all his magnificent nudity exits, gun firmly in hand and with the safety off.

Left in a room that feels as if all the gravity departed along with John's mass, Sherlock follows obediently, carrying the red dressing gown over his arm.

"Step well back, there's glass everywhere," John says sharply as Sherlock approaches him. The doctor flips on the lights in the kitchen. "Now, take a look at this, and if you tell me it's fine again, so help me god I will slap you."

Sherlock turns.

The windows of the sitting room, so cozy moments before, are entirely blown out. The reek of fossil fuel drifts through the air, and John is right, shrapnel and splinters and glass shards are everywhere. Across the road, the long-empty house is lit brilliantly, its windows likewise decimated, its walls shining with floodlights as if an intergalactic space vessel had landed in Baker Street. It's brighter than the building appears at high noon. And painted across its surface in a hideous sickly yellow are gigantic letters:

I-O-U

The downstairs door opens. With a key in the lock, not violently. Footsteps, a pair of them Sherlock registers, sound as they climb the seventeen steps with urgent, determined male force.

"Oh, you would, would you?" John hisses, advancing with his weapon held high. "Try it. Come on in, lads, cuppa's on the house and so's a fucking bullet in your brain supposing I don't take to you."

"You're absolutely magnificent," Sherlock breathes, entirely forgetting to be frightened. "Are you aware of that at all?"
The door bangs open. Shinwell Johnson's huge gut appears first, followed by the rest of his limbs, clad in sagging black jeans and a garish scarlet Manchester United windbreaker paired with an incongruous off-kilter white baseball cap that reads "wot evah" in lowercase letters. None other than Mycroft Holmes, dipped in Saville Row and then hung up to dry and presented as usual, follows in his wake. The strong new aroma of marijuana, Sherlock decides, emanates from Shinwell, though it will be very pleasurable to rib Mycroft about it. The two men stare at Sherlock and John open-mouthed, forgetting the decimated windows entirely.


"Tell me something I don't know," John returns evenly, not lowering the gun.

"I'm holding an extra dressing gown?"

"Nope. Knew that too."

"Mycroft once ate an entire bowl of trifle over the hols. It took him two sittings, but he managed in the end."

Exhaling, cracking his neck, John lowers the gun. He walks a few paces away and sets it on the table, the safety still off. Then he turns to face Sherlock, who smoothly passes him the robe.

"Right," John says, tying the belt with a jerk. "Someone had better start talking. I'm pretty particular as to topics just at the moment, however. So. Subjects that won't twist my knickers include what in bloody hell you're doing here, Mr. Johnson, what in bloody hell you're doing here, Mr. Holmes, and what in bloody hell we're going to do about psychopaths directing our notice to graffiti by blowing out our fucking windows. You have my full attention."
Chapter 18

As an exercise in focus, Sherlock studies the trapezoid the four men are making—he and John before the kitchen table, Mycroft and Shinwell before the still-open front door, smoky breezes teasing at Sherlock's bare ankles. The explosion yet sings in his ears, high and shrieking like a staticky radio, and no one is saying anything. It's decidedly uncanny.

John is going to be in still more of a strop than he is already if the silence drags on for much longer, Sherlock decides, and opens his mouth as a preventive measure.

"Will you close the door?" he asks his brother snidely. "There's a bit of a draught."

In lieu of snickering, John widens his stance, hopping on his feet a little, but Sherlock knows what he means by this time, and is glad the joke landed well. The air gushing through the windows is autumnal and comprehensively bitter beneath the sour stench of fossil fuel, acrid as pure spite, its char seeping into the wallpaper and the floorboards.

Mycroft, his face a positive mask of outrage, turns to shut the door but ceases his motion at the sound of slippered footsteps shuffling upstairs. A single person. Not much above a hundred pounds, and with a gammy hip. John glances at Sherlock, then glances at the gun, and Sherlock shakes his head.

"Boys!" Mrs. Hudson cries. "Boys—oh, boys, are you all right?"

Mrs. Hudson bursts fully into the room, purple curlers dotting her thin hair and her sweet face oddly pale without her usual rouge. She goes straight to Sherlock and he experiences a familiar uncomplicated pang at the sight of her, stretches his arms out and takes her thin elbows in his long fingers. Mrs. Hudson shivers, staring wide-eyed at the blown windows. Mrs. Hudson should not be shivering—that goes against every right principle. She smells of chamomile and the faint copper-penny tang of her flat.

"I was just nodding off over the telly, when you're older you'll find that you can't sleep as well, herbal soothers or no, and no matter how knackered you try to make yourself during the day of course, rushing about here and there and everywhere," she gasps, "and oh goodness, IOU, Sherlock, whatever does it—"

"Oh, do shut up, Mrs. Hudson," Mycroft sneers, closing the door.

"Mycroft!" Sherlock and John shout simultaneously, while, "Really, Mr. Holmes, surely we can be make an effort in the general direction of being civil blokes even under such regrettably difficult and unprecedented circumstances," Shinwell Johnson disapproves, crossing his fat arms over his belly.

Mycroft is startled enough by this barrage that he actually draws back an inch, face curdling as if lemon juice had been improperly added to cream.

Sherlock hasn't been so satisfied in years.

"Right, did you get here by car?" John asks Mycroft, gently disentangling Mrs. Hudson from Sherlock's protective grip. He mourns the loss of her for a moment, the ways she steadies him without meaning to, her oh-so-human fluttering and her bottomless decency, but Sherlock lets her go.
"What?" Mycroft snaps.

This is the best explosion I've ever been a part of. Sherlock thinks in reluctant glee, watching his brother percolate. And there have been several.

"You heard me. There's nothing wrong with your ears. Your car, is it downstairs?" John insists, reaching for the gun.

"Yes, it is, around the corner on Marylebone Street, whatever that is supposed--"

"Your secretary whatsit, that posh bird who kidnapped me, she's in it, I imagine?" John nods. "Good. Mrs. Hudson, come with me. The lady downstairs named Anthea in the expensive car is going to take you and set you up in a hotel, all right? And she's going to do a full security sweep of it and then arrange a guard detail for you, isn't she, Mr. Holmes?"

"Oh my." Mrs. Hudson breathes. Her hand wavers before her slender neck. "I must just--give me a moment to put a coat on, I... Do you mean--but this wasn't on purpose, Sherlock, just an accident, surely? This isn't--this isn't his doing?"

Not for the first time, Sherlock finds cause to regret that Mrs. Hudson knows absolutely everything about him. He remembers being terrified because his mind had stopped working entirely, simply ground to a sluggish, congealed halt, having just come off a binge in Montague Street, and Mrs. Hudson banging down his door and finding him keeping company with a syringe, a pile of forensic science magazines, a bottle of whiskey, an empty container which had once contained cheese pizza (probably from the week previous), and a scattered constellation of Moriarty letters which formed no pattern whatsoever.

Oh, my poor boy, she'd said, this woman whose husband he'd seen put to death, and he hadn't pushed her away for once, you just come right along with me now, she'd said, in a tone Sherlock's mother had never ever used, even when he was small, we'll go straight home and sort this, between the two of us, you'll see, everything will be right as rain come morning. Come away from this place, my sweet boy.

"Setting aside the fact that streets seldom explode of their own volition, I rather think the graffiti is indicative of malicious intent," Sherlock answers mildly. The urge to decimate her for the question, to cut with his razor wit, isn't even present--he ought to have known Baker Street wasn't safe, ought to have sent Mrs. Hudson away at once. He hates himself for the oversight. Sherlock hates the tremor in her veined hands. He loathes the way she clutches at the thin terrycloth of her robe. "Stop sniveling, Mrs. Hudson, you know well enough it won't impede the path of a bullet. John is right. He'll take you downstairs. My brother was just texting his minion--sorry, assistant, was that the title--that she's to take care of you. Go on."

"But Sherlock, I can't possibly, not with you--"

"I'll be fine," Sherlock says, smiling. He knows it doesn't reach his eyes, but that's more than can be asked of him at the moment. "Mycroft. Text."

Lip curling, Mycroft raises his phone and instead presses a single speed-dial number. John, touching Sherlock's arm as he passes, leads Mrs. Hudson downstairs while Mycroft delivers Anthea's orders. The entire process takes all of two and a half minutes, and by the time John arrives upstairs again, barefoot and with the small blond hair along his chest bristling with cold outside the boundary of the sleuth's too-large dressing gown, Sherlock is staring in mute hostility at their guests once more.
"Well," Sherlock says coldly, as John slams the door shut.

"Well," John agrees, setting the gun back on the table.

"Yes, isn't this delightful?" Mycroft drawls, glaring daggers at the shattered glass. "It's like a reunion, only more...atmospheric. I must freely admit, Mr. Johnson, finding you here is a surprise. I expected my brother, of course, and it would have been rather obtuse of me not to expect his newfound...oh, dear me...admittedly I am at a loss as to what to term him precisely, as despite the extremity of our present circumstances, we appear to have surprised him in a state of some deshabille--"

"Doctor would be fine," John says, leaning a hip against the back of the sofa. "Or, you know. Captain. If you'd rather. Good enough for government work."

He's already incensed, Sherlock knows, and it's only growing worse.

Something tangible in the air between the two of them has changed. Something that had nothing whatsoever to do with sex, though Sherlock can see that under less heightened circumstances he may have mistaken it for the closeness brought about by what they shared that evening, that sudden blinding knowledge of what John's heartbeat throbbing desperately against the thin skin of his legs felt like, the way it matched the pulse fluttering along his throat behind his uneven breaths. That was...there is no way to describe what that was in English, it wrecked him too entirely for mere words, though Sherlock thinks that he might make a go of graphing it.

No.

What's different is that they kissed.

It shouldn't matter, the way so much of the rest of it shouldn't matter, these small things they share that ought not make a difference, and yet this does. On a global scale, it does. Sherlock actually inhaled John and absorbed him into his body, invited him places no one has ever been, placed John in his air supply and then fed his cells with John's essence, and now when he looks at the smaller man's tightly racheted spine and the thin push of his lips, Sherlock knows something unusual is about to happen. He can feel John's future in the way a sensitive man can feel the onset of a thunderstorm.

Meanwhile, a slight tug of pique grips Sherlock.

For just how long, he wonders, would John have settled for us as us without breathing each other in? Weeks, all things considered? In other circumstances, years? It isn't as if I'd known anything about the subject, after all.

Mycroft turns to study the glaring yellow I-O-U, making a humming sound in his throat which sounds like a particularly vicious purr. "Doctor or Captain. What a remarkable set of choices. Yes, lest I be allowed to forget for even a moment, it's really so forward-thinking of my brother to have acquired a personal physician who doubles as a bodyguard, and the only task my sibling has to perform in return for the service--but I shouldn't be indelicate, should I, not when Sherlock despite his physical disinclinations is already so adept at trading favours for favours, though not always in kind."

Sherlock feels his ears blazing, and for a moment seriously considers the option of breaking his brother's neck with his bare hands. It would be possible, apparently. He has done as much to fireplace pokers. But shame, the sort he never indulges in because it's all fucking transport anyhow, trading chemicals for chemicals is a perfectly equitable system of substance
"Here now," Shinwell Johnson coughs, reddening. "That, Mr. Holmes, if you'll pardon my proffering tuppence as an outside observer and all, is neither entirely here, nor when it comes right down to it remotely there--"

"D'you know something, Sherlock, this dressing gown of yours is too long in the arms for me, thanks all the same," John announces, and drops it to the floor in a silken puddle.

Mycroft and Shinwell gape as a freshly naked John Watson stalks towards them upon furiously silent feet. It's the tread of a jungle cat, and Sherlock records it for later study, as he's presently hampered in his observational skills by a stomach-churning mixture of delight and awe.

"I suggest you listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once," John hisses. His hands are on his slender hips, his musculature standing out in taut, incensed lines, pulse thrumming and sinews bulging with the righteousness of his anger. "Who your brother shags is none of your business. Who I shag is really none of your business."

"Whom," Sherlock observes automatically.

"Cheers, love. Sorry, whom." John licks his lips, staring up into the steaming face of Mycroft Holmes, as Sherlock feels his heart begin to swell. "If you're fussed at walking in on me in my birthday suit, fucking ring us next time before you hike up those stairs, especially after an unscheduled detonation. I spent months in the desert worried over being shot at every time I went outside to take a shit in a plastic bag, and I have cleaned sand out of places you don't even know exist. Or you won't until you've done a tour which considers Maiwand one of the nicer resort towns. Now, I'm going to our bedroom and putting my kit on, not because I don't like the look on your face, because I do, I really do, mate, but because our fucking windows are presently not working at best efficiency and I'm freezing my bollocks off. When I come back, there had better be tea."

Turning on his heel, John stalks away. Sherlock says nothing, merely watches his brother succumb to a previously unobserved form of apoplexy. Silence falls, golden and glittering, like the light from the streetlamps as it glances off the sea of jagged glass.

"That was, in my estimation, meaning no disrespect and likewise expecting no argument from you, Mr. Holmes, the buggering craziest goddamn thing I've ever seen, including my perhaps previously alluded to stint as an arms dealer in the Balkans, brief and yet regrettably vivid as that small portion of my life may well have been," Shinwell says at last, rubbing a hand over his jaw as he grins.

"He invaded Afghanistan," Sherlock admits, shrugging because executing a theatrical bow would probably spoil the moment, and then goes to put the kettle on.
brought him to Baker Street, neither reaching for the teacup Sherlock sets beside him near the armchair nor sparing it a glance. As they are wearing shoes, Sherlock waved Shinwell and Mycroft into the chairs, appropriating the sofa for himself and his friend after fetching his slippers from the fireplace hearth. "We discovered aberrations in the gas readings that indicated a leak or a surge threatened, and no unusual data centered around the Baker Street area passes through without the utmost scrutiny from my staff. Add to this the fact that CCTV picked up traffic wardens redirecting the flow at either end of your block, and I arrived here as soon as I could."

_The paint_, Sherlock thinks, staring out the window at the hulk of the empty house once more. _And the floodlights. He needed time._

Sherlock places another cuppa before Shinwell, sets the tea tray on the low table he sometimes stands on when he needs a higher vantage point from which to think, goes to the front door, shrugs into his Belstaff, buttons it over his robe, pulls his collar up, and snugs himself into the corner of the sofa with his phone. _Nothing._

_Nothing yet_, he corrects himself, thumbing the screen off.

Because Sherlock knows what this is. _He knows precisely_ what this is, and he doesn't like it. _John is going to like it even less_, Sherlock realizes, and can't suppress a melancholy sigh.

He switches his phone on silent. _If he watches it closely enough, he'll miss nothing. And John...John can always be informed at a later time._

The man in question reappears, incongruously smaller-seeming fully dressed. Sherlock knows this to be mathematically impossible, but the doctor has deflated somehow after acquiring a pair of blue jeans and a black and white striped jumper. He picks up his cup of tea as he sits, close enough to Sherlock to make a point while still far enough away to drink English Breakfast with some freedom of motion.

"Surveillance," he says, giving a professional nod to Mycroft. _All the belligerence has leached out of him. Sherlock wants it back, wonders where on earth he put it. It isn't as if one can deposit a fit of temper in a sock drawer and leave it behind. "I heard that from the bedroom. Which leaves me wondering what you're doing here," he adds to Shinwell, in a not-unfriendly tone._

"Ah," Shinwell wheezes, adjusting his "wot evah" cap and taking an appreciative slurp of hot tea. "Would you believe, Dr. Watson--and I think you will, being a man well used to the quixotic twists and turns of fate--the same identical circumstance brought me to your door, and at the identical moment to boot? The younger Mr. Holmes here has been texting me a pre-agreed upon phrase daily to indicate his own continued well-being, may it ever remain so, as you are probably already aware, but we've put in place other additional precautions, and these include the invaluable round-the-clock eyes of the freaks, junkies, winos, punks, ravers, pervs, base heads, skinheads, and airheads employed by us in times of trial."

"The Homeless Network," Sherlock explains to John's eyebrows. _"They work for Shinwell. They work for me when I need them. They're watching the flat."_ 

"Do you think it might be, I dunno, a good idea to tell me this sort of thing?" John demands, sloshing the tea in his cup.

"Possibly," Sherlock owns, "and I'd meant to, but they can guard you better when you aren't looking at them."
"The point being, of course," Shinwell continues smoothly, "that as I was putting my feet up just half an hour back to indulge in a few post-midnight biscuits and some homeopathic remedies passed down from me own late blessed grandmum as a cure for the demon blight of insomnia, it being a curse attached to the Johnson family tree and nature's wonders being myriad and their fruits--"

Mycroft Holmes snorts, checks his phone, and returns his attention to the high polish on his shoes.

"He's uncomfortable with the concept of marijuana," Sherlock interjects, "as he was widely assumed to be a stoner in his youth and when he entered government work was forced to confess to a poor metabolism and an obsession with pouring treacle over everything. And I mean everything. Do go on."

"I was called to the front lines due to suspicious activity," Shinwell concludes, saluting with three fingers at John in a way that is exactly half admiring and half sarcastic. "It were the traffic detour bit, not the gas readings bit. Banksy, this sorry sot isn't. Pulled up in me chariot a block over just about the time Mr. Holmes here did, and there you have it. Barely missed getting singed ourselves, though you know I'd not shirk in the line of duty. Does that cover most of the dangly bits?" he finishes, winking at Sherlock.

"All right," John sighs, shooting the last of his tea as if it were whiskey. Sherlock leans in and pours him another. "Pax. Pax all round. Please."

"Oh, I weren't never the slightest bit discomfited, I assure you, and if I may say so, the longevity of our business acquaintance and the purity of its ensuing personal affections being what it is between me and Mr. Sherlock Holmes here," Shinwell continues, blithely ignoring Sherlock's expression of shocked irony, "it behooves me to state in all honesty that I've long desired for him to come by a bird, or a bird what's in fact a bloke if he'd rather, who suits him, the suiting him being the general gist of the thing and not the gender of the party, you understand me, and by Christ if it doesn't seem that he has done at long last, and I'm that chuffed over it, Doctor, my prior positive impressions being confirmed and all, that you could shake your unmentionables right up in me face and I'd ne'er bat an eyelash, as the saying goes."

Sherlock, as an experiment, makes a mental attempt to diagram Shinwell's previous sentence. The effort quickly comes to nothing.

"Um," John says, half-smiling. "Thanks? I think?"

"Yes, now that you have been welcomed into this...individual's good graces, by all means indulge in any outrageous display you like," Mycroft mutters furiously.

"I'm through now, 'ta," John answers.

"You needn't be, it's my flat and I like you naked," Sherlock says pettishly, tucking himself back into his coat collar as he enjoys the rare sight of his brother physically squirming. "It's none of his business what you do behind closed doors. Or broken windows."

"Regarding the common etiquette perspective on the subject at hand, you dropped a clanger there, make no mistake about it, sir," Shinwell agrees sagely, nudging Mycroft's shiny shoe with his elbow. "Crashed and burned like anything. The humanity."

Mycroft, previously maroon, turns an unlikely shade of eggplant.

"It's fine," John says flatly, setting his teacup down in its saucer.
"Why is it fine now?" Sherlock demands.

"Because I said so."

"No," Sherlock objects, irritated. He checks his phone. Still blank. "Five minutes ago you were--"

"Sherlock, friendly fire might be friendly, but it's still fucking deadly and I've lost men to it," John growls. Sitting back, he tugs his leg up over his knee and regards Mycroft with a level expression. "Anyway, I agree with your brother."

"You what?" Sherlock snaps.

"I agree with your brother that all your previous partners were tossbags, and yeah, I was narked, but he knows me even less well than you do and that's saying something, so it's going to be fiddly between us until I manage to prove myself, Christ, scientifically or something." John blows a resigned breath through his lips.

"But you don't need to--"

"The point is someone out there is trying to frighten and then kill you, and your brother loves you and wants to keep that from happening, and this is the identical row I had with you after we sorted the Norwood builder business, I'd wondered why it felt like deja vu, and we don't have time to have the same row twice. Therefore, your brother can treat me like the shite under his shoe all he likes, it'll make for a nice hobby until he gets bored with it. I don't matter. So long as he leaves confidences you don't want to share out of the picture, I'm through taking the piss. Meanwhile, we all play nice and fight terrorists together. Next question."

Sherlock sweeps the blade of his grey gaze towards his brother.

Mycroft's high colour slowly fades. Reaching up, he adjusts his necktie, though its dimple is already perfect. He considers, as if somehow fact-checking this small speech against what he knows of John, scanning mental databases for discrepancies. He ruminates for a moment or two more. It's maddening. Finally, he reaches for the untouched tea Sherlock poured him and takes a discreet sip of it.

"Glad to see firsthand that the bruise is healing well, Doctor," he says neutrally.

John grins, about as wide as he can.

But Sherlock finds himself still more disconcerted.

You were right, he thinks, studying the pleased little quirk in John's brow. You were right, and you knew you were right, and you let it go. For me.

You don't give a toss what Mycroft thinks of you. That was for me, for me entirely.

Why are you so much smaller? he thinks next, frowning. What happened between losing the adrenaline rush and coming back to whip the troops into order?

I don't matter, he hears John saying.

Then, You're to die for. I would die for you, I think.

Stomach tightening into a painful knot, Sherlock lights up his phone screen. Nothing. Something
is very wrong nevertheless. Well. More wrong than usual. He burns to understand what it is.

"I confess the timing of this new form of harassment puzzles me," Mycroft says, raising his eyebrows at John as if asking him a direct question.

"You and me both. Until it was always his plan to escalate. I assume people are searching the area?" John inquires. "I'd hate to be chatting over a cream tea while our target makes tracks out of harm's way."

"No, no, a full sweep of the area is being enacted as we speak by my team, they arranged for a tight perimeter to be set days ago, and with special emphasis on trapping James Moriarty should he be nearby, which doubtless he is not," Mycroft assures them. "What I desire to know is what set him upon this particular course of action."

"I didn't thank him," Sherlock says carefully.

All eyes dart to the detective. He clears his throat, as it seems to be suffering the aftereffects of sleeplessness.

"I didn't appreciate his present, or not vocally," Sherlock explains. "The locked room. The Stoner case. It was a gift. He's been tormenting me with randomness for years, and now I'm meant to be grateful when he gives me order and I solve the riddle and gain the reward of the stopped clock and rescue the hostage and feel like the victor. It's textbook, supposing his next planned gift to me is Stockholm syndrome. He wanted me to acknowledge he was the only man in the world who could have given me the perfect locked room murder."

The wind through the curtains caresses the fabric, sweeps the dust into small puffs as the gathering considers this suggestion. Mycroft, drawing a long breath, rubs at the bridge of his nose.

John's hands grip his knee and his shin tightly. "And was he?" he asks, harsh as metal.

"Yes," Sherlock snaps. "Unfortunately."

_We were made for each other_, sings like a chorus in his head.

"What do you mean you didn't appreciate his present, _or not vocally_?" John demands, and this time he doesn't even try to disguise his anger.

"Just because you warn me a present is beautiful poison doesn't make it any less beautiful," Sherlock returns icily. "And I was sick enough over enjoying it afterward that you ought to be perfectly happy."

Practically grinding his teeth, John shrugs, snapping his eyes out to the three massive letters. "Fair point."

_No, Sherlock thinks, furious, you're right about this too."

_Fight me._

_Fight me, demand I do better._

Desperate for an answer, Sherlock thinks back further, scrolling through his database for clues.

_Can't this mean you're mine, a little? Can I keep you after?_ John asked, sounded ragged and pleading.
Followed almost instantly by:


"What is *wrong* with you?" Sherlock demands.

John blinks, wide-eyed. His head pulls back as his mouth drops. "I--what? Jesus, Sherlock, how can you ask me that? Our fucking windows are destroyed, a psychopath is giving you murders as a sodding flirtation device, and--"

"And you're not angry at me for any of it!" Sherlock exclaims.

"Angry at you? Are you *completely* mental?"

"I solved the Carl Powers case, I kept all those letters all those years and read every word as if they were gospel, I set us boundaries I didn't understand myself, I admired the crime scene he left me, I wouldn't answer your question after you kissed me, *how are you not angry at me?*"

Sherlock blazes to know the answer to this question, now he realizes this specific question exists. He aches with it. Not asking the question once he'd identified it never so much as entered his mind, and if Mycroft and Shinwell are sitting there with their jaws open again, well, they've plentiful tea at hand to rehydrate them, after all.

John pales visibly even in the low light, wipes his palms on his jeans, and shifts away a little. Silent.

"Answer me," Sherlock orders.

"I'm not doing this."


"That is not fucking fair," John says, his voice shaking. Sherlock has never heard John's voice shake in quite this fashion before. It's fascinating. He doesn't enjoy it, but he wants more of it, like poking at a wound and watching the blood pool.

"It doesn't matter, you won't blame me for unfairness, after all," Sherlock drawls, tenting his fingers.

"No, I won't, because you have the relationship experience of a fucking kicked puppy."

"I don't need your pity."

"Good, because you don't have any of it."

"Stand up for yourself!" Sherlock all but shouts.

"What, you want me to drop trou again and shake my--"

"Not to *them,*" Sherlock hisses. "To me. *I'm* the one who turns you into a coward."

"Fuck you," John says clearly. He turns to look Sherlock directly in the eye, and oh, this is good, this is marvelous, it's real, and it *hurts.* The tremor is gone from John's voice, and his hands have relaxed fully. He's perfectly comfortable again, looking trim and calm and capable. "Fuck you, Sherlock Holmes. There. Happy?"
Sherlock swallows. He can't look at John, so he looks at his phone screen. There is a new voicemail on it. Face a blank, he stands, dropping it into his coat pocket as if nothing had happened.

Mycroft is staring at him intently, eyes bright with something too similar to *understanding*, and that won't do either, so Sherlock heads for the hallway.

"All right, gents, if I could just *redirect* the conversation a touch, as it seems to me we may have got just a wee bit off the intended path and all, no reflection on you both of course, nor your characters, as the strain must be enormous," Shinwell says nervously, spreading his fat hands, "we ought to--"

"I'm just off to the loo for a moment," Sherlock says.

"Sherlock," John says, and he doesn't know what that tone means. He doesn't wait to find out.

Slamming the bathroom door shut behind him, the door John fixed after breaking in the previous time, his heart racing wildly, Sherlock turns the taps on. He raises the volume level of his phone and checks for missed calls. *Private Number.* Of course it was. Sherlock enters his password and raises his hand to listen.

"Heeelloooooo, my only darling," trills Jim Moriarty's real voice in his ear.

Fear slams into Sherlock, the old fear, the uncontrollable sort. He grips the sink edge, white-knuckled, watching the water flow uselessly into the bowl of the sink as if it's blood into a gutter. He can't do this.

He *cannot.*

He can do this. John has been teaching him. John isn't perfect, John in fact is terribly mysterious just now, but John cares and John is not leaving anytime soon and John thinks Sherlock can do this. Sherlock breathes. In and out.

He looks at his own grey eyes in the mirror. They're granite-hard and distant as ancient star systems.

Moriarty is breathing into his ear like a lover.

"I was so sure you'd like my little present," the soft Irish lilt continues. "I was hoping you'd call, you know? After such a fabulous date. I mean, it really was a bloody amazing date, no matter what they think it was. Did you just love my client, Grant Roylott? Was he to die for? Such a big ugly brute, nothing like the two of us. When I picture you and your gorgeous brain in that locked room, observing, deducing, weaving all my little threads into the pattern I left you, in and out, god Sherlock, and that gang of clods watching you and I as we danced?"

Another long pause ensues. Sherlock's jaw tenses in disgust.

"It was like *public sex.* Whoops! Sorry, sweetheart," Moriarty adds, panting a little. "Had to make myself a bit more respectable, this new suit is tailored so well, and just thinking about your perfect, perfect face makes me indecent. Aaaah. There. But you don't have that problem, do you? Never mind, darling, I'm not offended. Well, not *yet.*"

The mirror gives Sherlock his drawn, pale features, the fiery hurt in his eyes, the blood slowly
leaching out of his skin. Sherlock looks like death already, and only from a voicemail.

How much more can he be expected to take?

"Listen, buttercup, reason I rang you," Moriarty sings, "it's just, I think you're getting a bit distracted. By that Jeff fellow. Jack? Was it Jack? John. That was it. Stupid name, but then it suits him, doesn't it? Your pet veteran. God, he's mad for you, isn't he? Like some kind of fucking golden retriever. Did I promise to torture him to death yet? I think I did--did I? Was that meant to be if you lose our game? Were those the rules? I just have no short term memory when it comes to poor dumb animals, my apologies. Anyhow, I so wanted you to be able to concentrate on the fun of that last challenge I gave you, and I kind of think he might have ruined it, and so, you know what, Sherlock, my heart's song?"

Sherlock waits.

"The rest of these cases are not going to be fucking fun!" Jim Moriarty screams.

It's too difficult to lean like this, so Sherlock drops his elbows to the sink edge. He watches his reflection's eyelashes trembling like moth's wings. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in.

"Concentration. On me, Sherlock. No one else. Concentration is key. Eye on the prize. Well, I think that's everything!" Moriarty calls happily. "Oh, and since you're not sleeping, boom and all that, I'll just send you the next pip in a mo'. Ta ta, dearest! Be with you soon. In the meanwhile, I'll try my best to remember whether I decided John Watson should be dead by the time we meet in person. My memory really isn't what it was before prison, thanks to you, my sweet. But I'm counting the hours!" the convict concludes, hanging up.

Dropping the phone on the sink counter, Sherlock covers his face with his hands. It's just one sob, just a tiny sound. No one will hear it. It'll all be fine. Secret. No one will know. John least of all. John. The water continues running. Sherlock shouldn't have picked at him like that. If John leaves--no, that would really be for the best, all things considered, if John were to leave.

One more horrible whimpering sound from the back of his throat. The taps will cover it. There.

Sherlock straightens, breathing hard. His eyes are glassy. He splashes water in his face.

Better.

He turns and opens the door.

John is on the other side of it. Waiting. Not angry. He should be very angry. He looks, instead, gutted.

"We have to get ahead of him," Sherlock says in a rush. "We're treading water and we won't win, we can't win this way. I have to solve something quicker than he expects and then wait before stopping the clock, give us time to explore other avenues, or, I don't know, be in two places at once, but if we keep on as we've been doing, it's never going to get any easier and we'll be boxed in impossibly and I won't be able to think our way out."

Reaching up, John brushes his fingertips across Sherlock's eyelashes. His half-smile wrenches downward. John's entire haggard heart is in his face. Perhaps Sherlock opened this door prematurely.

Perhaps he should never have come out at all.
"I'm sorry," Sherlock whispers. "You're not a coward."

"Fuck you," John repeats.

"Please, I can't stand--"

"Phone," John says, holding the same hand out.

"No, it won't help--"

"Now," John snaps. "I sent your brother and your friend off to scheme amongst themselves. They could see we have...matters to discuss."

"He's not my--"

"If Shinwell Johnson isn't your friend, I don't want to know what friends look like. That fact he's also your dealer will just have to, um, broaden my horizons. And you were right about me standing up to you. And when I know how to explain it, I'll try. All right? I am way more damaged than you give me credit for, chum. Just. Give me your fucking phone and--"

Sherlock dials his voicemail and then hands him the phone as he sinks slowly to his knees, placing his face squarely in John's belly. He should be able to handle this like a man, damn it, but breathing into John's jumper sounds like the best possible option at this point in time. John clutches Sherlock's head to his torso and sets the mobile to his ear with his other hand, leaning against the doorframe.

"Shhh. Hey, hey there, love. God, Sherlock, it's OK," he says. "I'll just--"

John stops. He listens to the voicemail.

He cards his fingers through Sherlock's hair.

He goes on listening.

John's belly, which was very soft a moment ago, is now tense as a boulder.

When it's over, John carefully puts the phone in the pocket of his jeans and tugs Sherlock's curls gently back with both hands. "Hey. Oi, you. Look at me."

Calmer now that John has heard the worst of it, Sherlock hesitantly looks up.

"I am supposed to be strong for you right now," John rasps. His eyes are slightly red. "If I cannot be strong for you right now, I'll never forgive myself. But I can't do that if you try to break me in pieces and put me back together. You're, uh, more than capable, trust me, but this is not the right time. This is a very, very bad time to play John Watson puzzle games."

"That isn't fair. You broke me in pieces and put me back together," Sherlock protests as John's thumb traces his eyebrow.

John opens his mouth. He shuts it again. He thinks this through. "I made love to you, that's not the same thing."

"Is that what that was?" Sherlock demands in a much higher-pitched voice than usual.

"Of course that's what that was. Wait, did you--"
"Do you have any idea what that did to me? Why do you keep backing down? You're more than capable of asking for what you want, just not where I'm concerned. Do you honestly think I don't deserve to know what in hell is wrong with you after you did that to me?"

Anger clouds John's face. "You know perfectly well what's wrong with me, you deranged prick. You're the one called me a coward. You know what, Sherlock? Fuck. You. I can't--"

Sherlock's phone buzzes in John's pocket. Tucking his hand into the denim, Sherlock pulls it out. John drops to his knees alongside the detective and both ruined men stare at the picture Moriarty just texted them.

The digital image is a mug shot of a woman. She is very beautiful, even Sherlock recognizes the fact. She has a strong, clear-cut, and yet sensitive face, and though there is spiritual sensitivity in her eyes, she seems vaguely powerful, as if her influence over others is a strong one, as if she is able to dominate in her chosen field. She is clearly tall, by the markings she stands against, her long brunette hair tied back, and her dark eyes have in them the searching, lost expression of a hunted creature.

She holds up a placard bearing a prisoner number and the name GRACE DUNBAR.

"That does not look like any fun at all," John says softly.

"It won't be," Sherlock agrees, switching the image off. "But duty calls."

"Wait," John says.

He leans in and kisses Sherlock. Their lips open, part like flowers Sherlock has seen bloom in speed-enhanced film. Sherlock knows what John means. So he gives back as good as he gets, his tongue tracing the impossibly soft edges he finds, and almost as soon as it's started, it's over, and when Sherlock wanted it never to end, just the pair of them half-collapsed in a hallway surrounded by ash and rubble, daring the world to interrupt.

He could live on that, he thinks. That's what John can never know. Not until this is over, one way or another. There's too much fragile hope in the fact, too much optimism. The thought it could all be fine tears Sherlock in half.

"I did want you to answer my question," John admits roughly as they break apart. "I wanted to keep you. I wanted you for good, wanted to know this wasn't just about the fucking twisted game it's turned into. I still do. But I'll wait. All right? I'll wait for you."

"You're an idiot," Sherlock says.

"You told me to ask you for what I want."

"And I'm not giving you anything that's about to be snatched away again."

"Sherlock," John says, horrified. "That isn't even--"

"No," Sherlock growls, sweeping to his feet. "There's only one way out of this, and that's through the worst of it. Now, help me to find Ms. Grace Dunbar."
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

I am SO sorry for the delay, but this chapter was a monster. Also, find me on Twitter these days @wordstrings, my lovelies.

Since it's still the wee hours, visiting an incarcerated woman takes longer to arrange than it should-even with the threat of new terrorist acts looming large, the as-yet mere possibility of a fresh hostage swelling just beneath the still-dark horizon. All is ominously quiet at Baker Street following the shrapnel and floating ashes. Sherlock can only assume that something is going wrong with Moriarty's night, or he'd have received another horrifying phone call by this time.

As John indicated, Mycroft and Shinwell disappeared following their bizarre tete a tete. When Sherlock phones his sibling with the urgent request that government strings be pulled on the Grace Dunbar front, Mycroft claims to be actively tracking a suspected James Moriarty departing the Baker Street area--a suspicious man caught on CCTV--which is going to solve all their problems rather more handily, he theorizes.

"That's ridiculous," Sherlock says, impatient to be started on the new case. "It isn't him. And if it is, you won't catch him."

"You mean it's not ridiculous but instead extremely productive unless it isn't him," Mycroft replies (smugly). "And I will catch him."

Then he rings off (smugly), so Sherlock shouts himself blue at Lestrade via phone instead. The sleepy detective inspector quickly vows to hasten arrangements for Sherlock to see the prisoner in question; but meanwhile, in the absence of a hostage, Lestrade suggests that they consult with Bradstreet, who apparently arrested Grace Dunbar the day before.

Growling, Sherlock appeals to his absolutely intolerable sibling for the second time, via text.

*I need to approach the clue he sent in the most direct manner. That is LITERALLY Grace Dunbar. It's nighttime, not the center of a bloody black hole. Get me in that prison, you disgracefully lazy sucrose addict. SH*

Sherlock presses the send button with the same force he'd use to initiate a nuclear war via bright red button. He begins doing up his dress shirt just as John returns to the bedroom from washing his face and taming his hair in an only marginally successful fashion. John, seeing the gap in the top of the shirt, traces a single finger down Sherlock's chest. Then he stops, retreating in a businesslike way. As if that event were normal, as if Sherlock's crackling skin weren't already freshly alive at his touch.

All too quickly, the sleuth receives a reply from his hopelessly obnoxious brother.

*Whether you solve these petty puzzles or not is of no relevance to his endgame. I have a chance here to net the biggest fish. MH*
"Petty?!" Sherlock exclaims aloud, wounded.

"What?" John says, sitting at the edge of the bed. He's fully dressed, already wearing his coat and shoes. The air in the flat has quickly grown uncomfortably cold as well as acrid. "That isn't Moriarty you're talking to."

Sherlock's slender fingers fly over keys.

_Fucking call the fucking prison warden and let me in or before I'm murdered I'll tell Mummy you kissed that socialite friend of hers Carlotta from the Spanish Embassy when you were 21. SH_

Baring his teeth, Sherlock taps his foot on the floor. Waiting.

"Sherlock," John says patiently.

"Hmm?"

"When you were in the loo before he left, he...Mycroft sounded on to something. His face almost wasn't totally unbearable for a second. You know? That is who you're snarling at like a pit bull, yeah?"

The mobile lights up.

_Before you're murdered? Charming. You'll have to tell me all about it when he's through with you. Meanwhile, I am rather busy hunting, so leave me in peace. MH_

For a moment, Sherlock can scarcely breath for the hurt firing across his heart, spreading in little sparks through his torso.

Fine. His brother hates him.

Fine.

Or it would simply make no difference to Mycroft if Sherlock were there or not.

Sherlock always suspected this to be the case, despite familial posturing and swift arrival after unexpected explosions. A certain sort of sneer removes all question of regard, and Mycroft has leveled it at him time and again.

Or worse still, Mycroft doesn't hate him and simply is ignoring Sherlock's opinion because sibling rivalry and privileged arrogance are more important than Sherlock's fucking life.

Fine.

"Can we just, maybe if you felt up to it, not have a repeat of you hiding in the toilet to deal with important updates while there's a psychopath after us, and instead you tell me why you look like someone just kicked you?" John requests, worried.

Sherlock flings his phone at John in lieu of an answer and leans a hip against the wardrobe to tie his shoes. The mobile bounces on the pleasingly mussed duvet. _He wanted me, someone wanted me here, that's evidence in every wrinkle and crease and trace of sweat that I was wanted here and will be missed, and any forensic specialist could read as much, that I'll be mourned if only for a little while._ The doctor lifts the device, squinting.

Sherlock fumes.
Doesn't he even want me to go out with a fight for the sake of the family name if nothing else? the detective thinks, swallowing a juvenile feeling of being smaller than Mycroft--seven years less educated and more often ignored and considerably more afraid of the dark--and of needing his brother's approbation the way he needed flawless grades and adventures with the Yard and successful chemistry experiments and occasional wild sprints through their imperfectly kempt grounds.

John finishes reading the text thread and looks up. His cheeks are too-hollow, his perceptive eyes hooded. "I, um."

"Yes?"

John sighs and slumps forward with his shoulders a little, favouring the leg he used to limp on.

"No," Sherlock exclaims, beyond appalled.

"Sorry?" John asks, rousing himself at once.

"He's getting to you." Sherlock points a stabbing finger. "Now Moriarty is getting to you, even you. Was it the last phone call, when he threatened you directly again? Can't you see what's going on?"

"Moriarty isn't frightening me, or at least not any more than is sane," John says calmly. His arm lifts, and his wrist gestures with the mobile in his hand. "Anyway, it's just a chemical reaction, right? Call Bradstreet if Mycroft is busy. It's a good start."

"But he's my own--"

"Yeah, he is your brother, and you're making his life kind of complicated right now. I'll explain it to you in the cab, but trust me, Mycroft is not going to do you this favour. Not any way you ask him for love or money will he let you in that prison tonight. Just call Bradstreet, and I'll make it clear on the way what you're missing."

Sherlock seethes with anger. "How dare you side with that simpering--"

"For fuck's sake," John growls under his breath, thumbing buttons on Sherlock's mobile. He creates a smile so the caller can hear it, as ever. "Hi, sorry to cause any alarm, it's nothing to do with this household, but is Jane Bradstreet in? Hi Inspector, yeah, it's John Watson. Sorry to wake you. No, he's fine, 'ta, but Sherlock's in a bit of a bind, same terror situation Lestrade's been working. Do you have anything else on, um, right now, as in this very instant?" he concludes, chuckling humourlessly.

The detective slumps against the wardrobe a bit further. It is only possible to watch this conversation, weary with hurt, while Sherlock tries not to recall all the many ways he used to worship his brother. At the edge of the vast garden of meticulously recorded corpses outside his mind palace, there is a single oak tree he used to climb during summers in the countryside. Every good memory he's ever had with Mycroft is written on the underside of a separate leaf.

Where his brother can never find them.

"Yeah, cheers, Jane, I'll pass you over to Sherlock and you can make the plans," John announces.

Jane?

Sherlock accepts the phone but scowls daggers at John, who appears now to have taken over the
investigation. "Tell me one good reason why--"

"I'm meant to stand up to you, Sherlock, so fucking answer the phone when I'm right about something and stop being such a sodding arrogant prick," John snaps, zipping his coat up emphatically.

Neither speak for a moment, and then John turns.

Sherlock finds himself holding a live mobile, watching his friend's back as John limps...ever, ever so slightly...out of the bedroom.

*Limps?*

Sherlock scrubs his knuckles into his eyes.

"Hello?" he says coldly into the mouthpiece.

Bradstreet, when apprised of developments, requests five minutes to put her knickers on and pledges to assist in any way she can afterward despite the fact it's gone two in the morning. She gives Sherlock an address and rings off with that clipped precision which makes working with her slightly less unbearable than working with the majority of the Met. Sherlock and John are seated in a taxi, en route to the private estate of one Mr. Neil Gibson (mining magnate and legendarily wealthy American capitalist tycoon, employer of the accused Grace Dunbar and the widower of the murdered woman), when Sherlock's mobile finally rings shrilly.

John looks at him. The cab's windows are untinted. Red and blue and yellow lights from the traffic play over the doctor's face like a carnival show's effects turned sickly and malicious. His slim brows draw together as he frowns.

Reaching into his pocket, Sherlock answers.

"This one...is a bit...defective," says the soft, frail voice of a very old woman. "Sorry...she's blind."

The passing headlights cut across Sherlock's vision in increasingly vicious swaths. Sherlock's own perfectly functional (for the time being) eyes fall shut as he fights the familiar roll of his stomach.

Jim Moriarty is exceedingly likely to be in the same room with this unfortunate grandmother, since her sight is impaired and she cannot read his communiques.

And Sherlock knows that, were he even to attempt to trace this call and initiate a raid via Scotland Yard, she would fail to survive it.

The wretched unfairness of the situation runs along his skin in uncomfortable prickles, the fact that Jim Moriarty is practically dangling his whereabouts in Sherlock's face and *nothing can be done about it*. Meanwhile, he can only hope that Mycroft is right, and in pursuit, and soon to have triumphed after all. If Mycroft is not right...

Well, then Mycroft never cared in the first place and Sherlock's sole ally throughout his school years was a severe waste of time.
"This is a funny one," the old woman continues, sounding on the verge of absolute shattering panic. "I'll give you...twelve hours."

"Why are you doing this?" Sherlock demands, forgetting himself in his annoyance. "Why go to such elaborate trouble? I'm undoing your own work, after all. Your clients paid you for a service, and you're unraveling your tapestry with every new puzzle. You could get to me at any time, don't think I'm not aware of the fact. You could snatch me off the streets, whisk me away somewhere, and you'd have what you're really after--why all this bother?"

"Because...the age of romance...is not dead," the old woman whimpers, crying "Oh!" in terror as the signal is disconnected.

Sherlock drops the phone back into his coat pocket, the familiar hazy feeling of inevitability washing over him. The speed of the cab itself is a vague comfort and for a while he fantasizes about perpetual motion, simply never stopping the car. With enough gasoline and motorway, they could fend off Moriarty's final revenge indefinitely. Only he and John in a motile fishbowl forever and ever. That would be beautiful. Beyond the glass, the lurid lights flicker as central London falls away behind them and the suburbs spread outward like a widening pool of blood. The nocturnal circus atmosphere is nauseating, but somehow appropriate and therefore acceptable.

"He could get to you at any time, eh?"

Glancing at John, Sherlock discovers that the doctor is staring out of his own window, his left hand clenched tightly into a fist as the scraps of headlights blur past.

"You really believe that," John continues in a monotone. "See, this is why your brother has a problem and why he's not letting you into the prison. On purpose. I'm really starting to relate to your pompous arse of a sibling."

"That's disgusting," Sherlock says, horrified.

"Before I'm murdered--that's what he's in a strop over, you texting him that phrase and then jumping through hoops like some fatalistic trick pony. You honestly think that you're going to be tortured to death in some sort of cage, that it's unavoidable."

Under more normal circumstances (and Sherlock wishes he could remember ever having experienced any "normal circumstances" at all, as it would have been interesting to record them), the detective would quickly deny this assertion.

Sherlock is so tired.

All he can do is stare.

John ducks a nod, shifting his legs on the seat.

"We might as well just give up, in that case," he suggests evenly. "Surrender."

"Oh, is that what my brother thinks?" Sherlock inquires coolly.

"No, Mycroft doesn't want to bother over getting you into a prison when solving the mystery plays right into Moriarty's hand. Told you I'd explain it." John stops to laugh in a gallows fashion. "Oh, but you, god, you. You're going through the motions because the crimes are interesting and you're chuffed over that, not to mention the fact that the survival instinct isn't a switch that's easily turned off--trust me, I've tested it--but you really don't expect that we'll succeed past solving the puzzles. You figure you're a dead man walking."
The detective shrugs one shoulder. He is too sad at this point to protest, and anyway surely John has guessed as much by now?

"I think I have the right to a certain level of pessimism under the circumstances," Sherlock admits.

"See, I was thinking we had a pretty good night just now before the explosion," John suggests neutrally.

"And how many more of those do you expect?" Sherlock looks down and reproduces from memory the tracks of John's lips on his skin and sees that despite the passion, so much surface area was missed after all. "I can't help but make extrapolations regarding future probabilities based on real data rather than wishful thinking. Jim Moriarty has proven himself more than capable of eluding some of the best minds in the nation, including mine. Meanwhile, you know as well as I do that if you're willing to die for a cause, that cause has a much higher likelihood of success despite suffering from unpredictable risk factors. I think Moriarty would rather die than end this prematurely, therefore it is statistically likely that he will succeed in abducting me if the current trajectory of events continues, and I see no point in senselessly ignoring the fact."

"And then what?"

Sherlock suppresses a bone-deep shudder. "Good night Vienna sooner rather than later, I hope."

"Might as well just kill yourself, in that case, and save the bother."

Sherlock blinks. Their cab driver pulls off the wider road and turns into a beautifully manicured neighbourhood, their headlights sweeping along a tree-lined avenue dotted with elaborately wrought gates. A capitalist idyll, Sherlock recognizes--old money and starched linen and colonial fortunes based on misery and glee. He grew up in similar circles but smaller houses.

"Excuse me?" the sleuth says, his mouth catching up to his brain.

John shifts to face him fully. Sherlock cannot observe him as closely as he'd like, but he can see John's jaw twitching in pained frustration.

"Kill yourself," he repeats. "That would sort it. He can't get to you afterward, can he? Not even Jim Moriarty can trump death." He returns his attention to the funhouse shadows flickering in the glass.

Swallowing, Sherlock ignores the ferocious stab of betrayal this advice produces. "I could manage to beat him, perhaps."

"Could you really, though? He's pretty much invincible. The way I figure it."

"The odds are extremely poor, but they aren't nil."

"Oh, just kill yourself. It's so much easier."

"I'll take the suggestion under advisement," Sherlock snaps.

A humourless laugh tears its way past John's throat. "You wouldn't be the first. I thought about killing myself, you know. I told you my relationship with my gun used to be a bit more, um, intimate shall we say? Nothing ever happened to me. Nothing but nightmares and strings of disconnected, meaningless moments. Nothing was ever going to happen to me again, either. Ever. There wasn't any joy, and the pain wasn't even enough sensation to stick around for anymore. I was just...done. Know what comes next, Sherlock, the way this story accidentally went?"
Something fucking happened to me. Wasn't exactly a trivial event, either. Know what it was?"

"You made the acquaintance of the world's only child prodigy consulting detective during the last several weeks of his life?" Sherlock says dully, wanting to hurt someone.

"I fell in love."

It's meant to startle him. Sherlock knows this even as he registers the words, knows that they were for him and not for John, never an egotist's desire to be preened in like kind. The words blast through the fog enshrouding the wings of Sherlock's mind palace and come to rest in a crater on its lawn, a detonation of self-sacrifice and desire.

Swiveling his head, Sherlock stares raptly. John still isn't looking at him, is watching the dark hulks of mansions roll steadily past the cab. His hair is a silvery grey in the scant, sporadic light. His left fist remains up before his mouth, lightly pressing, and...

Did he truly just say...but can he possibly have meant...but it wasn't Sarah, he didn't love her, even I could see as much, so does he truly mean to tell me that...

"Might as well mention it, since you're about to die and all," John continues in the same matter-of-fact tone. "I'll miss you, you know. You were like some sort of, I can't even describe it. Beautiful battlefield. It was a lark. I hope you aren't tortured more than is decent, same as your brother does. He meant to say that, by the way, and not that he wanted you to tell him all about being murdered afterward, that was admittedly a bit rude. We're both employing sarcasm to, well, to indicate that you're acting as if your horrible death is inevitable and that is unhelpful behavior, if you haven't caught on by now. I'd hate to get the wrong point across at this late date. Would you do just one favour, though? For me? One little miracle?"

Stunned into silence, his heart racing, Sherlock manages after arduous effort to nod his head once. John shifts half a foot along the seat toward the middle of the cab and turns his upper body, leaning a little.

"I want you to look me in the eye, in the goddamn eye, Sherlock, and tell me you have no faith in me whatsoever. You're think these are cases, and I defer to you in that area. But you're mistaken," John says in a deadly tone. "This is a war, and in a war, you fucking defer to me, all right? You know how you win a war, Sherlock? I'll tell you. Every time you fire your gun, you do it for the man next to you, hoping he lives. And every time he fires his gun, it's for you. I want you to look me in the fucking eye and tell me you don't believe I'd do that for you."

"No, I, I--" Sherlock stammers.

"Because I believe in you. All right? I believe in Sherlock Holmes, and..." John voice falters a little when he winces. "I know the whole Pashto language thing tonight was a shit show, and I know you've caught on to the fact I'm a coward, but I'm not that kind of coward, OK? Just because my brain has about as many PTSD holes in it as a block of Swiss cheese doesn't mean I'm incapable. And just because I'm, hell, in such buggering awe of you I can hardly see straight, that... It doesn't... Christ."

It's on the tip of Sherlock's tongue to ask John if he's all right, but when it comes down to the actual movement required, his lips remain frozen.

John shakes his head, smiling sadly at nothing. "You deserved an explanation earlier, but. Yeah. It took me a minute to put it all into words. I can't stand up to you because ever since I tried to kill Helen, she didn't deserve that, so I haven't deserved to be happy, and something about that misery
was just...it was right, like a penance. And even before the Friesland, just being near you, I was so happy it was obscene, and asking for more of you, anytime that even occurs to me, it's guaranteed to ruin everything. Asking for more of you is a hell of a gamble, you know? You're very...risksy."

I tried to warn you of that. Repeatedly, Sherlock thinks, clenching his fingers against his thigh.

"No, no, I get that you were honest with me, that's not my point. Jesus," John protests when he glances to the side. "God, that was not the point, the sex thing or the drugs thing or the mortal enemy thing, but. There are mines in this field, mate. All of them are worth it. Meanwhile, I'm happy just seeing you walk into a damn room, so I didn't want to get gluttonous."

Managing to force his mouth open, Sherlock whispers, "I'm happy seeing you walk into a room, too."

"Yeah," John sighs. "I suspected that when you almost killed a Russian smuggler for me as a present. So...I'm sorry. I knew it was a stupid move, but I asked you for some, whatever, commitment earlier tonight. I shouldn't have, but I can hope we'll last beyond this insane situation. And you might not think I deserve to keep you, I don't either, but if you think I'm the other kind of coward, the physical kind who'd run when you needed him most, you're about to learn your lesson in the next few days, OK? Right, but...I asked. It was too soon for any relationship for me to propose that, let alone ours. Then your brother objected to your rampant morbidity caused by obscene intimidation over a very long period of years. So you might feel a bit unloved right now, but...no. You're not. You're not unloved, Sherlock. That's what happened. A recap."

Sherlock, who never wears a lap belt in cabs, slides fully into the middle seat and hovers over John, his bloodstream singing like the treble notes he coaxes from his violin.

"You're not a coward," he exhales, ghosting his fingertips along the side of John's face. "You're the most magnificent thing I've ever seen."

John smiles a wolf's humourless smile. "Clearly you've never actually been anywhere," he posits, but his eyes are shining.

Shaking his head, Sherlock struggles for words. "I want to spend the rest of my life on knowing you, get inside you somehow, and I...I want you to believe in something better than Sherlock Holmes."

"I can't think of anything," John whispers.

"Once upon a time, I'd have agreed with you," Sherlock admits. "I am rather extraordinary. But...you're going to suffer for this. For me. You already are, for god's sake."

"Oh, cheers," John says, grinning suddenly despite the palatable tension. The car slows. "I'm a professional at suffering. We're properly sorted, then. Is there a reason you aren't snogging me just now?"

"Not a good one," Sherlock answers, aching with desire.

"Are you angry I wanted to keep you?" he presses, voice fraught.

Sherlock bows his head to John's temple. "No," he says. "I'm angry I don't know how any of this is done."

And then all is John's warm lips caressing, and his disbelieving small laugh that Sherlock catches in his mouth, and for several long moments--until the cab stops, to be precise--death is a trivial
matter compared to the feeling which John just was brave and reckless and unselfish enough to refer to as love.

Sherlock could have pegged Mr. Neil Gibson as a successful man of affairs from his manicure, let alone the giant stone house with the acres of grounds surrounding it called Thor Place. He stands in his study wearing a black bespoke suit despite the fact it is now nearly three in the morning, a tall, gaunt, craggy figure with remorselessly cold grey eyes.

As a matter of taste, Sherlock dislikes Neil Gibson instantly. But his wife Maria Pinto-Gibson has been murdered, shot in the head to be specific. The rich man's au pair, Grace Dunbar, has been arrested for the crime, so Sherlock grudgingly agrees with Lestrade that the instinct to begin with Neil Gibson and the arresting officer is a sound one. Bradstreet is standing with her arms crossed over a hastily donned cashmere jumper paired with a businesslike skirt, her cropped blonde hair gelled into chaos as a matter of expediency, staring down the belligerent mining magnate.

"Grace had nothing to do with my wife's death, I can swear to that," Gibson spits in a heavily American accent, falling into a masculine leather armchair and gesturing angrily at the sofa by way of hospitality. Bradstreet sits, as does John, while Sherlock paces. "Maria might have been a real bitch to her, I'll admit that much, but why should Maria's bullshit threaten Grace in any way whatsoever? She must be used to washed-up beauties hating her guts. It's useless to lie about it, you're probably snooping into her emails, checking her Facebook status updates, whatever you call police work these days. Maria loathed Grace. But Grace? If she gave a shit, I never noticed."

*Abraham Lincoln*, Sherlock realizes. If Abraham Lincoln had been a nasty old man rather than a great leader, he would be Neil Gibson, right down to his slab of a granite jaw.

"I see the period of mourning for your wife has passed," Sherlock observes sarcastically, studying the room's artwork as he prowls. Several Flemish school artists unknown to him by name, two Picasso sketches, a genuine Gauguin. Mr. Gibson is very, very wealthy indeed.

Neil Gibson shrugs. "I loved her when we got married. It was a very romantic, whirlwind wedding. I loved her as a mother and as a person if not as a spouse before she died, and I want to catch the real culprit. But she was a gold-digging piece of work. The only reason we were still married was the prenup. A man in my position can't feel beholden to parasites after he's caught wise."

"Were you sleeping with Ms. Dunbar, then?" Sherlock inquires coolly.

Gibson smirks. "That is none of your business, but for the record, I know better than to bang a good nanny. Not with that woman watching my every move, that is, and an infidelity clause written into the legal work. I kept our bargain as far as chasing tail was concerned."
Bradstreet smiles as well, all teeth and anger. "You know, you're not exactly crossed off my list yet, Mr. Gibson, even if your alibi clears you of any wrongdoing as far as your spouse is concerned. Meanwhile, did you hurt your wife, ever? Physically I mean?"

The tycoon laughs. "Her? I'd as soon touch a diseased monkey as lay a finger on Maria after our marriage went south. I told her as much. I'm the honest type, and she wasn't. Isn't it better to face facts in the long run? Would have been a lot easier for everyone, including the kids, if she'd taken the settlement I offered and gotten the fuck out of Dodge. I think she imagined I wanted her gone to make room for someone more like Grace, and you know something, towards the end I didn't bother denying it any longer. Maria would have been happier without me and she refused to see it. We hated each other, or at least I hated that she was still clinging to me like a crumb of shit. There's no point in lying about that--any of our servants would report the same, so I might as well fess up."

Stopping before a family portrait, Sherlock narrows his eyes. The two children, a boy and a girl, are biracial, charming, with gaps in their front teeth and unfortunate holiday attire. Neil Gibson is steely-eyed, as if he ingests small countries and excretes money. Maria Pinto-Gibson, on the other hand...Maria Pinto-Gibson, at the time this sitting was scheduled and shot, loved her husband. He can see it in the almost pleading curve of her hand on his hard shoulder.

"Detective," John says quietly, as if Gibson weren't present, "you're too good at your profession not to have arrested this knob if the evidence pointed to him. What pointed to Ms. Dunbar?"

"And who the fuck are you meant to be?" Gibson snarls at John.

"He's a medical consultant," Bradstreet trills, jotting down notes in a Moleskine. "Yeah, glad you asked, Dr. Watson, it doesn't actually look very sunny just now for Ms. Dunbar. She texted Mrs. Gibson's mobile that she'd be at Thor Bridge at nine o'clock. There's a little river at the back of the property, runs through everyone's estates in these parts and probably sends the value through the bloody roof for homeowners. Picturesque, all that rot."

John nods as Gibson's eyes flicker with disdain. "Any notion what the meeting was about?"

"None. Anyway, Mrs. Gibson's body was discovered there shortly after the planned appointment, and a recently discharged handgun of the right caliber was found by yours truly in Ms. Dunbar's closet. We don't have the bullet, mind, but we do have the bullet wound. All indications--"

"That's ludicrous," Sherlock says, rounding the force of his temper on Bradstreet as he turns in mid-stride. "Grace Dunbar is supposed to have shot a woman in the head and then gone home and put her weapon of choice in her sock index, the gun still smoking?"

"Index?" Bradstreet says, her attractive features twisting in puzzlement.

"Socks," John mutters, rubbing his eyebrows. "I've known this bloke for all of a month, mind, but don't get me started on him and socks."

"My socks are catalogued according to colour and weight and are also irrelevant," Sherlock sniffs, pretending to be more annoyed by this than he is. "What sane woman has never watched enough telly to learn you don't put your pistol in your pants drawer? The gun was planted."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Neil Gibson grunts as he taps on his mobile. "Thank you."

Bradstreet throws up her manicured hands. "It wasn't my favourite arrest this month, not by far--even if Ms. Dunbar was fed up with this household's wankery to the point of murder, she doesn't
strike me as either the pistol to the head type, nor the type to drop a hot weapon in with her Uggs--
but I'd have been irresponsible not to arrest her. Hell, I'd have been begging to be sacked."

Sherlock continues to pace, impatient beyond his capacity to hide. He has been here all of five
minutes and he's aware Ms. Grace Dunbar is innocent. He likely knew it from the photo on his
mobile, in fact, since if Moriarty is involved, this story must be askew somehow. Now he comes to
think of it directly, her being innocent is why he insisted Mycroft help him speak with her
immediately. But the discarded handgun--in the closet, of all places--clinches his hypothesis.

It only remains to discover what actually happened.

And Sherlock is terribly distracted just now.

He is distracted by John's frequent hostile glances and his ruffled hair where Sherlock clutched it in
the cab for a silken, too-brief moment. He is distracted by the faint flush remaining on John's lips.
He is distracted by John's impatient tapping foot and the fact he'd clearly like nothing better than to
slap Neil Gibson across the cheek.

Sherlock is distracted by the apparent fact that John loves him. Before it was merely suspected and
thus could be ignored accordingly, as unproven data is often dismissed. Now it is real, and it is
tangible. John is a different size now in Sherlock's perception, as compared to when he had only
hinted at loving Sherlock. Now John's feelings have grown denser by several pounds, and his
posture is accordingly more grounded.

Gravity has shifted in proportion to the perceived weight of John's heart.

John casts his dark blue eyes at Sherlock, an unspoken question: what's next?

"Take me to the location where the body was found," Sherlock orders Bradstreet.

"I don't get why you're even here at this hour," Gibson grumbles, "though I'm not sorry this idiotic
excuse for a cop is being shown how actual investigating works. My only experience of detective
work is CSI Miami, and I could solve this faster than she is. I wouldn't be sorry to see Grace
exonerated either, I know she didn't do it, she's a good girl and hot as all fuck, but meanwhile you
have me up in the middle of the freaking night. Business is a hard game and the weak get
composted. I can make or break people, and it's usually break--more fun that way. I don't have
time for this crap."

"Do your children have time to find out who killed their mother?" Bradstreet asks icily, and for
only a moment, Sherlock can see the part of her which isn't intelligence and posh shoes and glib
sexuality, the reason she chose police work in the first place. He decides it might be acceptable for
John to call her Jane after all. "I might be curious, if it were my mum. And I was, you know,
bored."

"He has a properly ironclad alibi, doesn't he?" John postulates, marveling. His short legs part on
the sofa, and instantly Sherlock tries to identify why his mouth feels hungry--whether he wants to
taste John's inner thigh or the hard curve of his knee. "I think I'd be knocking seven shades of shit
out of this maggot otherwise, pardon me for saying so."

"Yep," Bradstreet sighs, scratching at her already decidedly punk hair as she flips back through her
notes. "In fact, he was giving a live interview on Al Jazeera about heavy metals used in
electronics and how the market's changing during the entire range of time of death. Not that he
deserves to live just because he didn't shoot his wife in the head, mind."
"No," John agrees dryly. "Could he have hired someone to do it and planted the gun in the closet?"

"Oh, I'm checking so very very thoroughly into every nook and cranny on that point, you'd think I was fisting the poor bloke," Bradstreet purrs, and again Sherlock feels an insane urge to applaud her choices.

"I don't know what you fucking amateurs want from me," Gibson growls, stalking to a cabinet and pouring himself a whiskey. "Women do all sorts of crazy shit men can't figure out, and if you want to blame me for it, well, that just makes you exponentially less relevant as far as my attention is concerned."

And that, Sherlock thinks, is quite enough of that. I have a doctor to hold on to before the night is over.

"You might find your wife's death trivial, but it's quite important to me at the moment. As a matter of fact, it affects my life expectancy." Sherlock whips on Neil Gibson with all the flair which entering a room with a good coat and a short friend and never seating oneself can provide. "You're going to take me to the crime scene, now. You're going to disclose to me every word you ever exchanged on the subject of Ms. Dunbar with your wife, and vice versa, now. You're going to give me a short list of your worst enemies so that I can determine if they are relevant, though this smells like a domestic dispute, now. And you'll apologize to Jane Bradstreet here for being impossibly obnoxious, and I mean now, or I'll go direct to the British government with all the ways you illegally profited from the American financial collapse five years ago."

Gibson, despite his tan, pales. His drink he deposits on the desk, in concert with his fallen expression.

"You wouldn't," he marvels.

"Trust me," Sherlock sniffs when Bradstreet chuckles and John nods silently in approval. "I would in a heartbeat."

Sherlock solves the crime within twenty seconds of being shown the scene.

They carry strong lights, leaving the tycoon indoors, searching the grounds and the area surrounding the picturesque little Japanese-style bridge in the suburbs, staring at the bushes and the weeping trees. The air is cold but not bitter, an expectant feeling. They all peer at the gravel and the bark and the paving stones. They look with interest at the grass and the fallen leaves. But only Sherlock sees a tiny fresh chip in the wooden guard of the bridge's rail, and then realizes a handgun was tied to a cord attached to a weight and thus flung into the stream when Maria Pinto-Gibson killed herself, framing her rival. The scene plays out in brilliant whites and flares of colour in Sherlock's vast imagination.

She wanted a complete revenge and dropped a recently fired weapon into Ms. Dunbar's closet after making an appointment with her, like so, Sherlock sees blazing across his eyes.

She had tied the gun to a stone and lifted the weapon to her head, like so. She fired, like so.

She died, and in dying hid the true murder weapon, like so.
Going to the rail, Sherlock peers into the deep stream. It's completely dark, so he sees nothing, but he can sense the presence of the pistol beneath the water and feels a surge of hatred for Jim Moriarty when he imagines what Maria Pinto-Gibson's appeal to him must have been like.

*Dear Jim, if I can't have my husband, please fix it so I can ruin my bitterest foe.*

And Jim's answer was simplicity itself: die.

Sighing, Sherlock runs his hands over the wood, smelling pine and rushing water and thick loam under the distant stars. The dramatic part of him wants to borrow John's gun and replicate the experiment. John would enjoy that. He'd laugh, shake his head, call Sherlock a mad prick.

The part of him that doesn't want to die remains silent. They need the gun.

More than that.

They need time. They need so many more years together, and John is right. Sherlock talks as if precautions are valueless. He talks as if he's already dead. It disturbs his partner.

*Partner,* Sherlock thinks with a pleased swell of chest.

The easy gush of the cold water beneath his polished black shoes reminds Sherlock of another stream, back when they were children, of the minnows that used to flash in its shallows on days when Mycroft taught him to skip stones, and John is right about another thing: Sherlock has apparently forgotten during years of psychological torment that Mycroft, beneath the arrogance and the smear of pastry cream, is exceedingly adept at nearly everything. A text, Sherlock decides with a feeling like pressure being released from his chest, is in order.

*Contact made with hostage--she is with Moriarty. And I've solved it. Best of luck to you. SH*

After a few more moments of watching reflected constellations be distorted in the stream, Sherlock reads:

*You've been talking to your doctor friend, I take it. Lay low, brother mine, and delay your revelation for as long as you can. MH*

The sound of Bradstreet and John's shoes crossing the bridge echoes as they approach Sherlock, and he turns away from the rail which solved everything so neatly.

"Anything?" John says, huffing a little.

Sherlock nods at a slight angle.

"Cor, we might sort this in time yet," Bradstreet says, clapping her hands together.

"I solved it," Sherlock corrects.

"What, from the bloody angle of the moon?" John exclaims, doing nothing to hide his admiration as he spreads his arms wide.

Sherlock begins striding away toward the front of the estate, flipping his coat collar up, as he explains. Despite the grim nature of the information imparted, he enjoys himself immensely. By the time they've come around front, he has reached his conclusion and there is a tight, disturbed look to the faces of his audience. Sherlock cannot help but agree with them.

Locked rooms are very fun indeed. Suicides disguised to look like murders, while disgustedly
"Wait a few hours for daylight and then drag the stream," Sherlock says to Bradstreet as they part ways before the estate, Gibson staring balefully at them from the parlour window. "There are men, very good ones indeed, trying to rescue the present hostage. My stopping the clock at the moment does nothing save hurt us. If my brother can manage to capture Moriarty, there won't be any more hostages at all—and if he doesn't, then I post the solution and she still lives because the case is closed."

"I suppose I'll text you if we don't find a gun back there," Bradstreet says dryly, shaking his hand. "Oh, I'm afraid you'll definitely find the gun," Sherlock sighs. "I am not a genius for nothing."

"You're also not a complete git for nothing. How many hours do you have?" Bradstreet asks, already on the phone with Lestrade. She huddles a bit in her posh jumper now, her arms crossed. Sherlock is glad she was there and meanwhile wants to leave more than anything he has ever wanted on earth.

"Ten," Sherlock reports.

"And in the meanwhile?"

Stepping away as the group watches him for guidance, Sherlock hesitates once more in the quartz drive before the estate. She died because she loved him, Sherlock thinks, looking up at the all but vacant house. Maria Pinto-Gibson left her children and she died for no other reason than that she loved someone who failed her.

He said he was in love with you, or almost did, Sherlock thinks next, and is overcome by pure selfishness. He turns away from the mansion. From Bradstreet, from the arrest she didn't want to make and the lives which should have been lived better.

"We're to lay low," Sherlock announces as he walks. "Good night, Bradstreet. Thank you for coming. Don't fall in the stream later."

"Fuck you, you prat," Bradstreet calls back in a friendly way, heading for her police car.

"Where are we off to?" John demands, trotting to keep pace with Sherlock when they reach the darkened road. Their cab awaits still, polished and purring softly about ten yards distant. "That was...you're not really going to be reasonable and take Mycroft's...hang it, do we need to run tests or something?"

"I am being reasonable. There are no tests, only time. Thank you for the recap," Sherlock answers softly, getting into the car.

"Then..." John shakes his head as he shuts the door. "Christ, the flat is going to be cold. And bloody fucking unsafe."

"Oh, assuredly. Pall Mall, driver," he calls out, and the car pulls away.

"What's in Pall Mall?" John asks, tucking his hands between his thighs.

"The Diogenes Club," Sherlock replies, allowing himself to smirk for a moment.

What have I been so terrified of, supposing John is right? Sherlock wonders.
Sherlock checks his watch, knowing they can't sleep at Baker Street any longer and it would be sweet, sweet vengeance against Mycroft for every slight, both real and imagined, if the pair of them took a suite in the club members' area of the Diogenes and loved each other on every surface until the sun warmed their blue skin to ivory, loved each other in the presence of ghastly but expensive fake flower arrangements and desks which helped record only warlike, alarmingly sweeping decrees from their patrons.

"You were limping again," Sherlock confesses on a strong exhale. "You were limping and I couldn't bear it. It was my fault, my resignation to disaster that caused it, never Moriarty's doing. I accused you unfairly of him getting to you, and I'm sorry."

"Oh," John says, surprised. "Could...could we record that on my phone or something, just for posterity?"

"I'd another penance in mind."

"Well, bloody bring it on."

"What do you say," Sherlock says, flashing the full flare of his grin at John in the darkness of the cab, "to my taking you back to my awful, awful brother's warm, posh, expensive club for the night and our...making the most of it?"

John's small glimmer of tongue wouldn't be visible save for the fact it's wet, but Sherlock can see it. Sherlock sees many things which other people fail to observe.

"You mean you want to...tell me something again?" John questions, flexing his fingers outward from his legs in a stretch. He laughs. "I shouldn't be allowing this. God, um. Or I should be applauding you. I'm the one told you not to jump through hoops and here you are not jumping. This will...do no harm, for lack of a better phrase?"

Sherlock nods and reaches a hand across the aisle, wanting only the press of John's shorter fingers under his own.

John slides closer and twines their arms together, resting his head on Sherlock's coat just as it meets Sherlock's questing nose.

"Tell me anything you damn well please," John declares. "I'm in love. We're resilient creatures, after all."
Chapter 20

"What even is this place," John says on a half-yawn, wondering.

They stand in the foyer of a suite in a very old gentleman's club in Pall Mall, having been shown up by a tight-lipped elderly fellow who seemed far more deserving of the title manservant than porter. The walls are papered in subtle golden tones, the windows closely curtained, the furnishings polished to a high chestnut shine, an immaculate arrangement of paper and twigs and crepe resting next to the oh so sleek and modern telephone and the ergonomic desk chair fit for presiding over affairs of state. It's all terribly tasteful and terribly expensive in a way which comforts Sherlock even as it piques him. Sherlock shrugs out of his coat, hanging it in the closet behind a sliding glass mirror, and reaches for John's jacket as well.

"My ancestors were founding members of the Diogenes Club," Sherlock explains. "We Holmeses have never been very clubbable, but that doesn't mean we're against comfortable chairs and the latest periodicals. Mycroft is on the board of this place--its single redeeming feature is that when I encounter him here, we're not allowed to speak to each other unless in the Strangers' Room. Total silence is the cardinal rule. Any club that prevents Mycroft from talking is a club I can find it in my heart to endorse."

John chuckles, advancing into the room. He settles into a leather armchair with a soft sigh and yanks on his laces, toeing off his shoes. He's perfectly lit here, as if he gives off his own particular glow, which Sherlock has begun to suspect he does in fact. It cannot be merely a trick of his colouring--when Sherlock sets eyes on him, the entire room brightens. "Membership must cost a fortune. Are you a member, then?"

"I have...certain privileges," Sherlock concedes.

As you needed rather badly on that occasion when you were twenty-two, and more of an idiot than you usually are, wearing black tie on New Year's Eve and hideously high, more than slightly battered from the thugs who accosted you in Shoreditch where you were scoring some truly superb cocaine and grew careless from sampling the stuff, and Mycroft was here and when he clapped eyes on you didn't say anything, not a word, just a bland nod to the concierge and before you knew any better you were waking up in fresh sheets with your hair still slightly damp from the shower and only the grimmest of suspicions as to who'd bandaged the laceration on your scalp from where your head hit the pavement when they took you down.

Checking his phone, Sherlock winces at himself. Nine and a half hours. Mycroft has nine and a half hours, and of course Mycroft cares, there is sibling pique and then there is willful ignorance. One must never, Sherlock reminds himself, insensibly twist facts to suit theories rather than the converse. If Sherlock is going to be stupid, let it be about a subject less irritating than his brother.

"This is a nice room, very nice indeed, but. We don't have any...well, anything," John realizes, rubbing at his eyes. "Toothpaste, shampoo. Pants."

"Please," Sherlock drawls, tucking his dress shoes with the socks neatly inserted into the closet. "They have everything here. If you can think of anything they don't have, frankincense or myrrh for the bath for example, just ring for it and they'll send someone out. We'll be fine, at least until tomorrow. I for one don't plan on wearing anything to bed."

Glancing up at Sherlock in a sort of fond, weary surprise, John's mouth parts as the detective lowers himself gracefully between the doctor's knees. He lands in soft cotton, folded up like a
fawn. It's lovely here, the quiet and the warmth of it, the way when he tucks his face into John's lap and his arms behind John's waist, his friend buries small hands in his hair and easily tangles his fingers in the curls. Sherlock emits a pleased humming sound, nuzzling.

"You're like a bloody great cat," John observes. Sherlock can hear his smile. "We don't have to do...anything, you know. We can sleep. You ought to sleep. I caught a few winks, but. Well. Some sixth sense makes me suspect you didn't."

John is right. Sherlock spent the few hours they passed in bed observing John. He wonders how the man could know, then elects not to ask, preferring the little mystery intact.

"Sleep is for the weak." Sherlock pushes his hands up, under the jumper, tracing nails over the firm skin of John's back. The skin comes alive in tiny hills as he scratches, and Sherlock counts their peaks beneath the sensitive pads of his fingers.

"Look, you don't have to turn into Mr. Libido just because you're about the sexiest thing I've ever seen." John's voice remains amused. "We had a brilliant fucking shag not six hours back."

"That didn't count."

"Oh my god," John laughs. Sherlock's fingers continue to trace patterns and John arches his spine a little, appreciative without being demanding, and Sherlock's heart aches with that, with all the questions John doesn't ask and all the ways Sherlock has caged himself off and all the times John has allowed it, resigned--not resigned, deserving of rejection, or so he believes. "What in hell are you waffling about now? You said I broke you in pieces. That..." John clears his throat. "I don't know what to make of that, and I'm sorry if I need to be, but it sure as hell is warm counted for something."

Sherlock can think of no reason it wouldn't be pleasurable to undo John's trouser button and zip with his teeth, and so makes the attempt, his nose brushing hard against the smooth flesh of John's lower abdomen. It's easier than he imagined, perhaps because he's attempted successfully to get himself out of handcuffs using his lips and a key multiple times. Sucking in a breath, John rocks once and then stills, his grip on Sherlock's hair tightening. "It didn't count because I didn't know."

"What didn't you know?" John says tightly, pulling his fingers over the shell of Sherlock's ear.

"You were in love, I didn't know that you were in love, I--" Sherlock catches himself losing his breath and clenches his jaw briefly. It cannot be allowed to mean so much this early. It can't, or he will shatter like their Baker Street windows.

"Oh. And you're supposed to be brilliant. Fancy that." Hooking his fingers under John's waistband, Sherlock tugs, and then happily the doctor's pants and trousers are halfway down his thighs and the smaller man gasps lightly. "Oh, Jesus, what are you doing."

"Obvious."

John is...interested, clearly. His half-hard cock gives a strong twitch as Sherlock cups it in his palm, rolling it forward, and John surges up and down with one hand on Sherlock's nape and the other still deep in his hair, lifting the sleuth's face for a kiss. Sherlock doesn't recall parting his lips, but somehow they understand what they're meant to do and are open instinctually, and it's glorious kissing a taller John, a John whose mouth tenderly bullies his own, a John whose tongue can dive and slide without straining at their height difference, and when Sherlock bites the doctor's lower lip in an open challenge, John twists an arm around his lower back, pinning him...
closer between short legs.


"When did you fall in love? Tell me," Sherlock demands.

"Um. Fuck. Sherlock, this is not how this conversation generally goes."

"I want to know. I need to backdate the database on you to incorporate the nuances of your affections during everyday interactions, like the time two weeks ago when I glanced at the teakettle from the sofa and then starting meditating on the business of the stockbroker's clerk and then when I opened my eyes there was tea at my elbow, I need to know, it's not accurate otherwise, I need to rewrite the file if required, if you didn't simply also happen to want tea at the same moment," Sherlock pleads, tightening his grip on John's cock. It's hard now, warm with blood and bobbing occasionally, and Sherlock hasn't learned the feel of it with his fingers yet, and this is all he wants at the moment. He cannot imagine wanting anything else. He wants every one of his fingerprints permanently stamped on John's most intimate places.

"Sodding hell," John marvels, kissing him firmly and then pulling back to look in his eyes. "Erm. I knew you for something extraordinary when I left you that night. It was early days, I know. You said I was good and not nice. I was in pretty serious trouble, I realized, and didn't want to turn into some weepy git, and so I left. Then after that, I...it. Come on, Sherlock. It just happened. It's not a scientifically measurable event."

"Everything is scientifically measurable."

"No," John says fiercely. He pulls Sherlock's hand away from his groin and wraps both their hands together, all four sets of fingers intertwined and pressed up against his thin mouth. Breathing for a moment, he stills them, slows the pace. "No, it isn't. There is not a scientific limit to what I'd do for you. That's what I've been trying to explain."

Swallowing, Sherlock stares into dark blue eyes. They are unflinching, mildly curious, a bit exasperated, boundlessly loving.

You're to die for. I would die for you, I think.

"Like one of your fellow soldiers," Sherlock says, understanding. "You're planning to save my life."

"You already saved mine, so that's only fair," John answers calmly.

Lunging up on his knees, Sherlock kisses the soldier, lips flushed and wanting. John makes a sort of pained sound into his mouth, tasting the edges of his tongue and playing symphonies with the lush bow of his lips. The doctor's fingers descend to Sherlock's buttons, flicking them open. Then he pushes the shirt from Sherlock's shoulders and abruptly stands, pulling off his jumper and vest in a quick, efficient sweep. After making short work of his own pants and trousers, Sherlock follows him up, manhandling his smaller friend until he's up against the narrow wall table next to the armchair, lifting John by his thighs so he's sitting on the smooth wood. Another strong pull, and John's trousers are in a puddle and Sherlock is stepping on them with his naked feet as he muscles his way closer. John, his head tilted, laughs suddenly.

"What?"

"I kind of half thought you were kidding about defiling every surface in your brother's club."
"That was a serious as I have ever been," Sherlock breathes, dipping his head to catch one of John's nipples in his mouth. He rolls it on his tongue, feeling the texture harden.

"Oh, fuck, fuck. This is completely insane," John protests happily.

"Why? The ticking time bomb?"

"Nope, that's being sorted. God, I hope it is. I dunno, it's only, If you'd told me two weeks ago we were going to have a fucking brilliant sex life, I'd have called you a whopping great liar."

Bracing one hand on the thin table, Sherlock bends far enough to coax the tip of John's penis into his mouth. It's slightly damp now, tasting faintly of ocean water and stormy skies. John hisses, a hand flying to the side to brace himself as his head hits the mirror behind him, and a vase housing an abstract arrangement of multicoloured rocks and dried materials crashes to the carpet, rolling.

"Shit!"

"Never mind. Mycroft will settle the bill."

"That was, shit, not in reference to the vase. Fuck the vase. Was that even a vase?"

"Oh," Sherlock says, highly pleased. He pulls his teeth very gently over the perfectly smooth head, tonguing at the slit, and John's thighs tense where they're gripping his torso. Taking a breath, Sherlock presses him deeper, nearly to the back of his throat, and holds there, relishing the pressure and the feeling of John's heat against his tongue.

"Could you not talk about your brother when you're giving me head, love?"

Sherlock chuckles deep in his chest, which makes John moan, which makes Sherlock's heart perform complicated acrobatics within the empty arena of his ribcage. Now he realizes he is allowed to laugh during sex, he doesn't want to ever have sex again without this queer, surprised joy bubbling up inside him. It turns potentially repellent biology into something quite different, something closer to music, something along the lines of a flawless duet. Love feels enough like pain during his typical waking hours that he can relish this, the carefree teasing and the jokes which fall harmless and sweet as London raindrops. He never imagined such a thing existed before John. He redoubles his efforts, increasing the suction and wrapping John's length with his tongue. Soon, the hands in his hair become more insistent.

"Fuck. Hey. Sherlock. God, Christ, you are amazing. I don't want to come like this. I have an idea. Sherlock, come up here."

Obeying, Sherlock rather defeats the point of continuing the conversation by covering John's mouth with his own. Now they can both taste John, both savour how wonderful he is, and the army doctor makes a high-pitched sound at the back of his nose. Sherlock brushes the fine hair back from John's brow, does it again and again, something he always wanted to do from the moment he set eyes on him and is now allowed. His breath comes quick and shallow through his nostrils.

Kissing is...kissing is completely intoxicating. Sherlock actually feels high. This would be positively disgusting with anyone else, far worse than simple sex, but kissing John is like dreams of flying, the dreams Sherlock recalls from being a little boy when he still wanted things like a cape and a pirate ship, wanted to fly like the child in the book about Neverland and in the depths of his slumber one night actually soared through the constellations he finds so beautiful when he views them from the prosaic weight of life on solid earth.
"I couldn't decide if I wanted to be the boy who stayed young forever or the pirate captain," Sherlock confesses, only partly aware he is talking utter nonsense. "From the book. I think I deleted the title. But I remember flying. You're like flying. John, you feel exactly the same."

"Oh god, love, I have no idea what you're talking about, but keep at it until I do," John laughs, though there is something bittersweet and sad at the back of the mirth.

"What was your idea?" Sherlock asks when he must either breathe fully or else pass out there on the poncey carpeting. Burrowing into John's neck, he works to catch his wind, watching his fingertips play along the stiff line of John's cock.

"It. Um. Well, ah, sod it, I was wondering...did you mean what you said earlier?"

Sherlock looks up, calculating. Of course he meant what he said earlier. Sherlock always means what he says. Unless he is deliberately lying, and then...no, that wouldn't apply here. Is John talking about fucking him? John's eyes are bright with unspoken hope and he swipes his tongue over his lip, tilting an eyebrow.

"Of course I did." Forcing a confidence he doesn't quite feel, Sherlock plants a kiss lightly on John's chin and strides to the bedside table. "They always have absolutely everything here, it's obscene really. Ha! See? Lubricant and condoms, second drawer below the pens. The number of laddish men of means who have passed through these rooms with paid company doesn't really bear considering. In fact, I regret mentioning it. Anyway, yes, of course I meant what I said." Tossing the packet of lube onto the bedclothes, Sherlock sprawls gracefully on his back, his arms open and one of his knees cocked up, expectant.

John advances with his hands on his hips, his eyebrow twisting, a smile fighting for dominance. "You, um, have this backwards," he says flatly. "But I appreciate it. The offer. It's very generous." He goes into Sherlock's embrace readily, pressing their pelvises together with care he doesn't hurt any of Sherlock's tender bits, and both men pull air in unsteadily.

Sherlock runs his palms broadly up and down his friend's muscled back. "I don't understand."

Freezing, Sherlock stares.

This is...this is not kind. It lances through his chest, hot and sharp. How is he meant to respond in the face of such callousness? It isn't his fault he's this way, and for John to be disappointed when he cannot help it, after he's offered absolutely everything he can is...it's devastating.

"That is an incredibly cruel joke," the detective states icily.

John merely rolls his eyes. "Sherlock Holmes, do you or do you not possess hands?"

"I...oh," Sherlock breathes.

Leaning down, John paints little nips along Sherlock's collarbone. The touches spark through him, lighting small candle flames in his belly. Sherlock pulls one slender violinist's hand up and studies it between them. He knows abstractly that his hands are deft and aesthetically pleasing, but this notion of what to do with them...it's vaguely terrifying. John, up on one elbow, catches the appendage in his own and places kisses along his knuckles. Then he turns the hand over and kisses the stripe from the fireplace iron.
"You don't have to," he assures Sherlock, who has forgotten how to inhale properly. "And if flexing your hands hurts, then forget it. You said you wanted to get inside me somehow. Earlier, in the cab. That is an achievable goal, my friend. You inside me would be bloody spectacular. That would make my fucking life, mate. So...again, you might have meant something else, mentally or emotionally or something, and god knows you've properly wormed your way in there as well, love, but if you wanted to...then you could."

"You like that?" Sherlock whispers.

"Yeah," John says fondly. He bends to take the tip of Sherlock's middle finger in his lips for a moment. "Yeah, um. Not with everyone. With you, I would. You're amazing."

"You've done it before?"

"Sure."

"With men or women?"

"Both."

"How many?"


"Tell me," he growls.

"I didn't count, Sherlock. Maybe twenty times with men, maybe half that with women. With women, it didn't come up as often."

"Are you serious? Where?"

"Various places. All over. I'm not exactly an innocent. Three continents were involved, if you must know."

"When was the last time? In the army?"

"No, god no. A bloke from a pub here in London, must have been two or three months ago."

"Were you in love with him?"

"Christ no, you barking mad prat, it was a lark. He was fit, I was desperately lonely, there you are."

"And you...it didn't hurt you?"

"No," John says, frowning worriedly. "That is not the point of it. That is the precise opposite of the point. I like it, it feels good. God, Sherlock, I swear to Christ if I ever meet one of your exes in a dark fucking alley, I will tear their fucking limbs--"

"How do you like it?" Sherlock demands, now entirely lit up from the idea. He grins ferally, tracing John's slim mouth with his fingertips. "Deep? Shallow? Slow? Fast? How many fingers? Right on target, or should I avoid--"

"Oh god, you look like you're going to eat me," John hisses, capturing Sherlock's mouth in a bruising kiss. "Slow at first, and then...yeah, just sort of brush at it in circles, and you'll have me coming apart at the seams. Your hands don't hurt?"
Eyeing the still-livid bruise along John's side, Sherlock shakes his head. Their injuries are surely trivial in the face of such a request. Fumbling around beyond his line of sight on the coverlet, Sherlock finds the packet and brings it between them. John, grinning, rips it open with one hand and his teeth, rocking himself against the line of Sherlock's pelvis where his cock is nestled. Sherlock offers his right hand for servicing and John coats the tips of his fingers with the stuff, on the longest ones where the middle and index crook together.

"Are you sure about this?" John asks, his lips pressing outward in concern. "If I'm being a bloody selfish berk, then...oh."

Sherlock smirks. He isn't pressing hard just yet, merely slid his fingers down into the swell of John's arse. He smoothes his fingertips gently, spreading the slick where it's needed, watching John's eyes flutter as he memorizes textures and the suddenly ragged sound of John's lungs working. This is...completely unprecedented. John's lashes are a fine blond where they quiver, and the line of his strong neck is tight with veins as he twists himself up, mouthing kisses all along Sherlock's pale throat. John is entirely surrounded by Sherlock Holmes as he massages tenderly, and it's the most precious sight Sherlock could possibly imagine.

"All right?" Sherlock asks, himself breathless by now.

"Yeah, that. That is. That is just fine," John grits out. He looks at Sherlock, his eyes open and raw with feeling. "God, I want so much from you it scares me. I couldn't ask for it, how much I want from you, it would rip me in half."

Finding there is no answer to be made to this that wouldn't simultaneously involve Sherlock's untimely death due to heart attack, he ever so slowly dips his middle fingertip inside and they both shudder at the sensation.

"Oh my god," John whispers. "You're fine, press further, I want it. I want you there. Yeah, like that. Just like that for the moment."

Sherlock's single finger is more than halfway seated and surrounded by heat, by John's blood, by the beating of his heart, and John trembles where his prick lies trapped between their bodies. It's heartbreaking, this sight, so real and so very present that Sherlock forgets what it was ever like to be anywhere else, with anyone else. It becomes tremendously important for Sherlock to get this right, to show John what he means to him since he appears to be a fucking mute when it comes to expressing the topic aloud. Ever so cautiously, Sherlock pushes, and then settles for a gentle pulsing rhythm, sliding back nearly to the first knuckle and then driving softly inward again.

"All right?" he demands again.

"Fuck yes, do I look all right," John gasps, laughing. "Deeper. That's it. I'm not going to break, love."

"If you let me hurt you, I will murder you," Sherlock snarls, his chest aching with possessive desire.

"That's...really weirdly nice, cheers. Your fucking hands are so gorgeous, deeper, come on." John arches back a little, arcing his spine. "Curve your finger a bit when you press in. Yes, like...fucking bloody hell."

Sherlock can feel it. John's entire body sings like a bowstring, muscles flexing as his mouth parts on a stifled yell. When Sherlock repeats the motion, John's frame tenses again, and he muffles the sound he's making in the flesh of Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock grips John's hair with his free hand.
and forces him up into a kiss, fucking him again with a crooked finger, breathing him as he struggles in seemingly every direction at once. He watches, pulse pounding, for five or six minutes more, as John's reactions grow increasingly frantic.

"I want to keep you just like this all the time," Sherlock growls, recapturing John's panting mouth where it slid away from his.


"Can you come like this? Just from this?"

"Um." John's eyes wince close and he bites back another little yelp of pleasure. Sherlock's lower belly where John's erection is writhing has grown nearly as slick as where their bodies are joined. "Yesterday I'd have said hell no, and called you a lunatic to boot, but now on the other hand..."

"I want to make you come like this, just with my hand and your cock on my stomach and you'll forget everyone you've ever met except for me," Sherlock hisses.

John tries to swallow another whine and fails. "Yes, yes, yes. Come on then, add another finger. I'm fine."

"It won't be too much?"

"No, it'll be brilliant, I need it, I need more. Please."

"Are you begging?"

"Yes, you buggering beautiful nit, that is exactly what's fucking happening, so fucking help me."

"Are you certain?"

"Fucking fuck me with your stupidly pretty hand, Sherlock, or I will have my revenge on you," John demands, twining his fingers against Sherlock's scalp and pulling at his wildly disheveled hair. "There, yes yes, now just twist a bit and then press, god. Sherlock."

With two fingers buried in John's trembling body, Sherlock thinks it might be possible to perish from affection. Biting his lower lip, he concentrates, ignoring the small sore lump in his throat and the possibility that this may all vanish in the morning--that despite their efforts, they will lose, and he will never have John this way again. John is very tight, but not uncomfortably so, and growing more relaxed, his pulse galloping, so the detective deepens the push, tucking John's face into the hollow of his neck with his left hand. He's rewarded with teeth scraping his throat, with more badly muffled soft sounds, and he wonders how he can have lived so long without this. Without intimacy. Without any love.

Sherlock thinks that living is worth it if it's to please this man, but more than that, he knows what John meant. If it would save the army doctor, there's nothing Sherlock wouldn't do, he realizes as long minutes of intimate pleasure pass between them. He'd throw himself off the roof of Bart's Hospital to keep him from coming to harm. There are no lines anymore, not between them, and borders are meaningless. Sherlock doesn't end where John begins, nor the other way around.

"Oh, fuck," John growls as Sherlock increases his pace. He sounds wrecked, his face buried below Sherlock's chin. Sherlock can feel the faint sheen of sweat from his brow. "I needed this, need you like this. I want--"

"Go on, it's all right, I've got you," Sherlock assures him. He hooks an ankle over John's calf,
gathers him as closely as two people can be joined. John twitches against the taut, slick skin of Sherlock's pelvis. "What do you want?"

"Everything," John says, laughing brokenly.

"Take it. Take everything."

"Just tell me this means something to you, please," John requests hoarsely. "I know it does, I know it does, you're a crap liar, but you're actually fucking inside of me, and I--just say anything, I don't care what it is. Say my name."

"John," Sherlock whispers, and that feels right, more than right. "John, it means everything. You can have everything. I want to see you. Give me that, please? John."

"Jesus, I am really really close," John pants, wriggling again. Sherlock's fingers thrust steadily, much more assuredly now, but John's movements are growing almost random, his hard prick thrashing sweetly against the detective only to surge back against his hand. He moans extravagantly, then bites his lip. "Sorry."

"God, why?" Sherlock demands. "I could stay like this for years, let me hear you. I want to make you scream for it."

"This is actually doing something for you?"

"Everything, I told you," Sherlock insists desperately. He doesn't know who wants John's climax more, only knows that they're both dying for it to happen. "Absolutely everything. What do you need? Come on, love. Let go."

"Oh, god, what did you just call me," John gasps. "I'm...almost, I'm sorry, I can't quite..."

Out of impulse and a certain spirit of adventure, Sherlock tucks his ring finger in with the others and presses in harder than any of his previous efforts. John chokes something completely inarticulate and then stills with a sharp cry, his muscles contracting and his cock spilling thickly between them. Sherlock catches his face in his palm and kisses him through it, their lips moving messily, more scraping and gasping than anything else, but no less beautiful for the lack of finesse. The sensation of flying returns to Sherlock in a rush, creeping blithely along his shoulder blades and shimmering down his spinal column. John's pleasure rips through him, bowing his back and twisting his perfect small features. Waiting until the worst of the shudders are over, which takes far longer than is customary, Sherlock very carefully withdraws his fingers, cupping John's arse cheek as the army doctor collapses against his chest.

They stay like that for what seems many minutes, relearning how to breathe.

"Tell me you're all right," Sherlock says at length, shifting the hand cradling John's feather-soft head against him. He doesn't mean for it to come out wrecked. Unfortunately, however, it does.

"Mm spectacular," John slurs after due consideration. "You?"

"I'll be fine."

John nods into Sherlock's skin, traces a pattern on his pectoral muscle with his fingers. They are quiet, which is easier. It is far, far easier than any variety of speech. Slowly, Sherlock feels the dizzy bliss recede.
"This affects you, just not the way it does most people. It affects you...quite a bit, I'm learning. Arousal has bugger-all to do with it, but you're just as deep in this as I am. Was it true when you said I broke you in pieces?" John wants to know next. His tone is careful. Sated, loving, and yet...cautious.

"Yes," Sherlock sighs. "It wasn't a pejorative, if you can believe that. It was simply outside the realm of my normal experience."

"I think I know what you mean now. That was...fuck. I'm shattered. That's not a pejorative. You're incredible."

Smiling, Sherlock drops a kiss to his brow. "Move a moment."

"No."

"Get off."

"Fuck you."

"You'll be happier in the long run."

Sighing, John rolls onto his back. Sherlock disappears into the loo, washing his hands and stomach, wetting a flannel and bringing it back to the bed. John cocks a wry eyebrow as he approaches, cloth in hand, and cleans the tender skin of John's flagging cock, wiping away the worst of the sweat and lube and come from his softly glowing body. Throwing the flannel onto the expensive desk in triumph, right on top of the stationery, Sherlock retrieves his phone from his trouser pocket. There are no correspondences. All is peace, or at least, all is not lost.

Not yet. Not tonight.

Eight and a half hours. It will serve.

"C'mere," John whispers, holding a hand out.

"I'm right here," Sherlock says, suddenly exhausted.

John pushes himself up and draws the covers back, one arm still thrown wide. Sherlock taps out an alarm which will wake them within three hours of the countdown finishing and crawls into bed, curving his spine away from John as John tucks the blankets around them. John settles along the sleuth's back, crossing an ankle over his and encircling him within his arm.

There is nothing here save the two of them. There will not be for some few hours. Sherlock, unused to simple happiness, finds himself growing uneasy. But he forces the feeling down and concentrates, places John's pulse at his core and John's cry when he climaxes in the carved ebony box in the master bedroom of his mind palace, runs his fingers over the latch and presses it closed, falling into a dreamless slumber of terrifying depth.
The alarm awakens Sherlock in the very early morning after a sleep so profoundly vast that he suspects it unsettlingly resembled mortality itself. It certainly didn't feel like his usual pattern of fitful drug-induced slumber followed by still more unsettled wakefulness, his gently throbbing consciousness swiftly aware of an unseen menace and wishing he'd measured out just that little-bit-more or else little-bit less of his drugs the night previous. Never satisfied. Never rested. He always feels taut as a high wire in the mornings. But this...

Curiously, his eyelashes have got a bit stuck together and his mouth feels dry, as if he had been breathing in and out of it and parched the soft curves. The detective licks his lips. Reaching, Sherlock switches the chiming mobile off, looking for messages he may have been, for the first time in his frenetic life, exhausted enough to sleep through without chemical assistance.

Nothing. Nothing from his brother, nothing from Jim Moriarty, no voicemails from the Yard and no texts from Bradstreet. There is merely a shiny screen with a fingerprint smudge--the face of a half-charged phone, and nothing more.

Odd.

In the absence of the quelled alarm, the room is now very quiet.

An army doctor lies along Sherlock's back, pressed close as can be, his chest to Sherlock's spine and his perfect tiny fragile nose breathing gently into Sherlock's mop of squashed hair. His hand is draped over Sherlock's chest and the appendage curls, scratching capable fingers into the detective's milky skin.

"What's happening?" John's voice is rough, thick with slumber and deeper than usual. It sounds lovely. Sherlock wonders if it's typical for John's voice to change in the morning, wonders how many mornings he will be granted in order to test this subject. It changed the morning after the Friesland. It changed the next day, after the chloroform. It changed--

"Anything on?" John insists, still gruffly.

"Nothing," Sherlock answers, mystified.

Something must be wrong.

He cannot be allowed simply to lie here with John Watson, sloughing skin cells onto each other as John kindles weary nerve endings before quieting them again with smooth, stroking touches like the ones the doctor is patting--no, petting, there's the word--along his side and flank. This cannot logically be permitted to continue, Sherlock really isn't the sort of person to whom this happens, not by a long shot, never in a thousand lifetimes should this moment be possible, so something must surely have gone grievously amiss. He feels chosen, and without John having said a word, and in his disoriented state Sherlock suspects that is entirely unacceptable.

I wouldn't trade you, here in this bed with me, Sherlock recalls. Not for anyone else.
The world is out of balance. Good fortune blazes so brightly that complete disaster must have taken place elsewhere.

Sherlock taps out a message to Bradstreet, as an experiment.

*I trust you found the pistol?  SH*

After sixty seconds or so, she replies. So there is nothing wrong with his phone, apparently.

*Yep, just now.  Have it right here.  Catch of the day, fresh as anything.*

Bizarre.

And disconcerting.

Something is wrong. John is pressing his toes against Sherlock's bare calf. It would be absolutely wonderful if it weren't so very, very unlikely to last. Perhaps Bradstreet isn't Bradstreet after all? A test is in order.

*I can't believe you were idiot enough to doubt me even if it was only for 1.3 seconds.  I am, after all, a savant.  SH*

About a minute later, Sherlock's phone chimes.

*You're also a sow's tit.  But I'd have had jack all to go on if not for you, so cheers.*

That is definitively, absolutely Bradstreet. It could be no one else. Sherlock stares at the mobile, biting his lip as he tries to decide how to respond to her compliment without being either too grateful or too vitriolic. But he is prevented by another text.

*And this archnemesis of yours is one sick puppy--suicide as a frame for murder?  Give him hell, mate.*

This is easier.

*Puppies don't murder people.  I should have thought the Yard would be aware of that.  But noted.  Have you taken any further action?  SH*

*Setting wheels in motion to release Grace Dunbar on bail.  Otherwise we're waiting on you.*

"Now what's happening?"

"Nothing," Sherlock admits, returning his phone to the bedside table with a little sigh.

John undulates against the pale skin of Sherlock's back. He is, the detective realizes now, not entirely relaxed despite having just been asleep--his hands are restless, his prick noticeably stiff. John's breath comes sweet and sleep-slow against Sherlock's scalp and the taller man nudges his head back fondly.

The club is profoundly silent in the way only the Diogenes ever can be--it's an accumulated silence, practically an historic silence, silence in thick strata like the softest white winter layers. There is nothing tentative or temporary about it. It's what he loves about the Diogenes, despite Mycroft's greater claim to the place, which is a rather detestable circumstance. Mycroft fouls the air of all his favourite nooks with the greasily insincere aroma of artificial cake frosting. No matter how great a strop Sherlock finds himself in at his brother, however, he adores the Diogenes. The silence is unbroken as the wide Atlantic, sound ripples shifting only in Sherlock's immediate
proximity. John's inhales, John's exhales, the whisper of sheets and the almost-friction of flesh against flesh. Heartbeats like small songs.

*Chamber music*, Sherlock thinks. And in a soundproofed room, to boot. Nothing extraneous or crass or common.

"Cracking," John murmurs. "I am very comfortable."

Humming, Sherlock agrees. He tucks his arm back under the blankets, head yet feeling strangely thick. Under ordinary circumstances he'd be appalled at himself, and he feels a sour-tongued twinge of longing for the cocaine that would sweep away the cobwebs. It wouldn't require much, and he'd be instantly sharp and steely again. But John is here, and John is good, and anyway, Sherlock can't. Not when the game is still on and a very old woman has a deadly weapon pointed at her head and is probably dressed in semtex.

After a few minutes, Sherlock realizes he wouldn't want the cocaine to wipe away the fog even if he had some here and is so astonished at his own aberration from the norm that he wakes up a bit more.

*Contentment*, he identifies after a brief scan of the English language.

It feels like a small flightless sparrow in his hands, pure white, with no head or feet, merely a sleek birdlike shape equipped with meekly fluttering downy wings. He suspects without needing to be told that it is extraordinarily fragile. Sherlock walks through the halls of his mind palace into the bedroom on silent bare feet, cradling the thing. He creates a nest in the corner by the window and places *contentment* there with a reverence born of complete shock.

"Did we move at all?" he marvels.

"Nope. You must have been properly jiggered to manage that sort of beauty rest."

"I was," Sherlock realizes. "I think I...have been. I was just distracted. Before."

They fall quiet again. John's fingertips trace small loving patterns on Sherlock's sternum. He slides a bit lower along the bed and the arousal which had pressed against Sherlock's lumbar curve fits just into the dip of his arse. It's clearly an accident, because John stills as if determining his welcome. When Sherlock fails to stiffen, merely yawns contentedly, John likewise relaxes. Idly, Sherlock wonders what he's doing, because it feels quite nice--far from threatening, and intimate in the way locks and keys fit, the romance of objects that were made to slot together. When John's lips nip along the back of his neck, he understands the move south was based on wanting to taste creamy near-morning skin and he glows accordingly. It was for Sherlock, not for John at all.

"I find it really bloody difficult to believe I'm here," John confesses, muffled against Sherlock's neck.

Sherlock knows just what John means, but imagines their reasons are quite different. "Why?"

"Because we've been dating for all of four days. I think. If you count the beginning the night of the *Friesland* and not the next morning."

Groggily, Sherlock calculates. So much has happened that this news is surprising, but yes, John is right. Four days. Three cases, three hostages. One terrible cheese and tomato sandwich. One unprecedented bath. More sexual encounters than Sherlock ever imagined being bearable, let alone marvelous. No wonder he fell into such a dreamless abyss.
"We've never been on a date," Sherlock drawls lazily instead.

"No?" John chuckles, mouthing at Sherlock's spinal column. "Um. Wrong. You asked me on a date the day you met me."

"Technically that was a gesture of thanks."

"Date."

"No, it wasn't."

"Even that Angelo bloke said it was."

"Well, it wasn't."

"Yes, it was."

"You can't change reality simply by contradicting me. It was a thank you. I don't date. You are simply unnaturally attracted to dangerous people and situations, so the aftermath of tackling Abernetty seemed to you--"

"I'm unnaturally attracted to dangerous people and situations?" John chuckles. "Why is everything always my fault? As if you weren't texting me every half minute? Anyhow, plenty of dates since, too. That Ethiopian place, the midnight walk along the Thames last week."

Sherlock shifts, exasperated, and can feel John's warm body slide easily against his back. "The Ethiopian restaurant's owner was being embezzled from by his own wife, and the midnight walk along the Thames last week was surveillance in an effort to capture a serial strangler, an effort at which we succeeded."

John is unfazed. "That movie night at the flat when I showed you Unforgiven was a date."

Sherlock bites back a snort. "That was you watching a man squinting in the near-total darkness in some part of Western America because they apparently forgot films require lighting while I sipped tea and outlined a new article on types of cigarette ash, which is bound to be spectacular and published to universal acclaim."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. I know ash."

"Dates. Every one of them. I'm wise to you, my friend. I know how you get your jollies and I know a date when I am on one."

Laughing, Sherlock traces the back of John's hand where it continues to roam over his chest. He pushes his fingertips into the web of John's digits as the doctor's hand wanders upward, tenderly circling Sherlock's throat. "What are you doing?"

"You have a pretty wonderful laugh. And you don't laugh very...often. I wanted to feel it."

This quiets Sherlock, though he doesn't mean to impede John's exploration. He sighs instead, swallowing against his friend's cupped grip as an apology. John's hand increases its pressure incrementally. It doesn't feel hostile in the slightest, feels more as if Sherlock is being tethered to earth like a child's precious balloon which could bob away at any moment.

"I've never been on a date in my life," Sherlock insists. "The point of dates is relationships. I've
never had a relationship, as you are well aware."

"Just sex, then?"

"Yep."

"Not as many partners as for me, though."

"Not as many as for you," Sherlock agrees, feeling a small fiery pang. "Whyever are we talking about this?"

"Because we don't know each other at all and we've been dating for four days," John observes calmly. "If I'm going to be mad about someone, I'd prefer to know their, you know, biography at least in broad strokes. And if we're going to be sleeping together, I'd rather stop treating you as if you'll fall apart if I ask the wrong question."

"You once interrogated me for half an hour over my entire drug history and threatened to call the Met if I didn't oblige you," Sherlock observes dryly.

"Yeah, well, that was before." John shrugs. "You scare the shite out of me now, and you figured it out, clever you, and that is really making me squirm. I want to quit being this fiddly. Are you uncomfortable?"

"No," Sherlock realizes, surprised. He ought to be, because...well, oughtn't he be? The sleuth shifts his hand back and runs his palm over John's hip.

"Have you ever fucked anyone else like that before?" John purrs next.

He's referring to last night, to Sherlock's long fingers and to his own tremulous sounds as Sherlock unraveled him. Shivering, the sleuth shakes his head against the pillow. That would...not have been possible. He can feel John grow a fraction harder against him, feel the small throb of his prick against his lowest vertebrae.

"No," Sherlock owns in a rasp. It comes out far too feelingly for his taste.

"No?"

"I was saving myself," he quips, rolling his eyes.

_Better._

John laughs appreciatively. "No one wanted that, though?"

"No. But anyway, I'd have told them to go to hell."

"Did you like it?"

"You know I liked it. I may have liked it more than--wait. Did _you_ like it?"

"It was very pleasant," John says in a tone so lascivious that Sherlock melts against him even further. "We are going to do it again sometime. You know. One of these days. The odd Wednesday. When you're...bored or something."

"Good," Sherlock approves. He smiles as John's fingers drift to trace his Adam's apple and the hollows of his throat.
"Tell me what you were feeling," John requests, kissing Sherlock's shoulder blades.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You were lit up like Christmas, the way you were in the bath, the way you were in the bed, but. I was hardly paying you much attention physically. Sorry about that, you were bloody killing me. But I was definitely not doing much of the work just then. Limp as a rag, totally useless afterward as well. If I'd been spoiling you, I'd get it, but...I emphatically was not. And I'm trying to understand you, so. Explain that to me. Please."

His teeth scrape, and Sherlock gasps.

"I, ah," Sherlock stammers.

"What?"

"Sorry, that's...nice. I, um, felt..."

"Think away, genius, I have hours," John murmurs, and Sherlock feels him give a small twitch of his pelvis. It's not quite a thrust, but it's unmistakable, and it reminds Sherlock of the morning after the chloroform poisoning, when John was embarrassed and uncomfortable and thought he'd alarmed Sherlock. Realizing he truly is no longer being treated like glass, Sherlock grins broadly as he forces his brain to find an explanation for his sensations during their most intimate moments. When he replays the file, relives the thirty-six seconds including the end of the latest interlude and its afterglow, he finds parsing the experience less terribly difficult that he'd first feared.

"We were a circuit," he says, clearing his throat. "I was in you and you were kissing me and it was a circuit, a high voltage circuit, when I made you moan and your air was in my lungs. Forty-one, possibly forty-two thousand volts, if I were to measure it in the sensation of the electrical signals, though I am well aware the number of sodium and potassium ions present in the human body is far too low to create such a charge. The human organism can produce up to a hundred millivolts only, but yours were building and building as I touched you, and they fed into my sympathetic nervous system and then mine fed back into yours and it made the impulses triggering my heart contractions vastly stronger on a differential spectrum. That's what it felt like."

The doctor groans lightly and his hand darts down to grasp Sherlock's upper thigh, his compact body giving a definite roll. His prick where it lies neatly between Sherlock's cheeks is hotter than the rest of him, a fact explained through the organic sciences of blood and love.

"Sorry," he says as his brow hits Sherlock's upper arm and he breathes deeply in and out through his nose. "Sorry, that was. Sorry. I think you just declared your feelings by means of electromagnetism. Given that you explain fear as hormonal imbalances and sentiment as a chemical defect, I am. Completely unsurprised. I did that for you, and you weren't even aroused?"

"You're never going to arouse me," Sherlock sighs, arching his back and pressing himself further into John. "And if you did, I'd hate it. And you always change the electrical impulses triggering my heart contractions."

"That might be the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me, even though I don't understand it."

"Just as you said before--I'm happy whenever you walk into a room," Sherlock owns. "I think the sex factor causes the phenomenon to be...amplified."

John makes a soft sound through his nose that evidently is on the precise frequency required to
send a silvery arrow stab into Sherlock's chest. Widening his eyes as a flash of thought strikes, he reaches for the half-used and pooling packet of lubricant he'd tossed on the bedside table the night before, collects an ample amount, and then reaches behind himself, wrapping his fingers around John's prick. The doctor groans quietly, hoisting himself up on one elbow to look down at Sherlock.

"What do you think you're doing?" John's hair is standing on end and his eyes are still a bit more sleep-constricted than normal. He seems genuinely confused, though a wicked smile quivers at the edges of his mouth.

"Helping," Sherlock says, blinking innocently. Tightening his grip, he strokes languidly a few times, up and down, sending a small shudder through his friend, then wipes his hand on the sheets and raises an expectant brow.

"Sherlock, I'm not going to--"

"You aren't hurting me, you idiot, and I don't mind," Sherlock insists, petulance bubbling at last to the surface. "Just don't actually--"

"I already told you I have no interest in anal sex with you whatsoever. You have pants listening skills."

"This isn't the same _thing_. That's not what I meant, I don't want that either, but _I don't mind_."

Sherlock can hear his own doubt and eagerness and devotion and nerves and detachment and need and hauteur in this pair of sentences, in the nearly-tremulous vowels and the too-clipped tone, and if they confuse the living hell out of him, the mixed signals ought to be wreaking havoc on John's libido. Stilling a little, almost holding his breath, Sherlock waits to be rejected if for no reason other than that this was a very stupid idea.

"Um. Let me get this straight. You don't mind me humping the crack of your arse like a spotty teenager who forgot to buy rubbers," John says dubiously, but there is laughter in his voice and that is absolutely extraordinary.

Sherlock grins. "Not if you're kissing me, I don't."

"Fucking hell yes," John breathes, and the hand not gripping Sherlock's hip bone twists deeply into his hair.

Lowering himself, John presses his lips behind Sherlock's ear. It's difficult at this angle to indulge in any serious snogging as the soldier rocks slowly against the detective, his cock slick now and swelling to its fullest. John's teeth scrape at Sherlock's neck, and there are nails against his scalp, and the hand which was holding his hip steady has shifted lower, down to press flat against his pelvis, and _what, god, what now_ there is a delicate tracing of tongue against the shell of Sherlock's ear, and suddenly he winces because this is all very sweet and very temporary and it feels _good_ to be held like this, it feels _so very very good_ to be cradled against someone who wants you for something other than a quick fuck.

This is exactly what Sherlock feared allowing to happen. It has happened. He lost the battle.

He has _hope_.

What if this otherworldly tension between bliss and calm were normal?

What if he could _live_ this way? In the mornings? In all the mornings? The ones without cases,
anyhow, the ones without sudden kidnapes and ruthless murders and daring robberies during which John brings his gun and his eyes turn the blue of expensive pottery in the sunlight as he laughs at mayhem and peril?

*What if--*

"All right?" John asks, concerned. His body stills.

"Fine, I..." Sherlock swallows. Speech rapidly follows. Too rapidly, in fact. "You can touch a lot of me in this position, you're in contact with a large percentage of my epidermis, I like that, I just mean to say, for the record, and it's...but it's..."

"A lot?" John supplies when his friend falls silent.

"Yes. Don't stop, please," Sherlock whispers.

John rolls his hips gently again, draws the hand pressing against Sherlock's abdomen upward to trace his ribs. John is in his hair and wrapped around his body and rutting tenderly against his skin. It is all very marvelous for a while and then when his mouth ducks back to Sherlock's throat, sweet teeth pinching the skin, the detective produces what he can only embarrassingly admit was a whine.

Whining cannot be considered couth in the bedroom. Even if what he was feeling was warm light suddenly bathing the musty carpets of his mind palace's well-thumbed library as the curtains were blown open. Disappointingly, John stops again.

"What?" Sherlock snaps.

"Whoa, hey there," John says swiftly. The hand in Sherlock's hair relaxes slightly. "Too much?"

"No," Sherlock growls, annoyed at himself. He grips the bedsheet, trying to recover the earth's gravitational pull. "Fuck. I'm sor--"

"No."

"But--"

"Sherlock."

"Present. Hello."

"You're not sorry. Fuck sorry. Just talk to me." John's voice isn't angry and Sherlock can see him even though his eyes have closed, see the lines of worry and hurt and mirth around the doctor's dark irises and the lopsided frown he's wearing and Sherlock simply loves him, he loves him too much to breathe very effectively, and here John is, thinking Sherlock doesn't like experiencing his own suffocating affection, that Sherlock doesn't want to drown in the feeling, that he doesn't want to love him the way John already nearly owned he loves Sherlock, he thinks Sherlock either isn't in love or doesn't want to be, and he is entirely wrong, and suddenly that knowledge pains him more than he ever imagined possible. "Don't be sorry. Is this too much? Are you--"

"I don't know," Sherlock hisses. John simply has to understand this, that nothing is wrong, or it will actually kill him. Sherlock is not fragile, he is not precious, his *wants* simply don't fit within his spoken language. "It doesn't *matter.*"
"Baby, you need to fucking tell me if I'm--what, overloading your hard drive?"

"I don't know, please don't stop."

"I'm not going to just--"

"You think it's the physical that's going to cock this up, something you do wrong, but it isn't, I'm fine, I just feel...everything," Sherlock confesses desperately.

Sighing, John drags the curls away from Sherlock's brow and drops his own dark blond head. He barely brushes the cartilage of Sherlock's ear for a moment, then nips at the lobe. His other hand passes downward, lightly skimming the detective's stomach, settling gently, and Sherlock breathes a bit easier.

"I've got you," he says quietly. Like a promise. "Whatever happens, I've got you."

Which is very much better.

"That much I know," Sherlock assures him, twisting his neck to look into John's eyes, because he means this sincerely. If John says he has Sherlock, if he is certain of his benevolent hold, then he is right. John has him.

And he does. He does then, when he smiles down and kisses Sherlock full on the mouth and Sherlock moans, and he does minutes later, when the slide of his prick grows carefully urgent, and he does when he starts murmuring tender nonsense like prayers into the chapel-like stillness of the club, and he has Sherlock steady and safe when he begins to lose his rhythm and slows, gently, gently, and he does when Sherlock reaches frantically back to grip him by the leg, and he does when he gasps and comes, breathing hard against Sherlock's neck, his panting indistinguishable from the trail of kisses he drags across Sherlock's slender shoulder blades.

John has him the entire while. So everything is fine.

Vaguely, Sherlock understands that John has left the bed, and he stretches out on his belly with his head in his arms, buzzing with absurdly fine tremors like champagne spilling through his arteries and veins. When the doctor returns, it is with a warm flannel, and he cleans Sherlock's lower back with a sure touch, kneeling on the mattress. Sherlock isn't fussed by the mess, but silently hopes that John will have the good sense to contribute to the room's air of general debauchery. Sure enough, he tosses the cloth across the room and it lands half-draped over the flat screen telly. Perfect.

"You're really fucking beautiful, by the way," John says, curling up on his side there in the bed.

Sherlock hums, pulling his knees up a bit and mirroring John. John brushes a thumb over his cheekbone. For a moment they simply look at each other. John appears somewhat awed.

This would be ridiculous under some circumstances, but Sherlock knows how he feels.


Obligingly, Sherlock slides over and finds himself with his head to John's chest, one knee over his shorter legs, the bedclothes helter-skelter and the shivery sensation still lingering in his spine. They lay there for a while, sharing silence. It's as nice as the sex, only calmer. The difference between a river and a waterfall. Neither is less or more powerful, and after all, the two add up to
the same thing at differing speeds. Sherlock could fall asleep again, he realizes to his own shock, registering the occasional brush of lips against his hairline.

"I hope somebody or other at some point has told you that," John muses, tightening his hold. "Even if he was a complete dickhead."

"Told me what?"

"That you're beautiful."

After considering the question, Sherlock realizes that he has in fact been told that, under very different circumstances, about six years ago.

_You've grown up to be so fucking beautiful_, Jim Moriarty wrote in perverse glee. _I'm so fond of your face, that incredible face of yours, that I can't help but want to borrow it. But supposing I cure it for a fancy dress mask, rest assured I'll create you a plastic replacement for the loss of skin. Can't have you DYING on me, now can I? Even if I always had your face preserved in leather to remember you by. I could put it on and touch myself and be both of us at once, for hours._

"Yes," Sherlock says reluctantly.

There is a knock at the door.

Shifting out from under his friend, John hops up and dons a robe from the closet. He seems rested. Restored, rather. Sherlock, careful of his palms, rolls to a sitting position and drapes the bedsheets over his lap. He reaches for his mobile, but nothing has changed. There are no messages, and this prickles at him again, creeps along his spine even as John methodically picks up his gun and goes to answer the door with an air of someone who will need very, very little provocation to shoot intruders.

Anthea, Mycroft's terribly condescending and rather beautiful minion, walks through the door. She is texting. She wears a tailored black skirt and jacket with a flowing satin blouse, the ivory material rippling. She effortlessly carries a heavy duffel bag which Sherlock recognizes at once as John's, and she places it on the floor next to the wardrobe. Presumably, she has been instructed to deliver some of their things, and this confirms Sherlock's long-held belief that Mycroft is notified the instant his younger sibling sets foot in the Diogenes.

The insufferable prat.

"Hullo," John says, forcing a smile. He returns his gun to the table top. "We were...um. Hi. Nice to see you."

Anthea looks grim. Her nicely round face is tense, her full lips puckered, her eyes dark, a line between them. Sherlock has never seen Anthea discomfited by anything. Ever. Nothing shakes her absent-minded little smirk, this is a principle of Sherlock's very existence. Once Mycroft had to deal with a serious nuclear threat, and the North Koreans merely managed to inspire Anthea to frown. Briefly. If Anthea is upset over something, that something is of proportions Sherlock doesn't immediately want to contemplate. She takes in the two flannels and the scantily clad men, wrinkles her nose slightly, and resumes texting.

"Good morning to you too," John says when he's had enough of this. "Is that a change of pants for us in my bag, then, or did I forget I was shipping back out?"

Anthea presses send and looks up blankly.
"Coffee? I can ring for a pot." John gestures in a way which is somehow thoroughly sarcastic and hospitable at once. It's miraculous.

"Ah," she says.


"Mmm, no time," Anthea says.

"Are we going somewhere?"

"Yes," she affirms readily.

"Am I meant to be contacting Moriarty? Did Mycroft find him? What's happened?" Sherlock demands.

"The answers are, respectively, no," Anthea says clearly, raising her eyebrows, "yes, and boom."

It takes Sherlock and John under half an hour to dress in fresh togs from the duffel and arrive at the crime scene in one of Mycroft's sleek black cars. When they reach the shabby suburb outside Havering, they find a quiet neighborhood swarming with police cars. Sherlock, feeling positively sick, steps out of the vehicle and flips up his collar, more as a shield than an effect for once. He hasn't eaten since the previous day, he realizes, and unexpected hunger is beginning to make itself evident in lightheadedness rather than simple stomach pangs. If he only had some cocaine, or better yet some morphine, his appetite wouldn't be rearing its inconvenient head.

_Hunger_, Sherlock assures himself against the onslaught of fear. _Post-coital sentiment. Hormonal backwash. That's all._

"Come on, then," Anthea says, walking briskly toward the center of the hubbub. "Your brother wants you."

"I could use that woman's personality on a sponge and completely sanitize our fridge," John mutters, buttoning his jacket and striding sturdily alongside Sherlock.

Sherlock scarcely hears him. _This is the balance_, he thinks, _this the price of the small white headless bird in the nest and the morning silence and the "I've got you." These are the consequences._ Plainclothesmen are everywhere, taking notes, talking in hushed tones. The sun has just risen and it paints a soft blue glow over the little houses and the chippy and the corner store and the florist's display and the shrapnel, shrapnel everywhere, worse than at Baker Street where it had merely blown through the windows, bits of wood and cinderblock and metal and plastic and ash and less identifiable materials. The pale light illuminates it all, the crowds with hands over their shaking mouths and the stone-faced bomb squad and Mycroft with his umbrella over one arm, pale and sour-looking, speaking into his mobile.

And the gaping, nauseating, smoking hole in the landscape that was once the dwelling of the blind old woman.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

FYI, folks, for people who might otherwise be confused or offended by a phrase or two in this chapter: the Sherlock in this story self-identifies as asexual and not gay. (Additionally, though he is romantically queer and sexually experienced, he is not very fluent in his own terminology. So one should see him as...however one wishes to see him.) I ran into bad fandom trouble with this issue in The Paradox Series years ago when that other (mad as ferrets) Sherlock failed to identify as gay because he was demisexual and thought it possible for himself to be attracted to a woman he loved, if only as a hypothetical, if she interested him.

For the record--if you're queer, cis, ace, demisexual, trans, gay, silly, purple, straight, only into robots--it's all fine by me.

If you want to read thousands of words of a deeply homosexual Sherlock Holmes I've written, one who flies as many flags as he can and bones dudes, head to liquidfic.org. If you want to complain, you may do so in 140 characters @wordstrings on Twitter. My people do not always fit under tidy umbrellas.

_It really is unfair, Sherlock thinks, that everyone else in the world makes life look so easy._

He stands in the hallway just outside the morgue at St. Bart's, and he sees his hand reaching into the innermost secret pocket his beautiful coat boasts, he can actually register his fingers moving though he cannot recall having told them to thrust, precisely, _John's fingers, these are only for him now, seeking, not just at present, you idiot, searching, John may have enjoyed them once, but not currently, and maybe never again, scrabbling across silk lining, anyway he'll recover eventually when you're finally dead after all, he's been through worse and come out the other side, and he locates the solitary cigarette, not a pack, it can't be, not when Lestrade can see the box as if he has X-ray vision, and he pulls the single drag out along with the lighter he might need for any number of other reasons._

Sherlock lights the cigarette. He feels a certain affection for this lonesome object, the one he is about to burn the heart out of. They are the same, Sherlock and this cigarette. Whimsy disgusts him, but this is different, this is synchronicity. They are paper-thin and stuffed with both power and poison, and they will fade to ash all too quickly, leaving behind only an acrid smoke aroma like the one lingering over the bomb site.

Sherlock presses his lips to the filter and _sucks_.

It's glorious. The light in here is pallid and harsh at once, and the floors are unpleasantly neutral, and the walls are boring, and the air is sanitized, but the bodies are ripening, ripening, ripening within the doors Sherlock awaits. Soon, they will open, and Molly will be here. Soon, there will be something useful to _do_.

If only for a moment.
Inhale. Hold.


Exhale.

Opening his eyes at the squeak-squeak of sensible shoes, Sherlock glowers. The nurse is unknown to him, and so is the doctor who comes next, and so is the janitor, and so is the mortician, and so is the coroner. He catches their gazes as they conduct their hurried dawn business, and he refuses to blink. A wave of contented defiance washes over Sherlock while the earliest risers of the students and the medicos pass by in a huff, glaring as if having a smoke indoors matters.

It doesn't matter.

It doesn't fucking matter.

None of it matters.

Morphine, Sherlock thinks. Soon.

Very soon.

He swallows against the pained lump in his throat.

"Must you?" Mycroft sighs, approaching as he taps on his infernal mobile.

"Oh, I don't know. Must you prevent me from phoning in the solution to a crime in order to stop a bomb threat and then drag me to a morgue to determine whether Moriarty's guts have made a nice composed salad with Rita's?" Sherlock questions in his iciest snarl.

Sherlock had helped the forensics teams--the actual Yard and Mycroft's flying monkeys alike--as best he could. Searching for tissue samples in debris isn't precisely his forte, but he had executed a long scan of the area and barked at anyone he suspected might have been stupidly contaminating something. (This was only a few people, as Sherlock thinks investigating the detonation site at all both a holy ritual and an utter waste of time.) He doesn't know the first thing about blast patterns, not really, but he knows everything about physics and about human behavior, so he can infer where the most important areas of focus are.

These inferences have led him to conclude that:

I refused to play his game, and now this. This is where it gets me. Jim Moriarty set off a fucking bomb strapped to an old woman to teach me a lesson.

This is where being brave and compliant got her, the terrified ancient voice on my mobile. This is where being subtle and careful and trusting got me. There is no defense against this brand of lunacy.

This is where we all arrive, here we go round the mulberry bush, Sherlock thinks, when I get six fucking hours of happiness.

He reads the report again in his mind's eye, the one from an hour ago when the wind was still in his hair and Anthea was still upset and John was still glowing, the one Mycroft passed to him on his own phone screen with a perfectly steady--yet unsettlingly subdued--hand.

Rita [REDACTED]. Height 1.69m, weight 130 lbs., DOB [REDACTED]. Blind, Caucasian,
schoolteacher, retired--

Sherlock winces his eyes shut and takes another drag when he remembers the terrible fact that Mycroft is actually present, at his elbow, and watching him closely.

"You care," Mycroft says, as if surprised.

Sherlock darts a look at The British Government. He twirls his umbrella against the floor obnoxiously.

Typical.

"That I'm about to..." Catching himself, Sherlock listens to the John in his head, and he doesn't say die horribly over the course of several decades? and merely raises a supercilious eyebrow.

Ridiculous of him, the decision to settle on a mere forehead lift. He can never win in this category; Mycroft is in a class by himself when it comes to displeased facial expressions. His brother's face folds into a thin sneer, like the origami version of a pig.

Sherlock very nearly sniggers at this comparison before catching himself.

"About his hostage, I mean," Mycroft sighs. "Rita, taught primary school and dabbled in art therapy, complete stranger, no one you have ever interacted with, and trust me, I know this to be fact."

Sherlock is silent. His lungs hurt terribly. He watches the smoke undulate, snakelike, before his lips.

"Comprehending your anxiety is simple, but comprehending your lack of control?"

Refusing to answer his brother generally feels like a privilege. This time, breathing through the cigarette as if he were deep underwater strapped to a tank, it feels like survival.

"I ought to care," Sherlock says in a too-small voice. "I'm in the same position as they are. If I don't care, who will?"

"Their families and friends, no doubt. Their lovers. Normal people. Refrain," Mycroft growls. "And spare me the histrionics. You are not in the same position. They are pawns in a greater game."

"Pawns are made of ivory and ebony and plastic and hardwood, Mycroft." There is a tiny bit of paper on his lip, and Sherlock plucks it away, my hands aren't trembling, they aren't, or not because of that, I simply have been too long without nicotine, perfectly natural to feel a bit unsettled over my first smoke in so long, and even apart from the nicotine, what with the acetaldehyde, arsenic, benzene, beryllium, cadmium, ethylene oxide, formaldehyde, furan, hydrazine, see there, perfectly normal, just what's always present in a cigarette, I'm fine, everything is fine. "Pawns don't die violently."

"They do, actually," Sherlock's horrid brother corrects. "Every day, all over the world."

Isoprene, lead, nitromethane, nitrosodiethylamine.

"Do all of them die for my sake?" Sherlock whispers. "Because I'm told that death by Sherlock Holmes is a fairly uncommon--"
"You didn't hurt her, for god's sake, James Moriarty did!" Mycroft turns his awful mouth entirely downward in an acidic frown. "Pull yourself together. Redbeard, Sherlock. Redbeard."

"Oh, please, not this again, I really haven't the strength this morning," Sherlock groans. He takes a thick, rebellious drag. "I'm not a child, Mycroft, and I am also not the Holmes who promised me he would save him. Then, after you had read every veterinary text you could get your hands on, it became rather clearer that cancer-ridden dogs still die, so don't lecture me on the subject of detachment. I was lied to. It's hardly my fault I was...

**Upset? Distressed? Gutted?**

*Nitrosonornicotine, polonium 210, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, o-toluidine, vinyl chloride. Also poisons present in cigarette smoke. In alphabetical order.*

Just now, inhaling carcinogens is the single thing that can make Sherlock feel remotely autonomous.

Sherlock remembers Mycroft's pudgy, earnest, humorless face poring over a medical text Sherlock could barely lift at the time—long, long ago, before Moriarty and Carl Powers, before Mycroft abandoned him, before the advent of other children and before Reggie Musgrave and before the concept of death.

*Mycroft sat at his desk every single day leading up to the dreaded appointment when they put Redbeard down, hardly eating and snappish with worry and hunger, his fingers tracing complex medical diagrams, growing more and more doubtful, the landscape of his entire face changing as he discovered that 1) Living things die 2) People make mistakes 3) People break promises. By the time we got in the car to drive to the veterinary hospital, Mycroft looked like a portrait of himself and was officially a brittle, pompous adult for the remainder of his days.*

"Bereft," Mycroft says as a disapproving ending to Sherlock's abandoned sentence, and Sherlock could simply put his hands around the man's throat. "I did all I could for the hostage this morning, and some progress was made toward Moriarty's apprehension, but why should you feel so distastefully...invested? And in a stranger? Speaking of which, go on about your business," he adds to the doctor who stops to give Sherlock's cigarette a nasty look.

The stranger hurries off, muttering at his clipboard.

Sherlock blows a massive cloud of smoke into the air in anticipation of the next passerby, daring them to confront him.

"I ask again, Sherlock, why should you care about--"

"What, you don't?" Sherlock demands, waving his fag in his brother's face. "This appears to have turned into a fully-fledged war, and I'm sure it's hell on the traffic. If that doesn't disconcert you, think of what loads and loads of central London bombings could do to your career, and I'm sure you'll step up eventually."

"That is absurdly unjust of you," Mycroft says, low enough to mean it. He shifts his tie. *Fucking arrogant goddamn safe unthreatened healthy useless brilliant loyal dismissive fucking fat prig.*

"So do you care about Rita, then?" Sherlock asks, entirely nonchalant.

"I don't care about any of his hostages save in the abstract. Will caring about them help save
them?" Mycroft asks in his mildest, smuggest tone.

"I don't know," Sherlock spits venomously. "Redbeard, Mycroft. Will caring about me help save me? Because the answer is no for the foreseeable future, thank you for proving it."

A pause follows this outburst. A pause appropriate for their immediate surroundings, smelling of too-sanitized affections and never-declared alliances. It smacks of accidentally discarded letters. Sherlock wishes he had another cigarette. This one is nearly gone. He wishes he could take back his last remark. He wishes John would come back already. He wishes his brother would say something.

"Your loss," Mycroft states carefully, voice thrumming with energy, "would break my heart."

"Oh, what in hell am I supposed to do with that?" Sherlock cries, smashing the end of his fag against the wall and dropping it to the linoleum. "Now I'm meant to feel responsible for the fact your heart will be broken shortly? I'm meant to feel guilty over it? Fuck. You."

Mycroft's expressive mouth twitches, but his lips thin into a grim line as he declines to respond. He next produces an even more reprehensible scowl than he can usually manage and stalks away.

Fine, Sherlock thinks. Quit on me. See if I care.

I do, you know.

Sherlock presses his knuckles into his eyes so hard that he can see white spots blaze across his vision.

Why is it so easy for every other--

"I have the...um. Ready. Oh. Oh, Sherlock. Here, right...just...come in, yeah, that's good. So, I have, I said the. Results of... Are you...? No, sit, sit here, there we are. OK! Good."

A few moments later, Sherlock finds himself seated in the morgue before Molly Hooper's computer. She hovers before him like a peculiarly annoying angel, making vague sounds in her airy little soprano. She smells of coffee and chamomile body wash and cat dander. Comforting. There is water near his right hand seconds afterward, poured straight from the morgue taps into her coffee mug, which still vaguely resembles the coffee which was just housed there. This is displeasing, but hardly her fault--she is trying her best, after all.

Molly is always trying her best.

Looking up, Sherlock takes in Molly's appearance this morning. She is wearing no makeup, her hair done in about half of a rapidly knotted braid that she abandoned for a ponytail, her cheeks flushed and her warm brown eyes watering. Her lips are doing that very peculiar thing they do, displaying like a great public billboard that she wants to speak and is forcing herself to remain quiet lest she make a fool of herself. Sherlock has always loved that expression. It reminds him of everything he has ever said.

"I ought to have called you," Sherlock realizes, clearing his throat. "When Moriarty escaped. I ought to have known that we would..."

Molly tries to look supportive, which comes off as a flinch.

Sherlock waves his hand, unable to parse that he always knew he would require her help and didn't bother asking in advance of the necessity. "This was always going to happen, right," he
waffles, "you know all about the story and the, yes, but I never told you it had...started. Ready to have a little fun?"

The sleuth attempts to smile at her. This is usually the quickest route to getting whatever he wants, and he isn't sure what he wants right now, so the smile is probably necessary.

Molly pulls away in stark horror. Then she surges forward again.

"Oh, Sherlock."

Finding his face mashed up against Molly Hooper's soft breasts when she embraces him a moment later, Sherlock still seated and Molly clutching at his hair, her white coat scratching his cheek and her own lungs heaving, is marginally less repugnant than he would have expected if asked to predict his own reaction hypothetically.

Still. Not ideal.

Sherlock splutters a bit, which only makes her grip him tighter. Molly is one of the only friends he has apart from Mrs. Hudson and the skull, and it occurs to him that John's arrival meant he stopped going to Bart's to muck about with Molly's corpses.

And now this. Now he turns up at her virtual doorstep with an exploded old woman murdered by his arch-nemesis and asks her to have a little fun.

Comprehensive moron that you are.

"Don't look at the readout, you don't have to, just, I can tell you it's not him," Molly says breathlessly.

Sherlock doesn't mind the concept of breast tissue per se, but he tries not do anything one isn't meant to do when one's lips and eyes and cheeks are mashed up against, this, this...glandular, natural, not remotely repulsive, but very soft in texture, and I'm just not meant to be against it in quite this way any longer, not since biological necessity, and these seem quite excellent specimens, but where was the turning point which landed me, fucking hell, oh my god--

"It's all...Rita, the um." Molly squeezes Sherlock's skull convulsively. "Victim. I wanted, god, to be able to tell you that he's...he didn't. Die. Or not...that we know of. The only tissue matches were hers. Sherlock, I'm so sorry."

"You're sorry Jim Moriarty isn't dead in a bomb blast and you only ID'ed bits of the hostage?"

"Of course I am," she says through clenched teeth.

Unthinkingly, Sherlock smiles and sighs against her lab coat.

Breast tissue is...

He makes a strangely puckered face but swiftly recovers. She didn't see it, anyhow--couldn't have done.

Surprisingly OK.

Molly Hooper is a very peculiar person. One of the maddest he has ever encountered, in fact. She is both awkwardness and decency personified, and how this led her to work with cadavers, Sherlock has never bothered to ask. So he knows merely that she favours new oddly
matched knitwear every winter, many of which pieces are created by her cousin in Northamptonshire, and he knows the sorts of crisps she likes, and that she believes in nonsensical designations like the colour yellow being "happy." Her mouth is thin, and looks better with lipstick, but she vacillates wildly between her desire to feel pretty-but-not-trying versus pretty-and-obviously-trying.

She is an outstanding technician and an even better scientist, and Sherlock feels lucky to have met her all those years ago. Six, to be precise.

Unfortunately, she is probably in love with him.

Sherlock never quite screwed up the courage to say, my penis is non-functional save for the infrequent occasions when I want to cut it off, however. It's much easier to say, black, two sugars, please, when she asks if he would like to have coffee.

"I really, um," Sherlock says a moment later, taking her by both hips and pushing when the maternal aspect becomes just too daunting.

Molly allows him to force her back a bit, but her delicate hands remain tightly clasped to his shoulder and his nape. Something about Molly is different, wrong, meanwhile. Is it the--

"Why haven't you rung me?" she squeaks, shaking him vigourously. "You're not meant to do this alone, you stupid man."

"I'm not, well, alone precisely. You've...met my brother," Sherlock manages.

She blinks several times. "Yes, and he's...nice."

"No, he isn't," Sherlock exclaims, a surprised laugh emerging from his throat.

Molly blushes. "Well, he, he's very, I don't know, but--"

"Erm. Hi, there."

Sherlock turns to see John standing in the doorway of the morgue, just precisely where he was meant to be about five minutes ago. The doctor's face has smoothed out all its wrinkles, as if looking as cheerily like fresh-ironed linen as possible is what's called for in this situation.

"Hello," Sherlock says, relieved. "Molly, this is Dr. John Watson."

John has a bag in his hand which contains the only foodlike items Sherlock thought he could ingest twenty minutes ago without being sick: coffee, ironically enough, and a plain croissant.

Sherlock's friend advances several feet into the morgue. He is smiling now, good, they'll get on, good, and then he stops, coughing significantly into his hand.

"Molly, you said?" John bites out. "Nice to meet you."

Oh.

Sherlock, who had physically forgot he was framing Molly's hips with his overlarge hands and that she had clung to him like a limpet the instant she had him in grabbing range, kicks back in her roller chair and sends himself bumping into her desk.

That...yes.
That explains it. The smiling like that.

John is absolutely bloody furious.

Of course, Sherlock thinks, chalking it up to the simple fact that independent consulting detectives were not actually meant to live happily on this planet.

John ambles over to Sherlock with the bag, setting it on the desk and briefly frowning at the computer screen. John shakes his head, disappointed at the forensic results he can see there. They are merely raw data, but nothing is helpful. Sherlock already recorded it anyway, but...disappointing. Reaching into the white paper sack, John passes Sherlock his coffee and leans in for a brief kiss at the same time.

His head recoils almost immediately.

"Smoking, too?" he exclaims. "Jesus Christ. Your stomach was bothering you, and I leave you alone for five minutes, and you have a new girlfriend and a fresh cigarette prob--"

"No," Sherlock protests, holding his hands up. "Well, technically yes, but--"

"Oh, really?"

"No, yes, I--"

"No and yes on which counts, Sherlock?" John asks, smiling ferociously.

"Did you just--" Molly whispers, backing away with her hands behind her back.

"Yes, one cigarette," Sherlock admits to John, whose eyes are molten, "but that isn't a problem, at the time it was a solu--"

"You're gay?" Molly questions in a mortified rasp. Her eyes are as wide as dinner plates. "I never, I mean, I wouldn't have, not that I'm against, I'm not, I never was, but--"

"No, he's not gay," John says coolly, pulling out his own coffee and sipping it as if he has all the time in the world.

"You're not gay?" Molly directs to Sherlock, practically shrieking.

"I'm not straight either," Sherlock blurts out.

"But a moment ago, he just--"

"He's right," Sherlock hastens to add, and why does she look different than usual, "in the sexual sense, if exclusively the sexual sense, which is the reason--"

"In the sexual sense you're not gay and he just tried to kiss you?" Molly gasps. "Sherlock, who is this--"

"Bisexual myself, ta for asking," John interjects. "And you're--"

"Sorry I ever got up this morning." Molly's face collapses in on itself as she shakes her head.

"Seeing him smoking again is admittedly disappointing," John allows dryly, brushing a hand through the hair at Sherlock's temple.
"Stop it!" Sherlock exclaims, increasingly mortified at this display. He blocks John's forearm and the doctor glares with sniper-sight eyes. They shift, then harden again to military blue crosshairs.

**Something else just happened, Sherlock realizes. Something that wasn't as much my fault as the rest of it. I wonder what it was.**

"I didn't, um, want to see you smoking again either," Molly forces through a hoarse throat. "Sherlock, why are you letting this, I mean, are you uncomfor--"

"I'm pretty goddamn uncomfortable," John says brightly, grinning.

"I'm...I didn't mean..." Molly stammers.

"But just the one cigarette and the one new girlfriend? I can live with it. We'll work it out."

"Why are you acting like this?" Sherlock demands, catching John by the wrist and nearly spilling his coffee.

"Yes, why do you keep touching him?" Molly adds, lips trembling for entirely separate reasons.

"Because I'm pretty gone on him and he likes being touched." John beams. "What's your excuse?"

Molly shakes her head a few times. She pulls at the edge of her white coat, looking as if her heart is breaking and this, again, is Sherlock's fault.

Sherlock's fault he was lazy and demanding and arrogant and just that little bit charming. Now Molly will hate him. Sherlock never even pictured her hating him before, her admiration was such a peripherally distasteful constant. He never even had to brush it off very hard, and she never offered it too frequently. He knew he couldn't please her, and she seemed to have sensed (if only distantly) that he was freakish. Now she will walk away in flaming gasoline trails with her hairline all mussed where it was neatly pulled back and her tiny fingers remembering Sherlock's skin under theirs.

Sherlock loves John to the point of death, but he could slap the man just now.

"It...might have maybe been the same excuse, I think," Molly gasps before she turns and departs through a too-heavy exit door, banging her elbow and refusing to yelp over it.

**Four pounds, Sherlock thinks.**

That's what was nagging him. Molly is four pounds lighter than when last they spoke.

"She's lost four pounds since I met you," he calculates, eager for both of them to have all the facts. "That was...I should have seen it sooner, it was in the back of my mind but I couldn't pin it down. Four pounds."

John is silent for a very long moment.

"That..." he says, and then pauses, biting his lip.

"Was my only friend in the world other than my landlady and a fucking skull, yes. Well deduced, John."

"And you..."

"Never outed myself as ace to her."
"So I just..."

"Yep."

Sherlock crooks his elbow and curls up against Molly's desk, shutting his eyes, deciding to live in her unfinished paperwork. At first, the darkness is a blessing. Soon, though, it grows uneasy. Both men are quiet as John takes deep, uncomfortable breaths.

Finally, after perhaps two minutes have passed, John speaks. His voice is deliberately calm.

"Um. Wow. First, I would like to personally apologize to you for whatever ignorant madness that was, and assure you that I am about to go after your friend Molly and apologize to her as well. There is no excuse for what I just did, but if I were to offer any information you might find relevant, I would include a pretty strong desire to claim you as mine in the face of what Moriarty is trying to do to you, which is a shitty hormonal impulse but also my job to regulate, never yours, and also...pure male stupidity. Please forgive me if you are able, and without taking either of those factors into account. Claiming extenuating circumstances would be, um, obscene at this point. That was. I have no words for how appalling I just was."

"Mm," Sherlock says, tucking his nose further into his Belstaff. His head is too muzzy to either agree or disagree. He only knows he feels worse and not better, but his emotions are hardly a normative rubric. "You could make an argument that what you just did is kinder in the long run than what I was doing all these years. Keeping myself to myself unless I needed her. Or wanted her company."

Sherlock hears the breath leave John's lungs. The doctor is leaning against the desk, half curved over Sherlock's nestled form, clearly wanting to touch and not allowing himself to do so. "No, Sherlock, that...that was not kind. What I just did was unkind, and I'm so very sorry."

Nodding against his coat sleeve, Sherlock wishes John would break the touch barrier which has apparently sprung up.

The soldier doesn't. He merely floats, loudly thinking.

"I'm sorry for hurting her, but I'm more sorry for implying anything whatsoever about you," John says deliberately. "And you have plenty of other friends, by the by, you just fail to notice them when they're speaking. Meanwhile, may I ask you a few tactical questions? With your permission, and again, I--"

Sherlock waves a hand, keeping his eyes closed. Anything is better than the absurd protocol which is taking place at present.

"Moriarty is not dead?" John wants to know.

"Not unless he's dead somewhere other than the bomb site," Sherlock drawls.

"Do you know yet why the bomb was detonated?"

"Mycroft was pursuing a lead to the house. Moriarty lost patience and decided to teach the Holmes family a lesson in terrorist-hunting etiquette. The results you have seen. Voila. C'est tout."

"Christ," John sighs. "Yeah, I sort of...gathered that, but--"

"Mycroft explained to me that he had been scouring CCTV. A few days ago, he started cross-referencing footage against feed from known safehouses visited by the security guard Moriarty all
but kidnapped from his special detail," Sherlock explains. His tongue is sore. His lungs scratch. He wants another cigarette. He wants John's hand to stop hovering over his hair and fucking touch it already. "Well...not kidnapped. Extorted, anyhow. Forced into mistakes because his loved ones were threatened and harmed."

"I kind of know the feeling," John says. There are entire universes of apology in this statement.

"If you want a tactical update, then shut up while I give you one," Sherlock snaps. His eyes remain closed, head cradled on his elbow.

"Yeah, sorry, I." John clears his throat. "Yes, his family died in a gas explosion."

"So then you actually remember the man to whom I am referring? From when Moriarty wanted the guard to take his gum in the video?"

"Yeah," John says in an I will kill him and laugh afterwards voice.

"Well, he was a veteran of special forces. One of Mycroft's top hirings, as you recall. That's why they assigned him to guard Moriarty in the first place, he'd trained in every necessary area and went through hell overseas. So my brother thought Moriarty couldn't scare this particular fellow, but..." Fighting a sick little wave of fear, Sherlock grits his teeth and keeps going. "Intel indicates Moriarty and the specially assigned guard are still together. Proximally speaking. So Mycroft's people were looking for breadcrumbs through the forest, and it turns out that Rita--"

"Rita?"

_The blind woman I blew to bits just now_, Sherlock doesn't say.

"The hostage victim of the terrorist blast was named Rita--but she had just moved in, the place was at one point a haven for people actively shifting identities," Sherlock explains. "Mycroft thinks Moriarty is taking his new pet for a tour of old neighbourhoods. It's not merely practical for ex-cons, it's symbolic. Meaningful. That's what started this mess. Moriarty was too well prepared not to notice Mycroft nosing about, and now..."

"Now I've hurt one of your friend's feelings, and we've...lost one."

"Technically," Sherlock hisses, furious. "Technically, we lost one. But technically, I won that one too. And yes, you did hurt Molly's feelings. She has far too many of them for comfort as it is."

"Oh, then no wonder you two are thick as thieves," John surmises softly. "His voice is very sorrowful. "May I kiss you somewhere that doesn't require you to be, um, remotely reciprocal before I run after her and grovel for forgiveness? Say no if you like, of course."

"I suppose," Sherlock grants after considering. His limbs have been stuffed with ashes by this time, his muscles ground to powder. Dry lips brush hard against his cheekbone and are gone again, but it is enough. It is safer this way. More contact would have led to terrible raw feelings, and Sherlock suspects he doesn't have the time for those.

"Do you ever think about string theory?" Sherlock whispers without permission from his brain.

"Uh. Yeah, I guess when...I've read... Sorry?"

_In how many universes could I have saved Rita?_ Sherlock wonders numbly.
In every universe save this one? In none? In most? In only a few? Had the circumstances been ever so slightly different, would she be alive now, and if those had changed, might I not be alive to save her by this point in time at all, or worse still, would John not be alive for me to meet him, thereby rendering all my victories hollow, and meanwhile, though we never sat down to tea, and I ought not to care, could I ever ever ever ever ever ever ever have saved her?

"Nothing. To do with the case," Sherlock grates.

John's feet stand, Sherlock hears.

John tries to sigh silently but proves ineffectual.

John leaves with his fist pressed over his lips.

Exit John.

Fuck absolutely everything, Sherlock determines, I shall live in the sleeve of this coat.

When Sherlock comes back to himself and sits up, Mycroft is magically seated across from him, at the corner desk Molly has sadly abandoned, working on his phone. The detective smells that the coffee is still hot and reaches for it.

The cigarette gave him a headache that can be easily counteracted by morphine, please soon, just a taste of--

"I'm sorry," Mycroft says primly. "I ought not to have compared a life or death scenario spanning many years to the loss of a family pet."

Sherlock's eyes fill traitorously, so he pretends to kick the floor beneath his rolling chair and twirl in an uncaring circle.

Mycroft very sensibly ignores him.

"I'm sorry," the detective offers steadily after three revolutions. "I ought not to have suggested your career was remotely important enough for you to worry over. And no, you can't save me any more than you could our dog. We'll have to do it together. Maybe even with...outside help."

Mycroft makes the cream-licking expression he only uses at time of extreme relief. Sherlock doesn't care for the look, but this time it fails to chafe quite so astringently.

"No John?" Mycroft asks a few seconds later, wonderfully uncaring. As if John could not possibly be Up to No Good.

"He had a fit of sexual jealously," Sherlock says, grinning.

The volley has the desired effect.

"Kill me," Mycroft sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose, "kill me--"

Sherlock's phone chimes.

They both freeze.

"Shall I, brother mine?" Mycroft intones, holding out his palm.

"No need," Sherlock answers, reaching into his pocket.
Mycroft leans forward. Sherlock rolls the wheeled chair around to give his intolerable sibling a clear view from behind his head.

The picture sent to the mobile is of a very emaciated person. He is deadly pale, with the protruding, brilliant eyes of a man whose spirit is greater than his strength. But what shocks Sherlock beyond any signs of physical weakness is the fact that his face is grotesquely criss-crossed with electrical tape, and that one large pad of it is fastened over his mouth.

**SHERLOCK, MISSED YOU EARLIER, POPPET!** is written across his cheek on the grey plastic.

**JOHN SHOULD BE ON A FUCKING POSTAGE STAMP! LIFE-SIZED!** is scrawled half-over his swollen left eye.

**FUCK YOU ALWAYS, FOREVER, AND SIDEWAYS, MYCROFT HOLMES!** is penned over the tape covering his mouth.

It is about to become very difficult for Sherlock to function properly when suddenly Mycroft sucks in a breath and enters a number on his mobile. Sherlock's head turns over the back of the chair, confounded.

"What? Do you know what this fourth pip means? Do you have something?"

"No, but Mr. Moriarty apparently has."

"Has what?"

"Special Forces Agent Paul Kratides," Mycroft hisses, grimacing as the call connects and he lifts it to his ear.
Chapter 23

In retrospect, the worst part is that Sherlock doesn't even think twice about it.

His mistake doesn't occur to him. Not once. He is striding through the hallways next to his brother, sweeping past technicians and visiting loved ones and students and hollow-eyed patients in wheelchairs, thinking furiously, heading for the hospital's nearest exit. Mycroft, who never mutters to himself, is muttering to himself. It's extremely troubling. Recalling unfinished business, Sherlock whips his mobile out of his pocket and sends a text:

*Molly will be on the roof. She always goes there on fine days when she's upset. SH*

He presses *Send*.

*Vatican Cameos. SH* he texts next, and sends it to Shinwell Johnson as per their arrangement.

He is still free. For the moment, anyhow.

Mycroft elbows the glass door open and Sherlock follows in his wake, the cool, clean air of autumn sliding its smooth hand against his skin. Sherlock suppresses a shiver. A large black car pulls up instantly and the two men get in. The detective pulls the door shut and the driver shifts gears and glides out of the passenger pickup area. Tapping his fingers against his knee, Sherlock sighs shallowly. His phone buzzes and he glances at the screen. It's from John.

*Thanks, love. I'm sorry.*

The little flutter his heart gives is nonsensical, but Sherlock swallows down the sweet pulse of nerves and traces the word *love* with his smallest finger.

"The Diogenes Club, please," Mycroft calls to the driver, who promptly prepares to make a turn.

"Why?" Sherlock inquires.

"We are meeting someone there. Someone...of relevance."

"I've been having copious sex there, you should know. All over the guest room. There's come everywhere. Housekeeping will want a tip, I'll text you a reminder when you settle the bill. Semen is much more difficult to remove when dry."

Mycroft grimaces, grimaces with *his entire body*, from his head to his toes, and it's absolutely splendid. Sherlock refuses to giggle. It would ruin the completeness of his triumph.

"Voluntarily, I take it," his brother drawls.

"Eagerly. Sometimes I drop to my knees and--"

"Spare me," Mycroft snaps. "You have lived monastically for over seven years, a vast improvement upon the previous situation I might add, and surely you realize that this sudden desire for coitus is an aberration."

"So is John Watson."

"Yes, I have in fact gathered that. And I have gathered that you both appear to be suffering from a foolish yet mutual obsession. But as for the carnal relations when your preferred modus operandi
is total celibacy--I don't pretend to understand it at all."

"And I don't pretend to understand your urge to inflict diabetes on yourself, but--"

"Is he good to you?" Mycroft demands suddenly.

Lips parting, Sherlock stares in astonishment.

"We're...are we dishing now?" Sherlock splutters. "About feelings?"

"Of course not. But you deserve someone who treats you well without taking advantage. If he desires your company and holds a genuine regard, fine. If he desires favours from you in exchange for something, for anything, then we have a problem. And if he desires a pet, he can get a goldfish."

Sherlock opens and closes his mouth several times. Mycroft just sounded...not the smallest bit smug. He is now sitting there, waiting, wearing a thin but neutral expression. Expectant.

"No one has ever treated me like this," Sherlock admits softly.

"I see," Mycroft says, sounding pleased. "And I suspected as much. In that case, I shall allow it to continue. Now, to the matter at hand. If Moriarty has taken Paul Kratides as his latest hostage--"

"He hasn't," Sherlock interrupts, realizing this to be true only as he says it. "He may have been in the same room with him, or simply sent a message to the true kidnapper to write those messages, but another hostage, the real one, will be calling any moment."

Shinwell Johnson replies a second later.

Ten-four, message received, saw the blast on the telly, was about to ring up myself, was a wee bit worried and all, never implying that you're not better than capable of defending yourself, heaven forbid I imply weakness where none exists, carry on and best of luck with the day, plenty confident in your ability to kick some serious fucking arse.

"Ah. Of course, how thick of me. Symmetry."

"Precisely." Placing the phone on his lap, Sherlock presses the bruise on his left hand with his right thumb, the sudden ache helping to clear his mind. "He's been giving me cases to solve which he orchestrated, but he was always a third party consultant from prison. This is no different. I don't know why Kratides is being held, but it's in order to solve someone else's problem, dear Jim will you sort this for me, and unfortunately a new pawn ought to be ringing me at any moment. I suspect that you were meant to recognize Kratides, following your tracking Moriarty to Rita's house. They'd have known you would be with me in the aftermath of the bomb blast. He's special forces, you said?"

"A linguist."

"Any good?"

"One of my best. Greek by birth, but he speaks nineteen languages."

"Who wants him out of the way?"

"A number of people. He has been many times privy to quite sensitive information."

Sherlock's phone chimes. The message is, predictably, from John.
Just found her on the roof, like you said. I'll keep you posted.

Sherlock's fingers quickly swipe out a return message.

She likes something or other called Austen novels. And chocolate. You could offer a bribe. SH

Mycroft, who was gazing out the window with one finger crooked over his thin lips as the streets pass by, glances coolly at Sherlock. "You're very...distracted. What happened while I was out?"

"Nothing," Sherlock lies. "Is there any further connection between Kratides and Moriarty? Anything that suggests itself to you?"

His phone buzzes.

Sherlock, they're called peace offerings, not bribes, and everyone likes Jane Austen novels and chocolate. Shut up, my beautiful darling. I'm busy having a chin wag with your girlfriend.

Despite himself, Sherlock smiles.

John is fixing it. John is a doctor, he knows how to fix things. John is warm and marvelous and jealous and good and maybe just a tiny bit stroppy for a saint, but John is a healer in addition to being a killer and John will repair Molly and maybe if Sherlock lives, Molly will still ring him when interesting corpses arrive, like the one with the left hand and right hand switched postmortem and sewn with fishing line, that was marvelous and led to a cracking good case after Lestrade was called in, and maybe Molly will even still scrunch her nose at Sherlock the way she always does when he sniffs at dead people to gather data. He loves when she does that.

Sherlock has never had a sister, but he can imagine what it would be like, less oil and rust and vitriol than his relationship with Mycroft, more cotton and afternoon breeze, and Molly feels like that. She always has. He has never liked the thought of her being hurt, and every time he began to say, you know, the only person who touches my dick is me, and even I'm not keen, he pictured her deep doe eyes widening and her chin twitching and her almost puppyish affection waning, fading, dissolving away into indifference or worse, perhaps even hatred along Reggie Musgrave lines, and Sherlock realizes something truly terrible.

He hadn't minded that Molly was in love with him--he'd counted on it. If she was in love with him, she would never leave, and would never stop smiling unthinkingly when he waltzed into the morgue at odd hours unannounced, and Sherlock feels so guilty that his chest clenches as he sends another text:

She's not my girlfriend. She likes compliments, too. About her appearance and hygiene. Tell her that her hair looks nice. SH

"As a matter of fact, there is a connection," Mycroft assents, adjusting his cuffs. "Kratides is known to the high-security guard Moriarty has co-opted from my team. They collaborated on a mission together in Istanbul some years back."

I showed her your text and told her that her hair looks clean. She's laughing. I'm hoping she'll like me despite the fact I'm a total cock.

"Sebastian Moran and Paul Kratides?" Sherlock muses. "Oh! Elegant."

"I rather thought so as well."

"You set your best man to guard Moriarty, Moriarty gets to him anyway, but he's too well-trained
and too tough not to need reminding now and then that he has one remaining family member and that everyone can be got to, so Moriarty takes him for a visit to a former ally who for whatever unknown reason is being held against his will, making the point that he requires Moran's total obedience at the same time he gives me a new case. So Moriarty did write those messages himself." Sherlock blinks at the passing houses in the brightening daylight. They are nearly to the Diogenes now, and the buildings are very grand and very old. "I wonder who needs Kratides alive but captive."

"I plan to put the very same question to a certain Mr. Melas, who is due to arrive in a quarter of an hour," Mycroft reports in a clipped tone. "By that time--"

Sherlock's mobile rings stridently. He doesn't even try to disguise his wince, and Mycroft makes a moue of combined sympathy and distaste.

"Hello?" Sherlock says, answering.

"In your own time," Sherlock grits out in the Stranger's Room of the Diogenes Club. They are surrounded by immaculately clean bookshelves, and the lighting is low and clear and golden, and the rugs are very deep, and the house is entirely quiet save for where Sherlock, Mycroft and Melas are seated before a curtained picture window. "But quite quickly."

*I have a child to save this time,* he thinks, and refuses to flinch when he hears the high, piping voice of the terrified little boy again.

Mr. Melas is a short, stout man whose olive face and coal black hair proclaim his southern heritage, though when he speaks, he sounds like any other public school Englishman. *First generation to be born here, studied abroad in India, intelligence worker, gay but doesn't talk about it, art collector in his spare time,* Sherlock deduces without saying anything.

"I worked closely with Paul--we were in the same department," Melas explains. "Mr. Holmes here will tell you that we've all been worried sick over Paul since he vanished. I'd almost given up hope of his being alive at all. We make a great many enemies in our line of work, you understand. But this matter of kidnapping...that's a new line altogether. Surely we can get somewhere with that, even if we don't know where he's being held."

"I'm all attention," Sherlock urges impatiently. "What was Kratides working on when he disappeared?"

Mr. Melas darts a worried look at Mycroft, who smiles in a vulture-like fashion at him.

"You may tell my brother whatever you imagine to be relevant. In fact, I suggest you do so quickly and efficiently, as otherwise I would not have summoned you here," he says silkily.

Nodding, Mr. Melas licks his lips and continues. "Well, recently there have been developments in a certain variety of codes that contain a linguistic element. They are...how shall I put this...rendered more difficult to break due to the fact that patterns fail to emerge as readily when the message is translated into multiple languages before being encrypted. Terror cells are beginning to
use them. Paul and I were working with our top codebreakers to work out intercepted messages. Any number of those operatives might wish Paul harm. I'm referring to several radical groups, mind--they're based in Iraq, Pakistan, Syria. These are ruthless killers we're talking about. So when he disappeared--"

"We put every available agent on the task of tracing those who might have had reason to wish Kratides, Melas, and company stopped," Mycroft supplies smoothly. "The results have been disappointing."

Sherlock steeples his fingers, shifting in his chair. "Of course they have been--you were in essence searching for a body that didn't yet exist. If someone wanted the talent behind your operation stopped, why kidnap Kratides? Why keep him and starve him? Why not kill him?"

"It doesn't fit," Melas agrees, shrugging sadly. "I confess I thought as you did--I imagined Paul was already dead."

"Could someone be coercing him into translating a message or breaking a code against his will?" Sherlock asks his brother.

Mycroft waves a languid hand. "Possible, but extremely unlikely. I can think of eight more probable scenarios. Paul is a linguist, not a cryptographer. He was part of a team. And if they need something translated, why not simply find a willing party?"

Sherlock considers. It is fully morning now, the sun burning the edges of the discreet curtains half-pulled over the picture window, and somewhere a little boy is sobbing, strapped into a semtex vest, and Sherlock knows precisely how little boys feel when they are frightened, it is all-consuming and wretched and ferocious and nauseating, Sherlock has felt just so many, many times, because of the same man, in fact, and that identical psychopath selected a little boy specifically because he thought it would mindfuck Sherlock, this other little boy is entirely innocent, dragged into a madman's elaborate vengeance and likely to be as permanently scarred by it as Sherlock is, thought to a lesser degree perhaps, the unnamed boy will never never never never be the same afterwards no matter what Sherlock does, how quickly he wins the day, and this thought more than anything infuriates the sleuth.

"Tell me about Kratides," he says, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. "Tell me everything. Don't be discreet. Ready, set, go."

Mr. Melas, his voice a bit uncertain, does so. He speaks of Kratides and his time at Eton and Cambridge, his lingering preoccupation with rowing, the fact his colleague spent several years in America as a child, that his top languages, the ones he's really flawless in, are Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish apart from English and Greek, that he is unmarried but dates a number of women, that he came from a very wealthy family with coffee concerns in Columbia, that the great tragedy of his personal life is that his sister Sophy Kratides is a heroin addict who spends months at a time on the streets, suffers through rehab, then uses again, that when vacationing Paul is partial to coastal areas because he is a scuba enthusiast, that his only vice is expensive cigars, that--

The sister, Sherlock thinks, and his eyes fly open.

"Yes?" Mycroft croons, but there is a suppressed note of pride beneath the nonchalance.

Standing, Sherlock begins to pace. "This is personal, it has to be," he says breathlessly. "It's been personal every time. Jonas Oldacre wanted revenge and framed his ex's son for murder. Grant Roylott wanted to keep the family fortune and murdered one of his stepdaughters. Maria Pinto-Gibson framed her rival for murder by shooting herself. This is family. It must be family, this is
just another domestic gone terribly wrong, he's rich, you said, or the family is, and the sister is a heroin addict? We have to trace the sister. Where does she live currently? She's to do with this, I'd bet my life on it."

*You're actually betting someone else's life on it at the moment,* Sherlock remembers, but he is certain.

These cases are all of a pattern. Decayed families, blighted relationships, hate warped into love, greed flowering in soil meant to cultivate ease and affection--twisted, sickening acts that bear no resemblance to the best of human relations, and Moriarty has been giving Sherlock a tour, he realizes, of total depravity. Sherlock's stomach turns over, but he manages to keep his face impassive.

Mr. Melas's eyes are wide. Mycroft is already on his phone, dialing as he purses his lips.

Sherlock's pocket trembles and he reaches into it.

*Might not be completely sorted, but the waterworks have stopped and she accepted my apology. There was a hug. I'll keep at it.*

"Yes, Anthea, please trace the whereabouts to the best of our knowledge of Kratides' sister," Mycroft requests. "More likely to be a drug den or a subletting situation than anything actually documented, but leave no stone unturned."

"It's awful to think about," Mr. Melas says, his tanned, appealing face tight with anger. "Are you sure about this, Mr. Holmes? I hope you're wrong. It was bad enough when we thought Paul had been murdered by terrorists, but the thought of his very own sister--"

"I once won a card game with the Clarence House Cannibal, a card game a pretty hefty wager was riding on to boot, and she ate her own brother over the course of a month after strangling and butchering him," Sherlock snaps. "She kept different cuts in the freezer, used the thigh meat for a stir-fry with Chinese veg and the back meat for steak and ale stew, as I recall, I got a bolthole out of it but I don't think the brother benefited very much that I solved the case and won the poker game, as he'd already been digested and all, and yes, this has to do with the fucking sister. Do not hope that I am wrong."

Sherlock pulls his phone out when he hears another chime. John again.

*Where the bloody fuck are you????*

Sherlock's blood freezes in his veins for a moment. He is a statue supported by a cardiovascular system that has petrified.

*John. Fucking, fucking, fucking hell.*

*John.*

Mycroft's phone rings, and he answers. "Yes? And they've been known associates for how long? No, a love affair is more helpful than nothing. Harold Latimer, you say." A long pause follows as Mycroft listens. "And his address? Beckenham, thank you. En route." He rings off.

Swallowing, Sherlock types out a response. His heart is pounding again, and he wonders just how much the organ can go through without finally being overtaxed.

*The Diogenes, but we're headed to Beckenham. The fourth pip happened while you were with*
"What's the address?" Sherlock asks with a dry throat, following Mycroft and Mr. Melas as they hasten out of the club.

"Two thirty-one High Street," Mycroft answers. They plunge through the door and again the black car pulls up, as if it's a vehicle which can be magically summoned. If Mycroft could travel via fucking flying carpet, Sherlock thinks as he texts John the address, he would do. "Apparently a man with a trust fund he is no longer allowed to touch, though the family keeps him in digs. I suspect you to be correct, Sherlock. Apparently Latimer has also been in and out of rehab facilities, and his influence over Sophy Kratides is profound. He has a criminal record--forged cheques, fraud. The family used their connections to pave over his indiscretions. He is without work, and recently without support other than the residence. One can only sell so many silver spoons, after all, before one becomes...creative."

Sherlock, who has either gone down on or been fucked by exactly thirty-seven men in exchange for drugs, hears the dry disappointment in this statement and feels a slow burn of shame and anger spreading over the back of his neck. But he hasn't the time for Mycroft's prudery. Chemicals for chemicals, endorphins for narcotics, are a perfectly reasonable trade, he tells himself for the thousandth time.

"What service did Moriarty provide, I wonder?" Mycroft drones.

"Muscle," Sherlock replies. He is sure of it. "If they're extorting money from Kratides, they need muscle. Muscle that can't be tied to Moriarty, but that he was given a fee for and provided. When we find him, I post the address to my website, and the pip is solved. No fucking alternatives, Mycroft. You bugged us completely the last time, trying to get out ahead of him. I'm stopping this quick as I can."

"Naturally," Mycroft answers in a huff.

Sherlock's phone lights up just after the three men pile into the towncar and it pulls away from the kerb. Sherlock reads John's text with his heart in his mouth:

We don't fucking need Moriarty anymore, I am going to fucking kill you myself. On my way.

It is when they arrive at the address on High Street and Sherlock picks the door lock and they burst into the house that things go rather spectacularly wrong.

The rooms are spacious, airy, but uncared-for; Harold Latimer apparently prefers privacy to cleanliness. There are white rugs that seem to have once indicated an intended change of lifestyle, but they are filthy with wine and traces of sex and cigarette ash. A suit of Japanese mail stands in the corner, obviously antique, its shine dulled with neglect. On the low coffee table lie two glasses, an empty brandy bottle, several half-open cartons of Chinese takeaway, a bong, a roll of electrical tape, and a box cutter.

Sherlock's ears perk. "What is that?" he asks suddenly.

They all stand still and listen. A low moaning sound emanates from above their heads.
Sherlock rushes to the nearest door and finds a short hall. The dismal noise is coming from upstairs. Racing, Sherlock dimly registers Melas and Mycroft at his heels. When he crests the staircase, he discovers three doors facing him upon the upper floor, and it's from the central of these that the sinister sounds are issuing, sinking sometimes into a dull mumble and rising again into a shrill whine. It's locked, but the key is left on the outside.

Sherlock flings open the door and dives in.

"What the fuck," a soft, singsong voice wonders, and Sherlock hears the click of a gun being cocked.

Harold Latimer, who must once have been handsome and is now scruffy, bleary-eyed, quivering, and debauched, is slumped in a corner. His clothes are extremely expensive, but the jeans (2011) are fraying at their cuffs and split at the knees in ways that particular True Religion design never featured, and the Rag and Bone shirt (2008) is discoloured and unwashed. He blinks at Sherlock bemusedly. Sophy Kratides, a dark-haired beauty dressed equally well and equally messily, reclines with her head in his lap, a bent spoon just visible on the floor beside her.

Paul Kratides is tied to a chair, head lolling, gaunt, masked in garish electrical tape with writing on it, and a very small man stands before him. He is middle-aged and very mean-looking, with rounded shoulders but a scrapper's physique, and he wears glasses, and he is the one pointing the gun at Sherlock. He giggles suddenly, a nervous, jerky laugh, but the gun remains steady.

Mycroft sighs. "And whom might we have the considerable displeasure of addressing?"

"Wilson Kemp," the small, mean man answers. He giggles again. The high sound grates like chalk dragged over a board. "Be very still now, the lot of you. If you fuckers try any tricks, god help you!"

Sherlock edges further into the room and feels Mycroft doing the same.

"What's the plan, then?" Sherlock wonders idly. "You've taken this man, abused and starved him, and what do you have to show for it? He clearly hasn't paid you off, and he clearly has no intention of doing so. Your only hope of a lighter sentence now is to drop that gun. Immediately. Dull. Couldn't you have done a bit better? Honestly."

The venomous giggle returns. Sherlock desires to slap this very small person, the one in the pay of Jim Moriarty who is the reason the little boy is still dressed in semtex.

"Let you go? Now, where would that get me? Kill you, now there's a thought. Fucking shoot you and properly splatter your brains all over the room."

"Wilson?" Sophy slurs, and she sounds frightened. Harold Latimer tightens his grip on her and forces her face into his belly, where she can't see what's taking place before her.

"Fucking do it," Harold barks out, laughing when Kemp does. He is high as a kite and Sherlock is suddenly madly, excruciatingly jealous of that fact. "Blow their brains out, the bloody interfering pricks. I'll help with the cleanup."

"How could you do this?" Melas cries to Sophy, who is struggling weakly under Latimer's hands. "Your own brother? How could--"

"Shut the fuck up," orders Kemp, whose gun shifts to Melas. He giggles once more. "You know what, Harold? That's a pretty generous offer. I'm going to take you up on that, mate. Goodnight, gentlemen, and may god have mercy upon your souls..."
Sherlock is lunging forward in desperation even as Mycroft's umbrella makes a vicious jab at the same moment and in the same direction, directly at Kemp's insanely merry eye. But a shocking crack prevents either of them from completing whatever half-thought-of defensive effort they'd attempted.

It becomes clear that Mr. Melas, his eyes turned black and his dark brow furious, had pulled a gun from some unknown location. There is now a hole in Wilson Kemp, one rapidly darkening with spreading blood, just above his heart—a kill shot expertly managed, Sherlock realizes, thinking linguist in surprise before remembering special forces—and Sophy Kratides lets loose a belated shriek of horror. Harold Latimer, who Sherlock suddenly realizes is probably Jim's real client rather than Sophy, releases a bellow of rage as Kemp sways.

Turning with a smile on his lips, Sherlock is about to roundly—if sarcastically—congratulate Melas when Kemp's gun explodes even as the dead man falls to the floor.

"I really cannot fucking believe this fucking bullshit," John fumes. Later, at the Diogenes Club, after the post made to The Science of Deduction with the picture of Paul Kratides, which Sherlock made while he was still bleeding rather badly.

Mycroft's men had stormed the High Street house very soon after the gunfire was exchanged. Mr. Melas was driven away in one car with Paul Kratides, Harold Latimer and Sophy Kratides in another and in handcuffs. Wilson Kemp was driven to the morgue, doubtless. Mycroft was driven back to Whitehall when all was said and done. Sherlock possibly ought to have been driven to hospital, but he was only grazed, just nicked really, on his right upper arm, and anyway he prefers John to hospital on a global scale, and anyway John likes fixing things, and John is too enraged just now to create sentences without profanity in them, so Sherlock wants to give him something to do.

Thus he sits on the bed at the club and watches as John cleans the shallow, painful scrape, carefully sanitizing it before he pulls an absorbent pad from his kit and starts to bandage the four-inch wound.

"I was only shot a little," Sherlock points out in his own defense.

John is back to making the half-smile that means he'd like nothing better than to punch someone in the face. His wheat-coloured hair is mussed, his hands perfectly steady, his feet set bullishly apart as he tends to his friend. John arrived in a cab about twenty minutes after all the excitement. After Sherlock had already received word that Lestrade retrieved the little boy and returned him to his mother unharmed.

Not really unharmed, Sherlock reminds himself. But better than it could have been.

There has been no word from Moriarty yet of a fifth pip. So Sherlock waits at the Diogenes, sitting on the soft bed in the (disappointingly) cleaned room, and John smiles, and fusses professionally, and smiles more, and looks as if he is at any moment about to turn Sherlock over his knee and take his mind off the pain in his arm by giving him new pain to think about.

"Only shot a little," John repeats, wrapping over the bandage with a sterile cloth. He laughs without any humour whatsoever. "Fucking shit, Sherlock Holmes. I just. Wow. What... Never mind. You massive fucking twat. I'm going to kill you, and then resuscitate you, and then kill you again and repeat the process."
"That would rather defeat our stated pur--"

"You fucking left me at Bart's and swanned off to solve a pip while I was making nice to your girlfriend!" John roars, throwing his hands up in the air. The end of the roll of bandaging tumbles to the floor.

"She isn't my--"

"Shut the fuck up, please, while I complete my fucking thought! What if...I don't even want to finish this sentence. What if, Sherlock? What fucking if? You were shot, you fucking piece of shit. Not shot a little. There is no such thing. You were shot."

This is technically true, Sherlock realizes, and he feels suitably ashamed of himself. But he cannot devote his fullest attention to his own shortcomings when John's eyes have turned the colour of midwinter squalls off the coast of Scotland, not when John's muscled but petit chest is heaving in outrage, not when his breath is coming hot and fast through his slim lips this way.

John looks good enough to eat.

"I'm sorry," Sherlock says softly, hoping to placate him and, then again, not hoping to placate the small soldier at all. "It was admittedly a regrettable lapse of judgment. I was with my brother, and I'm--"

"You're a fucking brilliant, arrogant, pretentious, selfish, mannerless, impetuous, idiotic son of a bitch, and I could shake your fucking curly head off and probably will," John says, smiling with teeth that could rip flesh open.

"Right, yes, but I did solve--"

"I don't give a rat's pink arsehole that you solved the pip, you fucking dense bastard, or I do, of course, but, you know, yeah, you fucking solved the pip without me. Did it never occur to that fucking massive brain of yours in all that time--"

"It honestly didn't, because--"

"Because you are the fucking thickest genius on the goddamn planet, you gorgeous fucking cocksucking prat, and that is why right after I finish patching you up, I'm going to fucking kill you dead." Briefly satisfied he has made his point, John reaches down for the roll of cotton and continues wrapping the bandage over Sherlock's arm.

All is quiet for a moment. Diogenes quiet. When the Diogenes is quiet, it's generally graceful and soft. This time, though, the high ringing of John's fury hurts Sherlock's ears. Sighing, he drops his head.

"I'm used to being alone, is what I was about to say," Sherlock whispers, his eyes downcast. "I didn't mean to frighten you. That wasn't my intent. I just thought--"

"You didn't fucking think!" John shouts. He tapes off the bandage and stands with one hand on his hip, the other clenching again and again at his side. "You fucking moron. You didn't think. You acted. What would I have done if you--if Moriarty had--I can't even. What. Would I have done. I fucking love you, I love you. Sherlock, I love you so much, you fucking stupid donkey, you taught me how to breathe again, and--"

Sherlock wouldn't be sure of when the terrible shouting becomes passionate kissing, the biting sort of kissing that stings and lingers, if John hadn't been forced to stop talking. His hands grip
Sherlock’s face as if he equally wants to crush it as kiss it. The detective is already shirtless, but he rips John's trousers open while the doctor devours his mouth. John's tongue parries and thrusts like a broadsword, and this isn’t pleasant kissing, not a bit of it, Sherlock has never been kissed like this, he only vaguely knew that kissing like this existed, but where it fails at pleasantry it succeeds at overwhelming, comprehensive ownership.

Yes. That’s it. Sherlock feels owned.

John steps out of his trousers and pants and yanks his undershirt and jumper over his own head with one swift motion. He eyes are wild. Sherlock could drown in them. Easily. He wonders whether terrorists used to look at him in the desert and piss themselves with fear, soaking the sand.

"You fucking idiot," John says, and this time it comes out thick and wet and sorrowful. "I hate you, I hate you, you left me there and--"

"Hate me some more," Sherlock gasps as a newly naked John's mouth descends to sink his teeth in his neck none too gently and his hands scrabble desperately to tear Sherlock's trousers off. Sherlock lifts up and they are both naked already, how, and this is very very fast and a little bit frightening, but yes, Sherlock thinks, and I'm sorry, and yours, and he forgets to be mortified that he isn't hard and he forgets to be nervous that John might be unsure of his claim. "Hate me, I'm sorry. You can hate me. I deserve it."

"I don't hate you, you fucking half-wit," John says, closing his fist in Sherlock's hair and pulling his head back, just this shy of terrifying and instead...again, again, do it again. Sherlock remembers--as if he could have forgotten--that John is good but John is not very nice, and he stifles the whimper rising in the back of his throat. "I hate you, yes, but that's because you forgot you were mine. That was pretty thick of you. Remember next time. You do recall that bit, yes? The saying you were mine while you were fucking me in this very fucking bed?"

"Yes."

"Are you taking it back?"

"No."

"So you're still mine, and you'll recall that in future?"

"Yes," Sherlock agrees, licking his lips.

"No, you are not getting your face fucked right now," John snaps.

"No?" Sherlock questions in a far too high voice.

John crowds him forward until Sherlock falls back on his elbows and then fully back on the bed. When the doctor's mouth covers his once more, Sherlock cannot hold back a moan. John, under Sherlock's lips, smiles furiously again, and Sherlock is too much in love for his heart to hold it as John straddles him and takes his own cock in his fist and begins to pump deliberately.

"Now would be a good time to alert me if you object to my coming all over your chest," John informs him before returning his teeth to Sherlock's throat.

"No," Sherlock chokes out. "I mean, yes, you can...you can do that. Yes."

"Good," John growls as his arm works more rapidly. "Because you. Are fucking. Mine. And you do not wander off into mortal danger and get yourself shot without me. Are we clear?"
"Yes." Sherlock is struggling mightily for air, panting as John covers him with sucking, nipping kisses that leave red marks like the small bright blooms of rose blossoms across his pale flesh.

He is still panting a few minutes later, but the scattered roses are now a garden and spring has arrived.

He is still panting when John suddenly works his wrist in rapid tugs, shaking.

He is panting when the mark John is leaving just behind his ear is interrupted by John's muffled cry as he finishes, and if Sherlock taught John how to breathe again, he must have passed his friend the knowledge when he bestowed it and lost the knack himself, for he has forgotten everything in the world save for John on his chest and over his ribcage and buried in his hair and murmuring, I love you, you stupid, stupid prick, I love you.

I love you.
John pauses in the doorway with his kiss-swollen lips parted, crossing his arms and leaning against the frame with an expression of mixed ruefulness and appreciation on his face, holding a small dampened towel. He shoves his mouth forward and then pulls it back again, presses it into a hard line briefly.

"Jesus Christ," he murmurs. "I...wow. Um. I should pop round the Yard and pick up some police tape to cordon off this bed."

Sherlock, whose eyes were closed as the tiny skittering after-thrills pulsed through him, slits one lid open and takes a look at himself.

He's reclined fully on the bed on his back, with one knee a bit akimbo and one arm thrown up by his head, fingers curled but boneless. His taut belly rises and falls in shallow swells. His torso is mottled with blushing red marks from sucking kisses and scratches from eager fingernails, none of them bleeding but all of them vivid as stripes of August crimson sunsets, tiny temporary John-tattoos from his neck nearly to his bottom-most ribs, several glistening with stripes of sweat and semen. He knows without seeing it that his hair is an absolute disaster against the two thousand thread count pillowcase, because his scalp buzzes like a former war zone.

He looks wrecked, as if he'd gone ten rounds with a junkyard dog and came out the decided loser. He looks taken, even though he wasn't.

*I look absolutely fantastic,* Sherlock thinks, grinning a small, private grin.

Walking over to the bed, John hesitates. A look of apology is creeping over his face.

*Well, let's nip that in the bud directly,* Sherlock determines.

Lifting his long right hand, he drags his fingers through the mess on his chest. Then he stretches, still shivering. That doesn't...it's not that...he can't help...his friend shouldn't think...it's embarrassing, but he seems not to be able to control these almost imperceptible aftershocks. Not when Certain Key Words are being thrown around. Hell, even before, dating back to the devastating blow job at Oldacre's seedy hotel.

"You said that you loved me," Sherlock drawls in his deepest possible voice.

The almost-contrite expression flees John's face instantly. He smiles, this time without baring his teeth in fury. Sherlock likes this smile John has, the one he thought so warm initially, the one he now knows conceals dormant danger and which nevertheless resembles unstudied affection.

"Oh, you like how you look right now, do you?" John purrs.

"Mmm," Sherlock hums noncommittally.

"That's probably because you are the tidiest bloke in London. I think I told you about that. And just at the moment you look like pure sex."

"Only in London?"

"Fine. Probably in the world. Pretty likely...yeah, all of Great Britain at the very least."
Sherlock bats his eyelashes in thanks. He reaches for the cloth, but John sits down and does it instead. He always does it, Sherlock is realizing. The detective wonders why that is, exactly. The water he used is warm but not scalding. The heat burns a bit against the scratch marks. It's very nice, particularly when compared to the dull ache of the bullet scrape. Sherlock tucks the faint hiss of the scratch marks inside the box in his mind palace's bedroom. John throws the flannel on the floor by the discarded clothing, reaches out, and traces the edge of a faint bite near Sherlock's prominent collarbone.

"You're doing that thing again where you look like a circuit about to short out. I can't get over it."

"You said that you loved me," Sherlock accuses, shrugging.

It really isn't his fault, after all. John started it, this whole ungainly, terrible devotion business, and if it fries Sherlock's circuitry, John only has himself to blame.

Not quite true, Sherlock reminds himself, remembering obsessive, pulsating love at first sight and dozens of text messages and let's have dinner repeated ad nauseum, but John insisted, didn't he, even after the Friesland and the morphine and the dismissal. And now--despite the fact he suspects he technically ought to feel like a fire hydrant which was just pissed on by a stray mutt--Sherlock looks like a trauma victim but feels like a prize trophy.

"Stuck on that, are we," John says dryly, but his eyes are kind.

Another piercing little thrill like a bee sting travels down Sherlock's spine and he curls into himself on his side with his head cradled on his arm, still smiling. John promptly climbs up onto the bed and props a couple of pillows between himself and the headboard, shifting the pair of them so Sherlock's head is on his thigh and John's hands softly softly softly in his hair.

It's incredibly soothing. As a thank you, Sherlock would like to say something to John in return, something along the lines of:

I'd do anything for you, anything, I'd give you the moon if you wanted it, though I can think of better heavenly bodies, wouldn't you much prefer a dark nebula? or possibly even, I was in love with you first, you should know, I was much quicker on the uptake, I'm a genius, I knew from the moment I saw you, when you still thought me some sort of marvelous madman, I already loved you then, I wanted so to have you close to me, as close as you'd allow me to be just as long as it was closer than anyone else, you ought to realize that I adored you back when you thought you were still all alone and I was a holy lunatic, or possibly even...

I love you in return.

But he is unsure how to go about it--saying this aloud.

And the thought of botching such a thing the way he once botched kissing and the way he knows he is capable of botching other highly sensitive subjects terrifies him on a cellular level.

So Sherlock simply hums and allows his hair to be carded into some semblance of orderliness. John's fingertips pressing against his scalp, John's fingerprints stamped onto his skin, John fingernails waking nerves and calming them simultaneously.

"Better?"

"Better," Sherlock agrees.

"Good. Sometimes you worry me, mate," John says gently.
"How so?"

"You're just...you're one of a kind, and you don't come with a user's manual."

Stretching a little, his arm protesting, Sherlock yawns. "Why should that worry you? No one in the universe is precisely the same. Granted, I am generally considered freakish--"

"Nope, stop right there," John warns.

"--but yes, you disagree with that assessment, so I don't know what you mean."

John takes a long moment to think the question through, which Sherlock appreciates. "Only...you like this bit, yeah?"

Sherlock's brows angle downward. "The being civil to each other while not-copulating?" he asks snidely.

"No, god, I didn't mean anything that...cold. I like this too. Fuck, I fucking love this. But you have to realize that we can do this, just this, anytime you like," John says quietly. "I'm well aware I just attacked you like Godzilla, sorry about that, I was kind of losing it for a second there, but if you, you know, want to just be together without shagging, at any point, that's, I am very much on board for it, okay? I'm bisexual, not a nymphomaniac. We've been having heaps of sex, and during a time of kinda heightened circumstances. You don't have to feel like I need to have an orgasm to be intimate with you."

Huffing air from his nose, Sherlock removes the hand that had been cupping John's knee, tucking it underneath his own torso. A punishment. For stupidity. "If I didn't enjoy sex with you, I wouldn't be having sex with you. Do try to keep up."

"I know, Sherlock, Jesus. I know. But...you sorta need this afterward, yeah?"

"No," Sherlock says, annoyed. "I don't need anything. I'm fine. And to what this are you referring precisely?"

"Closeness," John attempts, exasperated to the point of loosening his grip. "Christ. Why shouldn't you enjoy being close to your...whatever I am? You're a human being."

"Not according to some," Sherlock reminds him with a new edge to his tone.

"Well, you're the most highly strung robot I've ever met then, nice to make your clockwork acquaintance," John retorts.

Tightening his shoulders involuntarily, Sherlock scoffs, "Highly-strung?"

"For a robot, yep. Bloody hell. God forbid I bring it up, that you enjoy closeness."

"God forbid I indicate that I require coddling."

"You're not being coddled. Aftercare isn't coddling."

Frowning, Sherlock flops over to stare up at the doctor. He looks very...yes, aftercare, caring, he looks caring. It's not particularly flattering, how caring he looks. The tips of Sherlock's ears glow with shamed self-consciousness.

"I don't require you here," Sherlock hisses.
John lifts Sherlock's barely vibrating hand in the air, kisses the tips of his fingers, and returns it, stroking the hair back at his temple. He says nothing.

Sherlock feels the kettle of his temper beginning to whistle stridently.

"I'm not delicate."

"I know you're not. I never said--"

"Did I ask you to come over here? You can sod straight off after, I don't give a toss. Why don't you, in fact?" Sherlock is aware he is being petulant, but petulance is a special talent of his.

Everyone else did, after all.

"That would not be very fun for, erm, either one of us," John objects, smiling.

"Aftercare? It's not like you took a strap to me."

"Noooo," John says, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

"Though you looked as if you wanted to. Are you into that sort of thing? You could, if you like. I can take it."

"Sherlock, shut up, I get it, you didn't like hearing that, that wording," John says, running his thumb behind Sherlock's ear. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything negative by it. You have this bloody great brain, you sod, and it amplifies everything for you even if you're not aroused, the, the sensory data, I guess it is. I get it. That's what I'm saying. Or I get it better now that I did before. I'm pretty average by comparison, my perceptiveness, I mean, and you about blow me away every time, so for you it must be...overwhelming. Yeah? Especially since I just came at you, um, let's say aggressively? Very aggressively. You know, I had a girlfriend once who--"

"Girlfriend?" Sherlock snarls, sitting up and backing away on the bed. "I remind you of your ex-girl-.""

"Whoa, hey there, calm down." John's hands are in the air, his mouth is very nearly amused beneath the alarm, his exaggerated surrender thereby all the more infuriating. "She just, she was very responsive to being touched intimately, the way you are, and I think she got as much out of the post-sex cuddle as she did the sex."

"That's an outrageous comparison. We didn't even just have sex," he protests.

"Oh, fucking hell," John exclaims, laughing outright. "Not this again. I never want to have this conversation again, you realize that, right? Yes, we did. Jesus."

"Fine, let's assume we did, even though we didn't. Did she fall apart the instant she came? Or was it when you did? Did she quiver and cry when you told her you loved her?" Sherlock asks icily.

"Do I remind you of her, how weak she was, was she pathetic afterward, this--"

"No," John says firmly, getting up and crawling toward where Sherlock is sitting. "She was heartbreakingly lovely after, though not in your league, not by a long shot, and entirely calm, and highly sensitive to stimulus and affection. And I don't know what she'd have looked like if I'd told
her I loved her, because I didn't, um, love her, so I didn't say that I did, even though we dated for, dunno, ten months I think. But I do love you."

Sherlock blinks, examining John's perfect weathered face. He feels the tight ball of bitterness in his stomach begin to dissolve, begin to sweeten, until it feels more like a sip of perfect coffee than a poison pill.

"Oh," Sherlock says, quiet again.

John's lips quirk up, but he quickly quashes the expression. "I didn't mean to offend you. But you don't have to pretend not to want closeness. Ever. Can I rephrase what I just said, when I told you that you were high-strung?"

"I suppose," Sherlock concedes.

"You," John murmurs, curving his face toward Sherlock's lips, "are a thoroughbred."

"Oh my god," Sherlock says in genuine horror.

John smiles wickedly, and Sherlock realizes that despite the fact Sherlock has admitted nothing insofar as love is concerned, John is winning nevertheless. He is absolutely mopping the field with Sherlock and his futile attempts at aloofness.

Because Sherlock appreciates strength and cleverness more than almost anything else, reluctantly he admits this is rather endearing.

Meanwhile, John is still pushing forward and Sherlock finds himself retreating, hovering, dropping an elbow to the bed, then a shoulder, and all the while John approaches inexorably, until John has Sherlock with his head diagonally on the coverlet again, not even really aware of how he arrived there, John nosing along the line of Sherlock's throat.

"You are a great, big, bloody, beautiful thoroughbred," John repeats, "and if I take you for a hard ride without wiping you down after, well, that's not taking care of a thoroughbred very well, is it, now?"

"This vile attempt at metaphor is obscenely sexual to the point of being pornographic," Sherlock objects, attempting scorn and nearly succeeding. John's lips nip his jugular, and he absolutely does not pull a startled breath in. "Not to mention juvenile. You have a career ahead of you in crap romance novels, the sort with bare-chested Byronic men on the cover with the wind in their hair, that kind of unmitigated bleat."

John is unfazed. And his mouth is...oh. "What can I say? You're inspiring."

"Shut up."

"You have any idea how many bestsellers are written about champion racehorses?"

"Please shut up," Sherlock groans, fighting twin urges to press back against John's delicate tongue and to smile at this patently ridiculous display of flattery.

"You're right, you know. I'm not a bad writer, had a knack for it at uni. I could write pretty florid romances inspired by you, I bet," John muses, pausing and looking up with an evil glint in his eye.

"I'm deleting this entire exchange even as you're speaking, in real time," Sherlock lies, suddenly battling not to laugh.
"No, I ought to take a stab at it, might pay more than the clinic if you're right. I could use a few extra quid a month. Romances with a healthy dash of adventure starring Sherlock Holmes and his medical mate."

Sherlock sighs tragically, cupping his hands around John's hips as if he's holding him at a careful distance while the doctor dips and undulates above. The detective is well aware he isn't fooling anyone. "Memoir, the realm of morons and narcissists. How perfectly ghastly."

"Yeah, ghastly," John says sarcastically. His face folds as he chuckles, scrubbing at his own head with one hand. "You'd hate it, you loathe being admired. Almost as much as you loathe being touched. I'll remember that when I start up the blog."

"You're so vacant, are you aware this is true?" Sherlock sneers, or attempts to. "How do you function? You could probably work a love story into the fifth proposition of Euclid."

"If I were looking at you, I could," John agrees cheerily.

"Ugh," Sherlock shudders, but his mouth is already traitorously curving upward.

"Your pillow talk needs serious work, by the way."

"I'm not the one slinging insults before comparing you to women and dumb animals!" Sherlock cries.

"I'll tell you a secret, my friend," John whispers, moving from Sherlock's long neck up to his face. "This part? This bit where I sent your central nervous system offline?"

"Will you stop having a go at me?"

"This, here, where I have a human firefly in bed with me and get to touch him? This is my favourite part."

"Really?" Sherlock breathes.

"Really," John vows, and it's true. It's too quiet and too simple to be anything other than fact.

"Well, you did say that you loved me," Sherlock whispers, and allows himself one small, perfectly sincere smile.

John's eyes spark hungrily. He is leaning down even further and is just about to kiss him if Sherlock lifts his head just a little, nearly there, whisper of breath, so close, when the flat screen telly flicks on in the sleuth's peripheral vision.

At first, John frowns and hoists himself up and reaches for the remote on the bedside table. But then he freezes. A frozen brittleness arrests his eyebrows. His neat little jaw tenses. His tilts his head to the side, evaluating even as the lines around his eyes tighten. It's baffling.

"Afternoon, duckie! Congrats on the record time over the Greek interpreter, that was one for the history books. You're a hell of a sprinter," Jim Moriarty's voice exclaims. "Give me five! Really, you deserve it. Up high!"

To his immediate mortification, Sherlock startles like a feral cat, his head whipping to the side. John catches him by the shoulder, steadying him. Reaching, the doctor pulls his loaded gun from the nightstand drawer and sets it topside, clicking the safety off.
Jim Moriarty, who stares maniacally into the camera, is in a white featureless room, and he has changed his appearance since prison. His hair hasn't nearly grown in yet, and the snake tattoo with the IOU-carved apple is still ominously visible along the thin cords of his neck, but he's swapped a prison jumpsuit for a bespoke navy two-button with a round-collared white shirt and a thin necktie, the small pattern of which isn't quite visible. Sherlock feels an inevitable creeping horror at the sight of him--there, in the Diogenes, in their bedroom, uninvited, leering, very real.

The escaped criminal is still holding his palm toward the screen, as if Sherlock is about to slap him a five.

"No?" Moriarty smirks at one side of his mouth. "Are you trying to hurt my feelings? I was super proud of you. What on earth are you getting up to with your puppy meanwhile, dear, that sort of thing isn't legal in decent places."

Sherlock is out of the bed in an instant, impossible, he can't see us, impossible, heedless of nudity, staring into corners and at drawer pulls and mantelpiece details, his pulse racing.

"Don't even fucking tell me," John growls, standing at the edge of the bed and likewise scanning the room.

Sherlock shakes his head. He was careful, so careful. He is always careful.

"Aw, that was cute," Moriarty says, giggling. "No, I can't see you. But I know you well enough to know you'll leave me hanging on a five, and that you're probably celebrating in some kinky way or other. Hi, John. I'd tell you to keep your fucking peasant hands off my property, but he was hurt today. Did you fix him for me? I'm counting on you to have fixed him for me. He's very precious."

John face does something extraordinary as he sniffs the air with the disgusted expression of a hound tracking a rat.

"Sherlock, sweetie pie, how are you feeling?" Jim Moriarty's face looms much larger as he leans, pouting his lower lip. He taps the glass of the camera lens, which looks as if he's tapping the glass of the television, and Sherlock's knees turn distressingly watery. "That agent of your brother's, Melas, I think, he shot Wilson Kemp, yeah? I didn't mean for you to get hurt, beautiful. That's my fucking job. If Kemp hadn't died, I'd have come after him myself and strangled him with his own intestinal tract. All for you, baby. I'd have filmed it and shown it to you on a looping reel as a present. Serves that fucker right that Melas iced him. How dare a hireling worm hurt what's mine? I wish he'd suffered more, but we can't always get what we want. And I want you perfect for me."

"Are you--"

"Already texting your brother, yep," John says, appearing at Sherlock's side in one of the club's robes. He passes another to Sherlock as he texts, and the detective belatedly realizes gooseflesh has broken out all over his bare arms, so he puts it on and quickly ties the belt.

"You can't help but be perfect, though, can you?" Moriarty croons, smoothing the collar of his new suit affectionately. "Even scratched and dented. Heal up fast, little rabbit, this is all coming to a head. I've given you just a hint of what I've got going on out there in the big, bad world. But now I've had a new idea, I am brilliant, you're going to love this when you come to live with me, it's completely perfect for you. So no more games for a bit, OK? Sorry, sweetheart. I'm planning the best fifth pip for you, but just now, put your feet up for a spell. While you still have feet."
"Does this piece of shit ever shut up," John mutters, widening his stance as his fingers fly over his mobile.

Taking a couple of paces toward the screen, Sherlock purses his lips in thought. A white room. It's featureless. But even that's suggestive. Where did Moriarty come by a perfectly white room? It looks like drywall with primer over it.

"It'll take me, and this is kind of embarrassing, but it's so hard to get reliable help anymore, maybe three days," Moriarty announces, checking a new designer wristwatch. "So boring. I know you'll be pining for me." Tenderly, almost reverently, Moriarty reaches out and touches the glass of the lens again. "But we'll be together soon. We have a certain special something, don't we? I feel like I've missed you for my whole life."

Ignoring the scared spasm in his chest, Sherlock stares, rapt.

"It was actually really uncomfortable," Jim coos. "Like a piece of me had been amputated. I'll help you understand what that feels like, Sherlock. I promise."

"This man's days are fucking numbered," John says flatly.

Waving a hand for silence, Sherlock draws closer to the television once more. There is a strange square object behind Jim, one which caught Sherlock's eye but had been mostly masked by his figure. Its stark edge bothered him, the way it hinted at a bomb or a portable control panel of some kind. Now it is visible, and it is...

It can't be.

Certainly not.

Sherlock blinks, remembering the late nineties. He blinks again, recalling one of several memorable occasions when he actually visited Shinwell Johnson's digs, with its three purebred lapdogs and its ruined designer furnishings, and departed reeking of weed, his stomach soured by cheap beer.

Whirling gracefully, Jim Moriarty leans over and presses the ungainly plastic Play button on a black boombox old enough to be an antique. For a moment, the tape merely hisses. Then a classically structured R&B beat drops (Sherlock may not listen to every genre of music, but he collects their intricacies like a botanist and realizes it takes skill to know skill regardless of medium), with airy rhythmic vocals layered in harmonies that are almost dainty in their lightness of execution, hints of freestyle rap beneath the flitting riffs, and the vocalist (whoever she is) is deft and liquid-voiced, and Jim picks up the boombox and rests it on his shoulder, closing his eyes and beginning to move to the pulsing beat.

Three things happen simultaneously.

First, John's phone in his hand makes a strange beeping sound, and the screen goes blank.

Second, Sherlock's phone acts in the same inexplicable manner. He can see it where it rests on the bedside table.

A terrible thrill echoes through him, resounding as if inside himself Sherlock were a great canyon rather than merely a brilliant man, when he realizes you are both about to be murdered.

You couldn't save him. You didn't even begin to try.
Third, the lyrics kick in:

You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off of you
You'd be like heaven to touch
I wanna hold you so much...

Jim Moriarty smiles as he sways, eyes still closed, the boombox lightly perched against his neck, twitching his hips and his feet in neat, loose, subtle, timely motions that would look natural and appealing under other circumstances, but which in this one are absolutely grotesque.

At the same moment, Sherlock and John, both standing there speechless, realize their phones have started echoing the telly screen. John's arm shoots out from his body, sending the mobile to the bedclothes as it begins to sing.

At long last love has arrived
And I thank god I'm alive...

"What's happening?" John snaps.

"I don't--" Sherlock attempts.

Their room floods with an innocent-seeming ivory light.

Both men pivot on a hair-trigger towards the windows. Sherlock makes three long strides and yanks back the curtain.

His own face is being projected onto the stately Pall Mall building opposite the Diogenes. He is half-turning on a laugh, pale and frizzle-haired and eighteen years of age and not yet quite as gaunt as he would become during a later period, having just solved his very first serial killer case and (unfortunately for public relations) lionized by the papers with his true feelings on the subject captured. Sherlock feels John's warmth at his elbow even as he unlatches the window and shoves it open to flood the room with autumn chill.

"Fuck me with a hand grenade," John says in grudging awe.

Cars on the street are slowing. Multiple cars, in fact.

All the cars.

Pardon the way that I stare

There's nothing else to compare

The sight of you leaves me weak

There are no words left to speak...

People on the pavement are stopping. Sherlock hears faint tinny sounds of music and watches as they throw their driver's side doors open and escape with their hands over their ears, watches as joggers yank their ear buds out in startlement, watches as pedestrians pause, pull their mobiles out of their purses and backpacks and stare in amazement.
The sound swells, crescendos.

I need you baby

And if it's quite all right

I'll need you baby

To warm the lonely nights...

Every single electronic device within god knows what circumference of the Diogenes Club is pumping out the melody that Sherlock, when he turns, Jim Moriarty is still dancing to--a flitting sprite of an Irishman with a rabid smile and the blinding light of complete insanity burning in eyes which remain happily closed.

"That image of you is coming from within the club," John growls, leaving Sherlock's side. "Has to be. You stay here, I'll--"

"Do you really think anything will be left to find?" Sherlock roars, catching his wrist. "Do you honestly think it's anything but a timed projection, the perpetrators long fled? Do you understand now, John? Do you?"

John stops, breathing deliberately slow. He touches Sherlock's hand on his wrist and rubs at it softly. Sherlock becomes aware that his own grip must be painful, bruising in fact, and he relaxes it as best he can.

"I'm not going anywhere," John says. His tone is as sober as a deathbed. "Not ever."

So Sherlock turns back and looks down at the street and at the dozens of people, the many people with their iPods and their radios and their mobiles, while all the while the telly blares behind them and John advances, pressing his body against Sherlock's back.

Oh pretty baby

Don't let me down, I pray

Oh pretty baby

Now that I've found you stay

And let me love you...
Chapter 25

For three absolutely excruciating days, nothing whatsoever happens.

Sherlock has been so alone at times that he has wondered if a hole in the ground isn't a better place to live. Sherlock has been so miserable coming off an overdose that he has remained alive through sheer force of will. Sherlock has experienced the knifing thrill of the chase and at the height of the danger thought, *if I must die, which I must (obvious), please take me this way instead of slowly sloooowly sllloooowlyyyyy...*

Since Moriarty's campaign began all those years ago, Sherlock cannot recall ever having been *bored literally to death* previously.

Apparently, though, it's perfectly possible.

On the first day, the day after Jim Moriarty's admittedly impressive public serenade, Sherlock determines that one staff member of the Diogenes Club has made an abrupt departure from his long-held position as a concierge. Sherlock remembers him, though it doesn't matter anymore. *Tailored suits but cheapest cloth for bespoke, Yorkshire origins, turned his nose up at foreign types, oddly nouveau riche sans the riche, overcame a lisp in his youth, had a dog with bowel problems.* Knowing the kind of money the establishment's employees make, which is piles of it to ensure absolute discretion, the sleuth is certain that in order to bribe or threaten this stooge into setting up the high-powered projector in the window of the empty guest bedroom and flash Sherlock's face at the white wall of the redoubtable building opposite, Moriarty had to be mighty persuasive.

Sherlock finds he can easily imagine the scenario.

Mycroft, pacing the Stranger's Room as Sherlock and John watch in a sort of numb resignation, nearly has an apoplexy.

Of course he does. And Sherlock would be delighted by this if he weren't rather concerned about other issues just now.

"It is to his considerable credit that the employee quit this place," Mycroft says with a smile on his face that could turn fruit rotten. "Had our Iscariot remained, I should have devised something far worse for him than anything James Moriarty is capable of imagining. Sacking doesn't remotely cover the question."

"Cheers. I'd have helped you brainstorm," John--who seems to be getting on better with Mycroft now, *ugh, disgusting*--sighs as the shadows beyond the window creep forward like timid soldiers. "Any luck working out how the fuck he managed that little electronics trick?"

Sherlock absently appreciates the fact that the doctor considers it *a little electronics trick* (as it's quite a masterful piece of understatement), lowering his eyelashes at his friend with his long legs crossed in front of him and his fingers steepled before his lips, half-smiling even if terming the Song Assault such is objectively insane.

And even if he really, really doesn't want to talk about it. The lyrics have been playing in his head nonstop:

*You're just too good to be true*
"He accomplished a massive network hack," Mycroft intones. His hands are in his pockets, and he sways back on his heels in a manner Sherlock has always found revoltingly self-important. It reeks of side corridor handshakes and quiet assassinations. "Never mind the details, it was absurdly simple when all was said and done. Merely a parlour trick, but it got his point across."

It's all Sherlock can do not to visibly wince at every successive word in this heinous conversation.

It wouldn't be that difficult.

Just duck into Baker Street, tell them you need some air, tell them you have an idea for a lead on Jim's whereabouts, tell them the sky is falling and you need a very big pole to prop it back up or we're all done for, tell them you're going to be sick if you're stuck in their company a moment longer, tell them you need to pick up some shopping, tell them Lestrade needs you, tell them you're craving chips at the moment, tell them you have a waxing appointment, tell them that the current King of England wants to consult you over a case, tell them anything as long as you can get your hands on some motherfucking drugs...

Not difficult at all, when one comes down to brass--

"All right?" John asks pointedly, and Sherlock realizes he was being addressed.

"What? Sorry, bit of a...headache."

Mycroft, already looking gaseous and irate, sweeps knowing eyes to Sherlock and frowns meaningfully.

Help me, Sherlock begs some unknown force, rapidly shutting down four separate wings of his mind palace to avoid spontaneous combustion.

John wouldn't care for my brain to self-immolate. Would he? No. And he's already--

"You want me to fetch something from the room?" John inquires, his brow furrowing. "Size of your cranium, headaches can't be a picnic."

Yes, morphine. Or barring morphine, cocaine.

"Don't fuss," Sherlock requests in a clipped tone. "Where was the video recorded?"

"We have not the faintest idea," Mycroft drawls.

"We haven't the faintest idea of anything," Sherlock sneers.

He stands abruptly. It's all he can do.

When he fully realizes that he can do nothing else, he allows himself a small grimace and continues his exit in what he hopes is a dignified and dramatic fashion even without his signature coat.

"Don't appall me when I'm exhausted, Mycroft," he snaps. "If you can't be of any use, the least you can do is keep your fat fucking face out of my sightline, it's putting me off."

John covers a smile by sighing with his hands over his lips.

Mycroft scowls.
The worst of it is, even after that not-altogether-bad parting shot, Sherlock can barely manage to keep enough breath in his lungs to reach the guestroom and curl up in a small caterpillar's ball on the bedspread. Refusing to allow John to find him that way, he gets up a few moments later.

Still.

The incident lingers like the horrible queasiness which ebbs and flows as illegal drugs leave one's veins.

They have dinner at a smart little place near the club, though Sherlock really just pushes risotto around on a plate and obsessively checks his phone screen while John frowns, and when they return to the club they sip expensive scotch Sherlock puts on Mycroft's account, and long after the sun has set, after the positively Matisse-like colours, when ordinary people are going to bed, Sherlock sees no reason not to be ordinary for once—or at least do something ordinary when soon he may never get the chance to try it again—and changes into his pyjamas, falling into the opposite side of the bed from John, who is regarding the flickering telly with considerable distaste.

"John," Sherlock says softly.

"Yeah?" Unconcerned, John clicks the screen off.

"You said we didn't have to..."

Stopping, unbearably frustrated, Sherlock tries to think of a way to say, *I want to have sex with you as many times as possible before the end, but if we have sex and I am still hearing this song in my head, and I feel skinless afterward, I may actually vomit on you.* Without being insulting.

John reaches out and brushes a curl off Sherlock's forehead, smiling slightly. "What, shag? I'm not shagging you right now, beautiful. I'd love to, believe me, but I'm knackered."

He switches the light off and lies down on his back, his hands linked behind his head, neither of them touching at all.

Growing steadily colder despite the fact that he is beneath the expensive coverlet, Sherlock finds this development almost as unbearable as the shagging would have been. He thus slides over, tentatively brushing his head against John's shoulder. The instant he does so, John has him in a steady embrace, passing his hand up and down the detective's arm while being careful not to reach so high as the bullet wound. His other palm he cups around Sherlock's nape. The sleuth is instantly warm again.

*It isn't morphine.*

But nevertheless, it is a temporary solution of another kind.

"Is this how ordinary people sleep, or am I being high-strung again?" Sherlock says caustically, just as a test.

He waits a few seconds for a reply.
"It's how we ordinary folk sleep, yeah," John says under his breath, "but you're not ordinary, so you can't sleep like an ordinary person no matter what you do. You'll have to sleep like Sherlock. Right? Get to it."

They are silent for a few minutes, Sherlock's mind playing a soundtrack which has a similar effect to noise torture.

(Moriarty, of course, explained high-decibel torture when Sherlock was twenty.)

He swallows, grimacing.

"Am I hurting your side?" he asks.

"Nope."

"Did you set an alarm?"

"Nope."

Say it. Say the words. Please say them, I don't know what's wrong with me, Sherlock thinks, unconsciously nuzzling against John's shirt. You might never be allowed the opportunity to say them. At any moment, any day, any night. It could be over. Say it. Tell him. Tell him the rest. Tell him everything.

Tell him you'd cut your own heart out in the middle of a marketplace for him, if only he were watching and said, "That's amazing."

"I ought to be working, seeing if I've missed anything," he says.

"Nope."

"Is that all you're going to reply for the rest of our lives?" Sherlock hisses.

"Nope." A small laugh escapes from John's chest. "We'll figure out tomorrow when it's tomorrow. There's enough adrenaline leaving your system to kill a pony, and it needs time to filter out. Sleep."

John cups a hand over his ear and another over his eyes, the way he did back in the Baker Street flat. The song's volume drops perceptibly. Sherlock sighs, twisting the fabric of John's boxers in his fingers.

Then John tilts his hand up a bit so Sherlock can hear him and says, "I love you. Tell your brain that for me, please. I don't know that it's always listening. Goodnight."

Sherlock swallows hard and cannot think of a single thing he could possibly mention that could match the depth and breath of John Watson's soul, and thus seals his lips.

There are dreams after, dark ones, dreams of an East Wind razing the land and blasting everything Sherlock has ever come to know into oblivion. It's the old childhood nightmare, the vortex obliterating everything in its wake. All dust and shrapnel and bodies and low, dying moans. Razed fields, afterward. Stark skies and hungry crows. Corpses everywhere, and as ever, one of them is Sherlock's own.

But when he awakens, the maelstrom is only the whisper of John's even breaths in his ear.
On the second day, John and Sherlock pay a call. There is still no word from Jim and, though he was told there wouldn't be, Sherlock wonders if the torment of waiting for the blow to fall might be actually more keen than any of the rest of it.

Molly turns bright red when he arrives at Bart's, dropping a pair of forceps into a cadaver. She looks down in bafflement, as if she'd just lost the tool down a sewer grate. Irretrievable. The poor girl hasn't bothered with lipstick on this occasion, though her lashes are lightly coated with mascara and her skin tone is artificially even.

Sherlock takes a few more strides, retrieves the forceps for her, and goes to wash his hands after giving her one of his gamest attempts at a smile.

"Sherlock," Molly chokes out. "I, um. Where's...John, then? But, not that I meant to imply. You're perfectly. I mean, he's not with--"

"Just using the men's."

Sherlock shakes water off his fingers.

Molly fidgets in a motionless way only Molly is capable of fidgeting.

For several seconds they study each other, wondering what--if anything--is the right thing to say.

"John spoke with you," Sherlock attempts.

It's better than nothing. At least it clears the atmosphere a bit. Ducking her chin, Molly affirms this to be true. Sherlock very suddenly is aware of all the wisps of hair sticking out around her temples and wants to tell her, _shhhh, it will all be all right in the morning_. Molly, of all people, shouldn't be hurting this way. But since he knows that it probably won't be all right in the morning, he merely continues speaking.

"He made it clear, then, that we're...together. Or. Well, he probably made it very very clear. Sorry about that."

Again Molly nods, her face this time distorting before she forces it back into some semblance of order.

_This is awful_, Sherlock thinks, and then tries not to think about it again.

"Yep," he blusters on. "And he probably also indicated that, for reasons which I never disclosed to you, one major impediment in particular, a real smasher, you'd not have wanted me anyhow," Sherlock forces himself to state, waving his hand in the air.

Molly's chest is heaving shallowly. Her lower lip is performing tasks never imagined by great dams and dykes holding water in check. The Panama Canal has nothing on Molly Hooper's face at present.

"I should, should um, apologize," she attempts. "I never...you're so...just, you never said, so I didn't...if I made a fool of myself--"

"The only person I can think of who made a fool of himself yesterday is John," Sherlock assures her in a hesitant voice. "He's an idiot. Well. Better than some, but--"
"No, that's not...I didn't mean about..." Wincing, Molly looks down at the forceps in her tiny hand. "Not yesterday. He's, uh, very...he's nice. Well, now he's nice, not before, but--anyway, you know about when my dad died? I told you that story? How brave he was about it, always tried to be happy right to the end?"

Sherlock sets down a hand towel and crosses to her, frowning. "Yes."

"He looked so sad sometimes, but not when we were watching," Molly whispers, her throat thick. "And you, you, you sometimes, um, you looked so sad when you thought that I couldn't see you. But I did see you, and that's...I wanted you to know that. I saw you. That's why all the...I mean yes, I fancied you a bit, but, oh god, sorry to bring that up, sorry, I always put my foot in it around you, but my point is, I know I don't count, but everything hurts sometimes, just everything, in anyone's life, you know, not just the unlucky people or the depressed ones, and you're just--it's so much for you, all the time, and you looked sad when you thought I couldn't see you and I did, you were wrong, I saw every moment, and I never wanted you to be all alone."

The tightness in Sherlock's chest gives a mean squeeze.

_Everything hurts terribly. Molly is right about that much._

Bending down, he softly kisses Molly's cheek. It's very smooth, and she leans a bit into it despite her shock, her back bowing, and he pulls slowly away.

"You're wrong, you know," Sherlock says, low and deep. "You do count. You've always counted and I've always trusted you."

A very strange, pained sort of smile appears on Molly's face. It brings out her twin dimples, makes her odd little mouth twist, and she looks at the floor before meeting Sherlock's eyes again.

"I think I'm going to die," he admits to her.

Sherlock can admit it to Molly.

_If only to Molly._

Her eyes widen, then grow bright with unshed tears. Reaching out, she takes his hand, pressing it before chastely dropping it again.

"Then you're wrong, too," she says simply. "You have to be wrong. For John, for...maybe me. If you wanted. For your friends. That's...that's all. You have to be wrong."

Nodding, Sherlock tousles his mop of hair in a quick scratching motion. The repellant R&B love song went away yesterday, but now the static is excruciating. For days, he had a purpose, and it has been taken away from him. _Like everything else is about to be._

"What are you going to do?"

Blowing out a draught of air, Sherlock thinks, _pull yourself the fuck together for once in your stupidly brief life._

"We're trying to track Moriarty down. He's been a bit naughty."

"Sherlock, he blew up an old woman," Molly chides, looking horrified at this glib assessment.

"No. Well, yes, but technically I was talking about him serenading me with a boombox," Sherlock
amends.

John comes through the door at a determined pace, rubbing the fingers of his left hand together. He isn't limping, but he looks uncomfortable. When he reaches Sherlock and Molly, he smiles at her, a real one Sherlock thinks, and presses her elbow. Molly relaxes visibly.

"How's this one, then?" John asks by way of making conversation, nodding at the corpse.

"Not very well. He's dead," Molly says blankly.

John laughs before he can stop himself, but quickly manages to sober. He clears his throat.

"Right. Yes. Did you...talk? The live people, I mean?"

"Yes," Molly says, finally putting the forceps down.

"And it's all good?"

"You need to do everything you can," Molly says to John breathlessly. She clasps him by both shoulders and John stares back at her, steady as he always is. "Everything. I can't, um, I mean, no, if either of you need anything, anything at all, just ask me, but you need to take care of him if there's nothing I can...do."

Not knowing how to feel about this display, Sherlock watches John carefully. The doctor crosses his arms, lowers his face, clears his throat again, and puts his hand out.

Releasing John from her grip, Molly takes it cautiously.

"I will," John announces. "That's a promise."

They leave Bart's and again there is food that turns to ash in Sherlock's mouth, Chinese this time, and again he wears the battery on his phone down, and again the sun sets over London and paints the plane trees with kind amber light, and a cool stripe of blue appears in the sky, then one of orange, and Sherlock can watch the progression of the stars coming out as they walk the distance back to Pall Mall, and he wondered once whether he would get to see sights like this with John Watson before the end and had thought that sort of accomplishment would bring him peace, but it doesn't.

He wants more.

He wants forever, now.

He wants eternity and he wants to cradle it in the palm of his hand.

Instead, he takes John's, lacing their fingers together, and pretends not to notice his friend's mouth widening into a smile.

This time when they go to bed, Sherlock doesn't ask if they have to have sex, he simply curls into another pathetic despondent ball, and it isn't until John snakes his arm around him from behind and murmurs loving words into his back through the thin cotton of his shirt that Sherlock realizes he never told Molly goodbye at Bart's.

And now might never be allowed to.

"How can you wait like this?" he asks John roughly in the darkness. "How can you stand it?"

"This is what soldiers do when we aren't shooting at things or being shot at," John answers
On the third day, they return to Baker Street with their things. The windows have all been replaced. Sherlock goes to them, letting John see to the bags. He stares out the new glass into the road, all the familiar shops and doors and passersby. The windows of the house opposite have likewise been repaired and Sherlock stares at the small figure of his own reflection. He looks terrible, he realizes. Wrung with nerves and too thin and far too pale.

He is acutely aware, as people who John would term addicts are always aware, of just how close he is to morphine and cocaine and just how simple it would be for him to simply walk ten yards and take it already.

Sherlock reaches for his violin and rests it on his shoulder. At first he only cradles it there, the posture a comfort. Then he draws a few scraping notes with his bow.

"Sherlock?"

He lowers the violin, turning. "Hmm?"

"Sherlock, we need to talk for a bit," John says gravely.

Studying him, Sherlock sets his bow and instrument down with care. John looks...he doesn't know how John looks. This is a different John. Different Johns are wonderful, but this one is rather frightening. It reminds Sherlock of John Speaking Pashto, and a little bit of John Tackling Abernetty, but honestly he's never seen this John before. If he were to guess, he imagines this might be Captain John Watson, and a half-thrilled and half-anxious feeling strikes his gut.

"So talk," he demands, rolling his eyes.

John gives a single, very military nod. "It's about Molly."

"Oh, for the love of god!" Sherlock exclaims. "My cock is non-functional, except for when I wish it were. How exactly and when exactly am I meant to have--"

"No," John says firmly, holding up a steady hand. "That's not--no. Your friend Molly told me I needed to do everything I could. She was quite right. And I haven't been. There's one thing I haven't wanted to do, and I need to do it. I've been putting it off and putting it off, but if I can be of any use to you, then I have to take the risk and take a stab, okay, so you need to listen to me right now. Sit down."

Sherlock sits in his capacious chair, baffled. He crosses his legs. John remains standing and paces a bit--not aimlessly, more as if he's planning an attack. He sighs briefly, clenches his fists, releases them, and then faces Sherlock.

"Tell me about your mind palace," he orders.

Blinking slowly, Sherlock frowns.

"Not intimate details, just--you said it was a system, not a symptom. What does it look like?"

Growing very uneasy indeed, Sherlock answers, "It's a palace. In my mind. Do you speak
"English?"

"Yes, and a little German, and Pashto, and passable Arabic." John allows himself a cold smile. "Berk."

"What is this about?"

John is quiet for a very, very, very long moment.

"It's about torture," he replies evenly. The penny drops.

"Jim wants to keep me alive," Sherlock surmises breathlessly. "You realize this. You understand that he wants me suffering, not dead, so in case he gets to me, which now you think he will--"

"He won't," John bites out. "And sorry, it's Jim now?"

"Since you've reevaluated your position on whether or not he is capable of kidnapping me, now you realize that in order for me to live through whatever he has planned, you ought to apprise me of the basic principles of hostage survival." Sherlock laughs suddenly, his head falling back as he claps his hands. "Now that your supreme and might I add stupid conviction that he's incapable of touching me has perished, you're feeling guilty because you haven't been training me to keep it together while he's setting starving rats on my naked person."

John remains quiet and still.

"Brilliant. Oh, this is rich, Christmas came early," Sherlock exults, shifting in his chair. "I love it. I do. No, really. Oh, shit, Sherlock's gone missing, well, at least he's just being broken on a rack and not actually dead. This is...so perfect. Since he wants to keep me alive as long as possible, get as much out of me as he can, you're counting on time being a factor in your finding me after he strikes. I lose a few limbs, a few teeth, but maybe I don't lose my mind, and you're suggesting you'd still want that person? The one who isn't the tidiest bloke in London anymore because he's sewn my lips together in such a way that the skin grafts into itself? That one of his favourite plans, by the way. You're going to want to retrieve my half-salvageable carcass so long as my brain still works?"

"It won't come to that. But. Yes. Even if your brain doesn't still work," John answers in the same voice of unnatural calm.

"You want to live with a torso with zero bodily autonomy and a head full of nightmares?" Sherlock cannot seem to stop laughing, because really, this is too amusing for words. "You're going to kip with a caterpillar with an artificial everything who can't even fuck you properly? You want a Chia pet for a flatmate? You'd choose that person when you could have anyone? Are you mental?"

John grinds his teeth a bit. "The palace. Tell me."

"Oh, yes, sorry," Sherlock gasps, eyes tearing with mirth. "Yep. Yes, Captain. Um, it's actually quite large. Are you wondering what the deepest bits are?"

"In essence," John agrees. "Your first step if he gets to you, which he won't, is to acknowledge you're there. I know that sounds crazy and you do of course need to look for every possible escape route. Every single day, you try to escape. You never stop doing that. But beyond staying alert for exits, accepting you're in a shite place is necessary. Denial will only break you in two later. You realize that you're in trouble, and you know that I am coming for you."
"This is lunacy," Sherlock insists, still giggling. "You're out of your mind. You thought I was the one who'd gone round the twist. You're perfect, do you understand that? You're delusional. I can't begin to...you are so fucking perfect, I didn't even know your kind existed. Tell me you're coming for me again."

"I'm coming for you," John says, the smallest glint of humour in his dark blue eyes.

"God," Sherlock moans, arching his neck back. "The sooner the better."

"That much seems obvious."

"No, I meant come over here. Now."

"We're having an important conversation," John says, crossing his arms as his thin lips twitch in amusement.

"Have it in my lap."

"There are two things you absolutely will not do," John continues implacably. "First, you will not ever respond to sudden kindnesses or overtures or gifts or reprieves with feelings of kinship with that fucker. He is not your ally. Ever. He is the enemy. Always. Second, you will not deliberately remain quiet, because that is not effective at all. If he hurts you, yell about it. Loud. Use the noise. That's supposing you're even present for whatever he's doing. I'm hoping that there's a bit of your mind palace that's deep enough he can't even reach you there. Can you go into trancelike states at will? We should practice that."

"I go into trancelike states when you're kissing me," Sherlock growls, running his hands down his thighs as he uncrosses his legs.

"Answer the fucking question."

"Yes, Captain," Sherlock drawls, "I can go more or less comatose. Whether I can do that while someone has my eyelids forced open and is fucking me remains to be seen."

"Stop it," John snaps.

"Oh, for god's sake, will you just shut up and kiss me?" Sherlock pleads, opening the first two buttons of his grey shirt. He has never tried this technique before, but he can imagine its potential effect and...yes, John's eyes are narrowing even as his pupils widen. Brilliant. "You're going to keep him away from me anyhow. This little chat is academic."

"Knowledge is power," John counters, studying the sliver of Sherlock's pale chest. "How are you at breathing exercises? Calming techniques?"

"Breathing is boring."

"Do you know what stress positions are?"

"I'm in one right now."

"Psychological torture is--"

"Presently taking place in this very flat."

"You're going to want to find a way to track the passage of time effectively," says John, inching closer. "If he takes accurate timekeeping away from you. Daylight, that sort of thing. Prolonged
darkness can be hell on a person."

"I'll tell you what I know about time," Sherlock purrs, unbuttoning the rest of his shirt. "You still aren't kissing me, and that is hell on--"

John's legs are bracketing Sherlock's hips a second later and his hot mouth is devouring Sherlock's and yesyesyesyesyes, now his tongue is battling for supremacy, now his teeth are worrying the detective's lower lip, now his hands are everywhere, one at the side of Sherlock's face, one roving up and down his bare ribcage and around to scratch his back where the scratches from before have faded, and Sherlock makes a hungry sound that causes John to growl deep in his throat.

"See? Best take advantage while I still have all my appendages," Sherlock observes, chuckling giddily as John fists both hands in his tailored shirt and sucks a mark onto his long neck.

"I would still love you if you were a fucking brain in a jar," John pants.

"How about a broken brain in a jar?" Sherlock presses, his heart pounding as he tears John's trousers open and shoves his palm against the hardness he finds there.

"I'd love you if you were even a trace of you. Fucking understand me," John insists, biting his own lip as his hips thrust forward. "If you are alive, I love you. Period. If you're dead, I love you, but..."

"Not quite so enthusiastically," Sherlock laughs. "In the physical sense."

"Now you've got it."

"Tell me you're coming for me again. Captain."

"Sherlock Holmes, I am fucking coming for you," John says, finally answering Sherlock's weird joy with a matching feral grin.

They are kissing again, wildly, madly, when Sherlock's phone rings and both men freeze.

It rings again.

"I should, um," Sherlock stammers.

"Yeah, yeah, go on," John says quickly, sitting back just a bit though he doesn't move away.

Managing to pull his phone from his pocket, Sherlock settles his breathing as best he can and answers.

"Hello?"

For a moment, the other end of the line is quiet. Then a voice Sherlock has never heard before begins to speak in a gruff, efficient undertone.

"Sherlock Holmes, I take it," the man says. "Do you have somewhere you can go that's private? This conversation is for your ears only. And I mean, you'd better be alone. I'm not playing around."

"Who is this?" Sherlock questions sharply. Gesturing for John to move, he stands, fastening one of his shirt buttons. "What is this about? If you're calling regarding a case, I'm on a temporary hiatus due to--"
"This is Sebastian Moran," the voice interrupts. There's an edge to it Sherlock recognizes now, a combat-honed edge, and his blood chills. "You don't know me, but I used to work top security for your brother, which is what landed me where am I right now. Jim will be gone for another ten minutes maybe, and I need to give you some key information. It's regarding John Watson and the fifth pip."

"What about him?" Sherlock asks calmly, looking at the same man two feet away.

"He's the next hostage," Moran says. "I served my time overseas and there's a lot I'm willing to be paid for, but I knew of him back then. Jim is going to kill him. Either way, no matter what you do. I don't call it fucking sporting, which us why I'm ringing you. He's claiming the third pip, the one where he torched the old lady, was cheating by calling in your brother. John Watson is a dead man walking. So you need to listen to me very carefully. Alone."
Chapter 26

Sherlock shifts his weight on polished shoes, considering. Weirdly calm. It's as if he isn't really there at all. Time stretches like taffy, thick and contorted.

This is exactly the sort of thing you were terrified would happen. Told him might happen. KNEW would happen. Was inevitably going to happen. You're not surprised, not at the contents of the warning, merely at the fact of the warning itself. The rest is to be expected.

So what are you waiting for?

John raises his sandy eyebrows in an endearing who-do-I-need-to-kill-now-for-fuck's-sake sort of fashion. Shaking his head with a quiet, genuine smile, Sherlock feels tenderness spreading, devotion hemorrhaging outward in thick gushes, the sort of boundless protectiveness he has never previously felt for anything save his own oft-threatened hide, and now lying is easy, any form of deception or betrayal would be easy, he could create the most elaborate strategies and enact them in complete secrecy without a twinge of remorse, because he is lying for John and if he would kill for John and die for John, then why not lie for him, and the sleuth says into his phone, "Yes, put them through. I'll just find somewhere private. One moment."

He clicks the mobile onto mute. "It's my parents," he says carefully. "They have a new secretary whose voice I failed to recognize. They...well. You can imagine. Might I have a bit of..."

Sherlock counts the seconds passing.

It was the easiest fib he ever told, but that doesn't mean John will believe it. Sherlock thinks he has a chance nevertheless. A seventy-four percent chance, by all telling calculations. John isn't catching him being not-Sherlock, after all, that wouldn't work, he's being perfectly Sherlock, easy, so easy, to look at John and think, you've become my whole world, and then tell him a lie.

Still.

John merely makes a wry, concerned face, rubbing at the back of his neck tiredly. "Jesus. Yeah. I didn't...of course you have parents, I mean, the pair of you didn't spring fully formed from the head of Zeus. They must be going mental."

Sherlock thinks of his staggeringly beautiful and brilliant mother, when her first book was published and she chose a career in mathematics over raising children, and how the woman who had once ruffled his hair turned into an empty space in the empty house, instead traveling to rarefied scientific conferences and publishing abstract studies no one save her could even attempt to understand, and the fact that his quiet desperation to understand the stars and the constellations feels like wanting to be close to her when he couldn't be. He thinks of his never-quite-so-bright father, once charming and now bitter, who felt abandoned enough by her to fall back on a life of business connections and clubs and politics, who only cared about Sherlock when his son made front page bylines. Mycroft hasn't included them in the Moriarty concerns in years.

"They do have some questions," Sherlock lies softly.

John sways his torso back and forth gently--understanding, considering. Sympathetic. "Yeah, I'll just. God. I'll be in the bedroom, okay? Take as long as you need."
Nodding, Sherlock forms a sharp line between his eyes that means thank you and I'm sorry you're saddled with this and forgive me.

The doctor just drops a light kiss to Sherlock shoulder as he scoops up his laptop and makes for the bedroom on small, quiet John feet.

Taking a deep breath, Sherlock unmutes the mobile and hold it to his ear, striding towards the stairs. He very softly closes the sitting room door behind him and trots down to the eighth of the seventeen steps leading up to flat B, unconcerned about Mrs. Hudson overhearing since she's in protective custody. He speaks, tense and low.

"First off, this line is probably monitored."

"It was," Moran returns. "By both sides. I've sorted that for the moment, but we don't have much time."

Sherlock's curls hit the wallpaper and he huddles into himself a bit, keeping his voice as hushed as he can. "Right, then spend the next minute convincing me that I should listen to a word you say. I know your family died over this, or most of them did, but you're still with him, and whether you're being coerced or not, this could easily be a setup."

"It could," Moran agrees. "I'd anticipated your skepticism. So listen hard, and then make your choices. I've been a hired mercenary ever since the Persian Gulf swallowed me whole and spit me back out again. I'm a tough customer. Kill people, hurt people, makes no difference to me. I've never been a man who thought principle outweighed practicality, and some of the shit your brother has asked me to do has been dirty as all fuck."

"I can imagine," Sherlock affirms dryly.

"My family were nearly killed in a plane crash twenty years ago," Moran continues in the same gravelly monotone. "There was a water landing, search and rescue, you name it, and ever since then I've understood we are all on borrowed time. My dad was a complete prick, really the gold standard, and mum was a pretty useless old bat, but they lived by the skin of their teeth and I got to suffer through a few more excruciating hols before shipping out. I learned we're all disposable."

Tell me about it, Sherlock thinks, biting back a retort.

"Some of my choices during combat might even have been affected, fuck if I know. I can't say who I'd have been if they hadn't been found, but I can tell you who I am now. They got an extra twenty years and then Jim Moriarty pressed a button and boom, now I have a sister and I want to see her again someday. I will see her. She's the only one of us worthy of her own skin."

"Go on," Sherlock says tentatively.

"You need to understand that I am a man who makes the practical choice ten times out of ten. I was a sniper. I shot fathers who were holding fucking babies in their laps through windows, my friend, terrorists who were some of the most beautiful, batshit women I've ever seen with holes in their pretty heads. If Jim takes you hostage, you get no sympathy from me. What happens is that Jim pays me when he's done with me and I get my sister back and this fucking brilliant psycho and your monumental prick of a brother are both misty watercoloured memories, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Sherlock agrees, recalling John's words. "This is a war. Why give John a pass?"

"I'm not," Moran answers gruffly. "I detest rigged games. War is hell, but war is also a game, a
winnable game, and Jim here is stacking the deck. Guarding that fucker before he cut and ran was...don't even ask me. A revelation. Life-changing."

Recalling Moran's hand shaking as he reached for the gum in the video days ago, Sherlock can't help but wince a little.

"He's one of a kind. I don't need to tell you he's the maddest, most charismatic fuck alive, or that if my sister wasn't involved I'd either cut his heart out and eat it or else throw in my lot with him and rule the goddamn world. But my family, all those years ago? They ought to have died. There was a tiny chance, but that was all it took. I'm not giving either of you a bloody pass."

"You're giving him a chance," Sherlock realizes.

"You probably can't do anything." Moran makes a spitting sound after coughing briefly, and the crackling sound of a smoke being enjoyed erupts near the mouthpiece. "I don't think you can think your way out of it. You definitely can't bluff your way out, and you sure as shit can't fight your way out."

Sherlock remains silent.

"But you can know what's coming, and that you probably won't make it through. Maybe you get to say goodbye. Anyhow. Take it or leave it, but the plan is to wrap John in semtex and blow him sky high. He had a reputation back in Afghanistan--stone cold, loyal as fuck, could take a bite out of your rifle and spit a bullet back at you."

To his shock, Sherlock finds himself smiling wistfully at these brutal recollections, tracing the wallpaper grooves with his fingertip.

"My family ended up in tiny pieces," Moran concludes. "You get a free glimpse into the future, mate. Use it."

The line goes dead.

All is very still. Mrs. Hudson has recently dusted the bannister, Sherlock observes. Pity. Dust is eloquent. He could have seen John's finger marks on the rail and imagined he felt their warm pressure against his bare skin.

Or he could simply walk into the bedroom and have the real thing, considering John is still breathing for the moment.

Fuck, Sherlock thinks numbly.

Though he knows John is probably fretting above, Sherlock slides his phone into his pocket and remains on the Baker Street staircase a while longer.

Seventeen familiar steps, all of them his. Seventeen steps which never seemed at all mystical or significant before John's footfalls graced them, a man with a duffel bag over his shoulder walking resolutely toward a room containing a severed head in a box and reeking of human decay.

Smiling senselessly again at the image, Sherlock settles his elbows back against the tenth step and he thinks.

Because Moran was right. They cannot fight their way out, or bluff their way out. Mycroft can do nothing. All the king's horses and all the king's men? Useless. Utterly beside the point.
But Sherlock is the most brilliant human being on the fucking planet--possible exceptions for Mycroft Holmes and Jim Moriarty notwithstanding.

And what is more, he is not against risking his life to prove he's clever.

The palace is cool today, full of shadows and coastal breezes, a gun-grey firmament spreading above the front steps of the stately entrance. Sherlock sits physically on the hushed stairs of Mrs. Hudson's house, and in his mind he sits in the same relaxed posture on the curved stone steps leading into the great estate, shivering slightly in the chilled atmosphere. Echoes of John's words keep circling above him, fragments of conversation come to life, black sea birds with long bills and elegant pointed wings with blood-red tips. They are restless, cawing, lovely fowl, but sleek and compact for all their fluttering.

_You're to die for_, John gasped in bed between burning kisses. _I would die for you, I think._

It's an unacceptable option for all it's the most likely one, but oh, how beautiful it is, Sherlock suddenly realizes. He pictures a John wrapped in semtex rushing Jim Moriarty, clutching him like the tiny ferocious bear John is, wrapping himself up in a madman with a furious embrace that mimics passion and shouting _Run, Sherlock! Run!_ Would he do it? God, he would, wouldn't he? Death in John's eyes, death in Jim's, Sherlock Holmes their single overlapping obsession.

Merely a thought exercise. One that makes his heart clench. He won't let that happen.

He can't. It hurts too much.

_Oh_, Sherlock thinks, his eyes snapping open to view the dark hallway.

He closes them again. John is still speaking, the new bird with its sable wings and splash of crimson feathers widely spread, hovering as if on an updraft before Sherlock's face.

_Kill yourself. That would sort it._

"I can't win if I'm not alive to try," Sherlock objects, the stone steps harsh and cold against his thighs. "Are you saying skip the torture, skip the fight, skip it all? End it, for your sake? Just _die_ and have done? Jim would have a fit, that I grant you."

_He can't get to you afterward, can he?_ The bird's eyes are like polished glass, fathomless and implacable. _Not even Jim Moriarty can trump death._

The Sherlock in the palace sits forward, frowning, gazing at the black sharp-billed bird. The Sherlock in Baker Street steeples his fingers, dropping his long neck and exposing it fully to the ceiling as he reclines further.

"That isn't what you're really saying," Sherlock whispers excitedly.

The breeze picks up, tangling Sherlock's curls, and the John-bird cocks its head. Another joins it, likewise hovering without flapping its wings, and then a third follows, and now there is a trio of sable tern-shaped creatures floating before him, making minute adjustments in the bullying wind.

_You know how you win a war, Sherlock? I'll tell you_, the first says.

_Every time you fire your gun, you do it for the man next to you, hoping he lives_, the second continues.

_And every time he fires his gun, it's for you_, the third concludes, its down ruffling in the brisk
wind.

And suddenly, Sherlock knows exactly what to do.

The birds dissolve into smoke which is quickly blasted into nothingness by the approaching storm Sherlock now realizes is his mind calculating every possible alternative, every probability and potentiality, every nuance of every detail he has ever learned about Jim Moriarty in his wretchedly lonely life, and everything he has ever learned solving the grimmest of cases for a living since boyhood.

The wind begins to howl like a hurt child.

Calculations splinter into pounding rain like glass shards, strategies whipping through the corridors of his palace in great gusts, thunder in the distance and a resolute cold like the end of the world settling over all.

Trees in the grounds crash and crack.

*God, that hurts*, Sherlock thinks helplessly as he forces himself through and past it, clenching his jaw as the squall climaxes in a final torrent of ice crystals that lance like needles against his skin.

The cataclysm stills.

A little out of breath, the Sherlock sitting on the eighth step hoists himself up with a stifled groan. That was...that was alarming, even for him.

Alarming but useful.

*So John Watson is a dead man walking?* Sherlock thinks, pulling out his phone while he has the chance and John is still absent.

*Two can play at that game.*

He silently hopes that Moran's blocking the monitors on his mobile is still in effect. Or else this will go very badly indeed. Particularly if Mycroft hears. The bullet scrape in his arm throbs, a mute warning. Sherlock ignores it. The other end of the line rings only once before Shinwell Johnson picks up.

"Talk to me," Shinwell growls.

"Hello to you too," Sherlock drawls irritably.

"Oh, bless us, but that's good news--cor, Mr. Holmes, here you rang and all, and I being an observer of the human condition same as you though admittedly a bit less eggheaded a sort, seeing as you didn't text and ringing a bloke up for you is akin to paper cuts on the bollocks, if you follow me, not life-threatening but fucking Christ nevertheless a profound pain and a spiritual annoyance to boot, the audible telephone form of communication I mean to say, well I leapt to the conclusion that you might have been in a tight spot."

"I am," Sherlock snaps.

"Bloody hell, where are you?" Shinwell cries. There is a crashing sound as he apparently leaps to his feet, and the high staccato of dogs yapping follows. "How many cavalry necessary? Do you have a weapon? Is the doctor with you? Are you injured?"
"Shinwell--"

"If bleeding, did you try to staunch the wound wi' a jumper or a blanket or, dunno, that poncy scarf you always wear? Are you in the boot of a car? If you're in the boot of a car, mark me now, you're going to listen to the roadways, memorize every sound, remember if there are any changes--bridges, traffic, tolls--"

"I am not in the fucking boot of a car," Sherlock moans. "Will you hold your peace for once in your life and listen to me? I have a plan."

"A plan?" Shinwell's always greasy voice positively glistens with pride. "Lulu! Annabelle! Henrietta! Shut the everloving fuck up!" The yapping lessens somewhat. "Apologies, Mr. Holmes. Pray continue at your leisure and, I need hardly add, at your own pace and in your own way."

Momentarily, Sherlock lowers the phone to stare at it, wondering what terrible force of human ridiculousness created Shinwell Johnson. But he returns the mobile to his ear with a heavy sigh.

Sherlock explains.

Shinwell listens.

"That is, and please forgive me for being blunt, the worst idea it has ever been my privilege to listen to, and you are--in the figurative and not the literal sense, you understand--barking," Shinwell whispers in awe.

"I don't have a choice!" Sherlock hisses. "You have to trust me on this. You have to stay with him, help him, please will you do this for me? Any other way, he dies. There are no other options left. And I can't live like this indefinitely."

There is--shockingly--no reply to this assertion.

"Shinwell," Sherlock says, thoroughly exasperated, "time is at a premium."

A wet sniff followed by a muffled gurgle emerges from the phone.

"Are you crying?" Sherlock demands, scrubbing his free hand into his hair in disbelief.

"Mr. Holmes," Shinwell answers in a choked voice, "begging your pardon for what might seem, to a man of your iron nature, an unseemly display of sentiment, but Jesus Christ on a tricycle, that is simply the most sodding beautiful and tragic proposal I've ever heard in me life, and it ain't going too far to say that I'm profoundly moved in the spiritual sense, and that your love for this fine and might I add deserving gent is, and I'm not exaggerating here, an absolute model of nobility and self-sacrifice, and that to witness this kind of devotion in the modern fucking age of selfies and celebrity and greed and Kardashians and general wankery is nothing short of miraculous, and I'll go down in history as your greatest admirer, with or without your permission, if you please, because 'greater love hath no man than this,' as the Scriptures put it, and fuck me with a broomstick if I don't agree."

The unexpected lump which forms in Sherlock's throat at this bald and unabashed assertion stubbornly refuses to dissolve immediately. So Sherlock coughs several times before managing, "Thank you. Will you help me?"

"I'm your man, Mr. Holmes," Shinwell Johnson avers. "To the fucking last ounce. Bring it on."
Knocking at the bedroom door with his toe, a cup of tea in each hand, Sherlock waits. When John opens it, Sherlock passes him the beverage and John regards him with mild awe.

"You made me tea?" he marvels, taking it.

"Oh, shut up," Sherlock sniffs, pretending pique. "I do know how to boil water. I can cook too, if you must know. It's merely organic chemistry."

"That's it, you're making me dinner," John says. The light in his dark eyes dims slightly. He sips at the tea, as does Sherlock. "How are your parents?"

"Upset," Sherlock lies, sitting on the bed cross-legged and patting the coverlet beside him. John soon follows.

"Damn right they are. How are you?"

Mulling it over, Sherlock shrugs minutely. *Upset*, he thinks, but it wouldn't be fair to worry John unduly.

"God, you put the whole sugar bowl in here," John teases, smacking his lips.

"I like sweet tea," Sherlock admits. He sets his own cup down. "Particularly when..."

*When I feel utterly ruined*, he prevents himself from saying.

John, unfortunately, understands anyhow. He goes to put his cup on the side table after taking another healthy swallow and stands in front of the detective, burying his fingers in his hair. Sherlock goes readily, wrapping his arms around his friend.

"I honestly can't believe you're still here," he says hoarsely. "It boggles the mind."

"You're kind of stuck with me," John states, smoothing Sherlock's curls and allowing them to spring back under his palms.

Sherlock guides John onto the bed so they're facing each other, and the smaller man goes readily. The doctor's irises are a wonderful, fearful blue, and Sherlock wonders briefly whether he is ever going to see them again. A hint of the terrible pain he's feeling must cloud his features by accident, because John props himself up on one elbow with a serious expression.

"You know," John says lowly, pressing his palm to Sherlock's suit lapel, "the thing about you is, you have completely turned my life around. Within another set of circumstances, I might not have got to have this, and...just..." He blinks, smiling briefly. "You've changed everything. For the record, notwithstanding the mortal danger and the fact you're kind of a complete dickhead, I'd not change it. So there."

"Would you really come for me if I vanished?" Sherlock whispers. He needs to know. "Truly?"

"To hell and back," John answers at once.

Sherlock smiles sadly. "Weren't we interrupted at something?"

"Ah, yes, yep, that's true," John grants mildly. "Kissing, I think it was."
"I forget how it's done." Tentatively, Sherlock reaches out and traces the line of John's throat. "I've hardly any practice. Show me again."

They are still kissing, sweet and oh so slow, when John falls limply unconscious to the bedclothes. "I'm sorry," Sherlock says, pressing one more kiss to the insensate doctor's brow.

First Sherlock posts a message to The Science of Deduction's forum. It's his Skype handle, W.S.S.Holmes, with nothing more.

Fetching John's gun, he goes into the sitting room and opens Skype on his laptop, waiting for the message he knows will come soon. For two minutes he sits motionless, staring at the screen. When fairy_tale_ending contacts him, he accepts immediately and watches as the caller appears.

"Sherlock, my dear," Jim Moriarty purrs.

The sight of him is sickening, but since it's also unavoidable, Sherlock simply quashes it.

"Jim," Sherlock intones.

It's the first time they have spoken face to face since the Carl Powers trial. Jim is smirking, his hair neatly styled, wearing white shirtsleeves with a tailored black jacket. He seems to be sitting in a very ordinary dining room and is sipping something brown with a few cubes in it. He has the most casually arrogant set of shoulders Sherlock has ever seen.

"What's cookin', good-lookin'," Jim trills. "Did you just love my serenade?"

"Guess," Sherlock drawls.

"You did, didn't you? Thought you would. What's up, precious?" Jim tastes the scotch-coloured drink appreciatively. "If you're going to beg for mercy, I really think we should skip it. Dull. Tedious. And I'm still going to mail your ears to your brother packed in salt."

"I'm not begging," Sherlock answers. "I'm going to offer you a deal."

"A deal?" Jim crows. "Oh, goody, I can't wait for this. You are offering me a deal. What hath God wrought. This is fabulous."

Sherlock raises the Sig so it's visible. "I deduced what you intend to do to John Watson. You're planning to kill him. He's the fifth pip--it's only logical. Don't try to lie to me, I know it's true. What better way to get to me? But you aren't going to kill him, you're a sporting man and you're going to vow to me by the rules of this game that you won't touch him, and if you do that, if you swear never to touch him ever, or compel anyone else to touch him ever, then I'll walk right into your net. You can have me. Me for him. It's quite simple."

Jim yawns, passing the back of his hand across his mouth. "Fuck. Sorry, sweetheart. That was a very soothing bedtime story. I can get you anyway. So there must be more to it than this. If I agree to leave your midget alone, you turn yourself over and we live happily ever after. What if I don't?"
Sticking the muzzle of the gun under his chin, Sherlock cocks it, smiling.

"I kill myself," he says coldly. "Game over."

Jim's eyes go a bit wide and then he grins devilishly. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would," Sherlock vows, and he is perfectly serious.

"Oh, go on, then, don't let me stop you," Jim chuckles. But his clever eyes are anxious. "You can cherish the look of surprise on my face as you expire." Jim makes a comical expression of exaggerated horror.

"You want me to shake hands with you in hell, I will not disappoint you," Sherlock growls, shoving the muzzle into his own flesh, cold and bruising. "You think I'm not prepared to do anything? Prepared to burn? If you wanted more than life to preserve something or someone, what wouldn't you do? What wouldn't you do to keep me alive? Well, I would go ten times further for John Watson. If you refuse, I die. Right now. You have ten seconds."

Jim chews the inside of his lip thoughtfully. "Honey, you really don't have to do this for him. He's not that interesting. Cute in a really ugly-cute way, I grant, but..."

"Five," Sherlock says through his teeth.

"This is cheating," Jim hisses. "You can't just--"

"One," Sherlock reports. He closes his eyes and draws a deep breath. "Goodbye, Jim."

"Don't!" his mortal enemy shrieks.

Ten minutes later, having changed into baggy blue sweatpants, a comfortable t-shirt, sneakers, and a hoodie which are the remnants of a disguise for a long-ago case and still are useful for hiding in plain sight, Sherlock texts his brother.

John is a bit under the weather. Popping out for some Lemsip incognito. Tell your gorillas not to shoot me. SH

He waits exactly thirty seconds and then exits the house without his keys and unarmed. The phone buzzes a moment later.

Go by the directest route. My people will follow and wait to escort you back. MH

Sherlock is counting on this, and he walks at a brisk pace toward the nearest Tesco. When he arrives, he strides coolly past shelves of wine and hummus and flowers and books toward the rear of the building. Without hesitation, he opens an unlocked door marked PRIVATE. Complete confidence is the key to this sort of benign invasion. The air back here is cooler, dry with dust and cardboard aromas. A few heads turn to look at him, but the place is mostly deserted at this hour.

Sherlock ducks and darts between the boxes, heading for the employee loading dock. When he reaches it, he flips up his hood and jumps down to the pavement. CCTV will pick him up soon, but he hopes his opponents will act quickly enough for it not to matter.

He walks to the predetermined corner and he waits.
"Please," he whispers to no one in particular, and not even really aware of what he is praying for. Terror ebbs and recedes like waves until his head is aching with it, but Sherlock steadfastly refuses to move.

When an unmarked van pulls up, the driver puts the vehicle in park and hops out. He is a tall man, handsome and blond with blunt, square features, eyes brown and entirely ruthless, a bit of stubble marking his strong jaw.

"Sebastian Moran, I take it," Sherlock says coolly.

"Now that," Moran says, a hint of admiration in his voice, "I did not expect."

"No," Sherlock agrees.

"Are you armed?"

"Of course not."

"Phone?"

Sherlock hands it over without protest.

"Still. We're not going to want you conscious for this," Moran warns.

"Oh, just get it over with, I hate waiting."

When the syringe comes out, Sherlock allows it to sink into his neck without a flinch, and the world goes very swiftly cold and dark.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

I know this is a new chapter posted in a hot minute, but you're not getting another one for a little bit. I know how this mess ends, in case you're worried. I know what's done next. I'll warn for nasty if there is any. Thank you a hundred thousand times and more for sticking with me, you know I see it every single day and am further encouraged. You're all my Best and Brightest creatures.

The sitting room at Baker Street is lightless in a way London never could accomplish, an impossible void really, it could never be this black, not with all the cars and the streetlamps and the neon and the electric glow of the sheer numberless people, but nevertheless Sherlock knows where he is by smell and touch alone.

John rests in Sherlock's arms, nestled completely within his embrace on the sofa--an incongruously terrifying and deadly creature now being cradled by someone who spent the majority of his life learning how to be frightened. The irony is not lost on the sleuth any longer.

He spent a very long time insisting that it was a Pavlovian glandular malfunction. But now he has decided not to be frightened anymore, Sherlock can admit to it: he was terrified all that long while.

"Sorry, I--" Sherlock mumbles, confused and apologetic even as his arms are tightening around the completely unprecedented warm body which is draped over him.

As if he can't help it. As if it's another chemical defect, just waiting to be triggered. The longing for a fellow human pressing against his thin skin.

"I'm not," John replies in a sleepy whisper.

The plan, such as it is, was based on certain premises regarding which Sherlock had no doubts whatsoever.

PREMISE ONE: Moriarty wants John Watson dead.

PREMISE TWO: While is it difficult to defend someone ad infinitum, it is relatively easy to kill someone so long as the killer does not fear reprisal in the form of punishment, censure, or attack. Indefinite protection is fraught with challenges. Terrorism and assassination are incredibly simple.

PREMISE THREE: Sherlock Holmes's death is preferable to John Watson's death.

CONCLUSION ONE: Skipping the fifth pip is the only logical alternative to John Watson's demise.

Sherlock is on his back, floating in a wide salt sea under a sky that offers no cloud cover and thus no protection from the rays searing into his pale chest. Abstractly, he knows that his skin is probably not aflame, but he feels sweat-soaked and fried nonetheless, as if his epidermis is about to curl up and slough away like burning paper.

Where is he? What shipwreck caused all this drifting along amidst shallow waves.
"Sherlock, you're scaring me a little," John says.

But where is he? From what side is his voice emanating? Or is John everywhere? Could he be the water and the sun and the blinding sky?

"Can you take a deep breath for me? Just out through your mouth and in through--Sherlock?"

So Sherlock had to give himself to Jim. He had to. There was no way around it. But there were emotional impediments which required John to be temporarily removed from the equation, and if there is one skill at which Sherlock Holmes excels, it is the ruthless removal of emotional impediments.

PREMISE ONE: John will sentimentally object to my deliberately endangering myself.

PREMISE TWO: Moriarty wants my life preserved for as long as possible simply so that he can make my existence excruciating.

PREMISE THREE: The probability is high that John will not stop looking for me if he is able to do so, and now he will be will be assisted by Mycroft and Shinwell and our homeless network.

CONCLUSION TWO: John's objection to my giving myself freely to Moriarty is irrelevant to the endgame and could hamper our eventual success and thus should not be considered a factor.

A small point in Sherlock's neck aches terribly, and his arm is throbbing. He is in a desert composed of black sand, every grain glimmering, and the sky above him is painted in ivory and beige. Something is wrong about all of this, Sherlock realizes, but he can't understand what it is.

He can see John approaching, wearing fatigues, his dog tags a lump beneath the pale green undershirt, and he suddenly knows that John cannot be allowed here, he cannot glimpse Sherlock in this land, if John speaks to Sherlock here, everything will be over and the pair of them will become pillars of salt. Forever frozen.

So Sherlock hides. In the nick of time, too.

"Sherlock," John calls, but he doesn't see his friend in the shadow of the black dune. "Are you chucking me out of your flat because you have a very attractive mouth and I noticed on an empty street corner in a moment of revoltingly maudlin self-pity? Because that would be truly daft."

The prospect of close proximity to Jim is highly distasteful but likewise irrelevant as regards the most logical stratagem.

PREMISE ONE: Moriarty cannot be killed at a distance, as Mycroft would have managed it by now if anyone could.

PREMISE TWO: In order to torture me, Moriarty will be required to close the physical distance between our corporeal forms.

PREMISE THREE: I am a master in regards to escaping rope bindings, handcuffs, and other restraints, and freeing myself while in captivity leads to astronomically better opportunities to strike than running, hiding, or allowing Moriarty to continue to dictate the series of events.

CONCLUSION THREE: Possible temporary discomfort and even permanent disfigurement does not nearly outweigh the tactical advantages of feigned surrender when John's life is considered.

Sherlock is standing on the roof of St. Bart's hospital, right up against the edge, the place where he
goes whenever he wants a quiet cigarette, and the air is crisp and clean under a pale sky. He is smoking, the taste of ash on his lips a comfort, watching John on the street below as he advances toward the building. They are both on their mobile phones and when John stops walking to smile up at Sherlock, the detective feels his heart stutter.

“There's not going to be any pressure to do anything, okay?” John says gently as the breeze toys with his dark blond hair. There is a slight crackle to his phone-voice, but Sherlock can hear him perfectly. “Not talk, or touch if you don’t want to, or, I don't know, we can go back to how it was before, I can pretend I don't understand. Just don’t..."

Waiting, Sherlock watches as John bites his lip. The doctor is carefully considering his words. A bicycle whizzes past, and pedestrians ebb and flow around him. But John is quite still, keeping his eyes fixed on Sherlock.

"You're amazing, I think you're amazing," John concludes.

When Sherlock finally wakes up after dozens of half-remembered nightmares, it's with a gasp followed by a groan.

For several rather horrifying seconds, his eyes refuse to open. But then he cracks them with an effort and light floods in--awful light, vicious light, lancing into his corneas--and another helpless sound is forced from his lips due to the severe reaction he is being subjected to following the stab of Moran's needle.

It's another two full minutes before Sherlock can focus his energies enough to sit up. Once he manages it, he gapes at his surroundings in considerable shock.

Sherlock stares down at his own agile hands, baffled.

He had expected, first of all, to be cruelly restrained. Considering the fact that Sherlock's memory is annoyingly perfect and Jim's capacity for creative description is grotesquely apt, he had expected to be chained to a wall, tied to a chair, encased in a box, hanging by his wrists from the ceiling, already missing limbs, hooked up to an electrical restraint system, encased in cement, or at the very least handcuffed or muzzled.

He isn't.

Sherlock is sitting in a bed with white sheets and pillowcases and a white duvet, surrounded by very tall white walls. They look simply like drywall with primer painted over them, and Sherlock recognizes the sharp aroma of it still lingers in the perfectly blank chamber. A fluorescent light he couldn't possibly reach shines coolly about twelve feet above him. There are small vents up there, which are heavily armoured but allowing plentiful air to flow despite this fact.

No one is here. There is a plain white door in the corner, closed. Next to it is the button Sherlock supposes controls the overhead light.

There are no sounds save for the faint buzz of the fluorescent fixture.

When he looks down again, Sherlock realizes he is wearing white cotton drawstring trousers and a white short-sleeved shirt and recalls that he had sewn several small pins and other potentially useful but relatively unnoticeable lock-picking tools into his hoodie.
"Fuck," he says under his breath, crushing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

The clothing fits perfectly and is quite comfortable, but it's extremely eerie. Sherlock thinks about the loss of his equipment and grimaces again.

He wonders who dressed him like this, and why.

Oh.

To take any tools or signaling devices I'd smuggled. Naturally.

Then he wonders who undressed him, and he can easily guess the answer, and manages not to gag only by a supreme effort of will.

"Hello?" he calls next, crawling out of the bed. It's the only object of furniture in the room.

All is terribly quiet.

Sherlock staggers, emitting a stifled grunt, barely catching himself by a corner of coverlet before he tumbles to the blank white floor tile on unsteady legs. It takes several lungfuls of air to get his muscles under control. He feels like a newborn gazelle. But after a minute or two, he stops panting. Sherlock stands straighter, peering about. Worried.

Well. Worried would be something of an understatement, he corrects himself, drawing his brows towards his nose.

He's not in any sort of hospital--the walls are too high and the bed is too comfortable. He's not in a gaol, or not really, not a traditional one, just in a room. Sherlock fully expects the door to be locked but determines to try it anyway. It would be pure laziness not to make the effort. He guides himself carefully along the wall and twists the simple knob.

It opens.

Sherlock remains where he is for several more seconds, simply dreading what he will find beyond. His heart thuds uselessly.

As both a delaying tactic and an experiment, he tries what is theoretically the light switch, half expecting to be tasered for his impudence.

The light flicks off. Then it flicks back on again when he presses a second time.

So.

That's...a light switch after all.

Gritting his teeth, Sherlock walks forward.

Another white room presents itself. This one is a hallway with nothing in it. There is a door off the corridor, however--no, no, three doors--and Sherlock tries the nearest one.

He finds himself in a very small bathroom, again with high freshly painted white walls and an efficient but impenetrable ventilation system. There is a toilet with low water level and no covering lid, a sink, a few built-in shelves, and a shower stall. No mirrors are in evidence. The shelves are stocked with one mini-toothpaste, a tiny travel toothbrush, deodorant, a small roll of bandaging, antiseptic gel, a hotel-sized soap, and an electric shaver that appears to be chained to the wall. This confuses Sherlock profoundly until he realizes that one cannot electrocute oneself and thereby
shuffle off the mortal coil if the shaver cannot reach the water of the toilet or the shower, and likewise that even disposable razors can be turned into weapons.

A very uncomfortable feeling churns in Sherlock's belly. This is not an environment packed to brimming with instruments of torture.

It is in environment bereft of ways to die.

Examining himself more closely, Sherlock sees that the bandaging on the bullet graze has been changed and cleaned since his capture and this time he does lean over the toilet, violently spitting the contents of his empty stomach into the pristine white porcelain.

It might be the tranquilizer hangover. It might be terror. Sherlock has no idea which and elects not to ask himself stupid questions.

When he stands up, he feels slightly better and tests the taps. Hot water flows readily from the shower head and the sink, and he finds a single small towel folded on the tiled floor.

It disturbs him in ways no towel should ever disturb anyone.

"I told you to acknowledge you're here first, remember," John says gently in Sherlock's head. He is wearing jeans and a familiar black and white striped jumper. He looks tired and rumpled, but unafraid.

_Hello. Yes,_ Sherlock thinks, sniffing at the toothpaste and the soap and finding them perfectly normal, _but you also said to try to escape every day, and this is...not what I expected. And I don't like it. At all._

"You expected not to like it," John says with a half-smile.

_I know. But this is utterly fucked. Do you like it?"

"Not one tiny bit, mate."

Returning to the corridor, Sherlock glances back and forth. There is still no one here, and nothing could possibly frighten him more. No Jim, no Moran, no human save himself, exploring a space he knows was explicitly designed to torment him.

"Take it easy," John warns.

_Shut up, you aren't even here_, Sherlock thinks, rolling his eyes as he goes to the next door and shoves it open.

"You must take this one step at a time, brother mine," Mycroft admonishes, fiddling with his umbrella. "Do not allow yourself to be overwhelmed."

_Oh, do be quiet. If there's one good thing about this place, it's that you're not here_, Sherlock huffs in his head as he crosses the threshold.

The new room is as tall and nearly as blank as the first two. This is a kitchen...of sorts. It contains at first glance only a wall-mounted digital clock with a calendar function beneath the time, and a large steel table--one Sherlock could not possibly dismantle without tools no matter how many heads he'd like to bash in with a metal leg--and a drinking fountain. But on second examination, there is a mini-dumbwaiter installed in one wall of the relentlessly white chamber.
Frowning, Sherlock goes to it, and easily flips the cover open. On one side is a trash chute, or so he supposes, which can collect whatever garbage might accumulate in such a barren place. The paper covering of his soap bar, he supposes dryly.

On the other is the dumbwaiter box itself, far too small to even contemplate escape that way—for god’s sake, his head wouldn’t even fit in the thing—which he next learns contains a cold filet of poached fish with a yoghurt-like dressing, a cucumber salad, a hearty roll of bread, and a glass of white wine, all resting placidly in paper products.

The sight alarms Sherlock on so many levels, he cannot even bring himself to count them.

His hands are shaking, he discerns. He locks them together with fingers laced, hitting himself repeatedly on the forehead with them, telling himself to breathe, you idiot, just--

"Look," John says calmly, his wrinkled brow furrowing, "you need to let yourself be--"

Panicked? Sherlock explodes in his head. Irritated? A bit miffed? What in fuck is wrong with you?

"Sherlock--"

I'm apparently being held captive in a no-man's-land, a cage in which there is nothing other than myself and my three square meals a day--

"Nope. Stop right there, soldier. You don’t know that yet. This might be the only food you get for quite some time. That could easily be the case. Eat it."

There aren't any forks.

"Of course not. But--"

Sherlock glares scimitars. Then he scoops a handful of salmon into his mouth and swallows, wincing, rinsing his fingers afterward at the water fountain, which is pleasingly cold. The fish is fresh and delicately cooked, the seasoning of the sauce nicely balanced, with a hint of spice to the tang.

There. I hope it's poisoned.

"It won't be. That would make no sense."

Drugged.

"It doesn't seem to be drugged either."

Well, I fucking hope it is.

Imaginary John merely purses his lips disapprovingly. "It's okay," the captain offers. "You can lose your temper. Completely natural."

Nothing about this is sodding natural.

"Do you want to, maybe, just--I mean, you should go ahead and look in the last room," Molly suggests, adjusting her lab coat and then nervously fiddling with a piece of her hair.

Fine, Sherlock thinks shortly. If it doesn't contain an iron maiden, I'll be very much surprised.
Returning to the hall, Sherlock passes through it and enters the final chamber. This one is much longer and narrower than the others, and contains at either end a pair of metal cabinets with digital combination locks on the doors.

*There. See?* Sherlock demands.

"What?" John questions, passing a sweeping hand across the landscape.


"That could be," John says quietly, "the thumb screws I mean to say, but you don't know yet. So just be right here, right now, in pretty good kip, and not in some bloody awful hypothetical."

"What the actual fuck," Sherlock mutters aloud.

At the end of the room is another door, this one much more industrial than the others, very very locked, featuring an electronic card reader. All along a single side of the long chamber, however, a highly polished mirror takes the place of the drywall. Sherlock pads in his bare feet up to the mirror and examines himself. He already looks grotesquely pale and underfed, with huge dark marks under his eyes, hair a riotous mess, and he has been here...all of one day.

*I can't do this,* Sherlock thinks, breathing harder every second. *There is no way in hell I can do this.*

"You haven't even conducted a thorough search yet, Sherlock," Mycroft reminds him smugly.

*I hate you,* Sherlock replies, shivering. *I have always hated you.*

"Oh, we both know that's not quite true. Now--you've missed things, surely. Look again."

His disembodied brother proves to be correct, for opposite the mirror, Sherlock finds a flat screen telly about four feet wide, mounted into the plaster.

So he is to be communicated with electronically. Perfect. *That is just fucking perfect.*

The next hour Sherlock devotes to examining the prison with greater care. He knows it's an hour because, aside from having a very keen sense of time, the clock in the kitchen (he calls it the kitchen for lack of a better term) says it's half eight in the evening when he finishes. Sherlock has deduced already from the stubble on his jaw and the state of the bruising on his hands from Roylott's poker that the hypodermic knocked him on his arse for an entire day. Nevertheless, senseless as it is, the hour spent searching every nook and cranny feels like it was a sad waste of time, if only because he discovers so wretchedly little.

Items of note: there is only one exterior door. The cabinets seem to be impervious to Sherlock's efforts to open them. The ventilation ducts in every room, while inaccessible, appear to contain small glinting cameras, for Sherlock can make out the slight c-curve of their lenses. This last is the least surprising fact Sherlock can think of, but it's supremely vexing even if predictable.

So they can see him.

*They can see him all the time.*

Sherlock spends five minutes being precious about this development before giving in to catlike personal hygiene and showering, ruthlessly efficient in every clipped movement, defiantly visible, washing his hair with the plastic packet of shampoo he finds on the floor of the stall. When he's
re-dressed and dry apart from stubbornly curling wet tendrils of hair, which he is forced to comb with his fingers, he returns to the dumbwaiter and stares at...well...dinner.

"It's not a test," John says, leaning against the white wall with his arms crossed. "It's a meal."

Closing his eyes, Sherlock thinks, *It's an insult. Insult to injury. First the injury, then the insult. That's what this is, John.*

"Yeah, love, I know. But it's also calories. And I kinda desperately want you back. So..."

Sighing, Sherlock takes the meal to the table and eats it, stopping on occasion to glare daggers at the vents. When he's through, he tosses the paper containers in the trash chute, finishes the wine (a fairly good un-oaked Chardonnay) and disposes of the cup, and flips the bird to the ceiling before washing up. Having finished this task, he collapses against the table with a small exhausted sound.

"I ate plenty worse overseas," John says, leaning down across from him with both elbows on the steel. "I quite like salmon, actually."

*Yes, by all means regale me with your superior mental stamina. I'm not the one with the PTSD problem.*

"You kind of are, though," John answers softly. "I don't hold it against you. But takes one to know one."

*I miss you, Sherlock* thinks miserably. *It's like an ache in my lungs that won't stop. Every time I breathe, you're not there. I knew it would be awful, but not this kind of awful. I miss you so much I can't stand it and I haven't even been conscious for two hours.*

*This is insupportable.*

*I'll be here forever, and I can't do it, John. I can't. Me and a mirror. That means me and...unadulterated me. It's what I always hated most, flung in my face daily. Total isolation.*

*I can't.*

"You can do this," John says, ducking his head down encouragingly in that sideways manner he has. "I believe in Sherlock Holmes. Remember? That's exactly what I said, and I...god help us, you're still a wreck from the drugs, aren't you, love? I'm coming for you. Now, get some rest."

When Sherlock pulls the covers over himself, a little after ten, he resolutely sinks into the cellar of his palace, determined that if he dreams, he will dream about John's face when he agreed to come to Baker Street for coffee the first time--before overwhelming, devastating love ruined the pair of them in a single blow.

Sherlock remains entirely unmolested the following morning, and he rolls out of the bed with a far clearer mind than the night previous.

He goes about brushing his teeth and taking a piss and then checks the dumbwaiter at 9:17 am. It contains two already shelled and salted hardboiled eggs, and orange juice, alongside a paper cup of fairly expensive tea. Beside the breakfast he finds a pair of clean pants, a new shampoo pack, and another plastic travel square (this one of moisturizer).
"Fuck you very much," Sherlock growls to the vent before mechanically eating one egg and binning the other. He drinks the juice out of a vague fear of scurvy developing and stands in the kitchen sipping tepid Darjeeling.

The detective spends ten minutes refusing to accept the clean undergarments before giving in. Sherlock changes in the bedroom (for lack of a better word—the room with a bed in it, at least) and without the slightest remorse bins the other pair rather than sending them back in the dumbwaiter.

He has principles, even if he is to be kept in a fucking zoo. One of them is never allowing motherfucking Jim to touch his pants.

_Ever again._

_For as long as I can manage it._ Sherlock morbidly corrects himself.

"What's the plan?" John asks when Sherlock returns to his tea in the tragically farcical kitchen. He's drinking a cup of coffee out of his RAMC mug, smiling affectionately, wearing a button-down with a maroon cardigan. He looks like the deadlier version of a physics professor.

_I like that you think a plan is possible. But then, you're an idiot._

"Well, we have to do _something_ or we'll go mental."

_I'll go mental, you mean._

"Sherlock," John warns.

Sherlock thus decides to declare war on the floor to ceiling mirror in the largest room.

When Sherlock retires for the night, this time at 12:37 am, he is covered in bruises from his wrists to his shoulders from throwing himself at the taunting glass. It was exercise, if nothing more. But now he is profoundly sore from the somewhat frenzied effort, and with nothing to show for his labour despite seeking scientifically weak points in the reflective plane. His fists didn't work. His bare feet didn't work. His miniature toothbrush didn't work.

Nothing worked, and Sherlock wants to scream.

"Scream if you want to," John reminds him, looking up from the corner where he's reading a novel.

_No way in hell am I giving Jim the satisfaction_, Sherlock snaps to himself. _Early days, John._

_Early days._

"Where do you think we are?" John asks, changing the subject.

This topic does puzzle Sherlock. But he has pieced the evidence into an excruciatingly partial answer like a quilt not yet assembled.

_A converted warehouse or industrial space, possibly an abandoned building_, he explains. _Nowhere anyone else can hear me through vents, presumably. Nowhere anyone would notice the food delivery or the locked doors. My guess is an untenanted structure, with only a portion in use, so as to better hide me from the outside world._

"You never guess," John quips.

_No, Sherlock owns, rubbing at his throbbing arms. He avoided the side with the bullet scratch, but now everything aches equally._
"Yes, you do."

No, I--

"Eat something," John urges more softly. "C'mon. It can't hurt. You'll feel better after."

Sherlock obeys himself numbly. He already tossed lunch (a fresh coronation chicken salad sandwich) scornfully into the trash, and manages only a few bites of dinner (lamb stew with Irish soda bread and a cup of porter) before his shaking arms demand he retire.

"You'll think of something else tomorrow," John whispers. He is lying on Sherlock's bed (no, not my bed, shut up, shut up, not my bed, my bed is in Baker Street) with his knees drawn up, wearing only boxers and an undershirt now. "Don't hurt yourself like that again, Sherlock, please? I hate watching it."

You aren't watching it, Sherlock reminds him grimly. You're a creation of my subconscious made manifest due to the visually pronounced nature of the method of loci I employ. I think you might be my sense of self-preservation, though it's possible you're my superego--no, then again, you're probably my conscience. Or my soul. Something poetic and stupid, a construction invented by moralists who fancy themselves prophets, a fallacious pit stop listed on the guidebook of the human condition. You're chemicals and enzymes. You're not real.

"But I love you anyhow."

That's the worst of it, Sherlock thinks, swallowing. If you were real, I'm beginning to think that would actually be true.

If his eyes are watering dangerously, well, it's just the bruising, isn't it, and Sherlock falls exhaustedly to sleep.

Sherlock spends the third day trying to reach the vents. He earns more bruises, rips his towel in shreds and forms a rope despite having only an electric shaver, and manages to learn that there are seemingly spray attachments next to the cameras. What these are for remains anyone's guess.

Sherlock thinks he can guess, but refrains out of sheer self-preservation.

"You had better fucking make today up to me," he says snidely to a vent as he slides back down his makeshift towel-rope to the bed. "Or no more showers for a week."

When dinner arrives (veal cutlet with pasta pomodoro), it's accompanied by a new towel and two pills Sherlock instantly recognizes are morphine. His mouth falls open.

He shuts it again.

For the bruising?

No. Surely not.

Still.

It must be.
For the...?
No.
Oh, god no. Please no.
Nevertheless...
When he looks back on it, the most aggravating part is that he didn't even have control over his own hand as it guided the two beautiful pills to his mouth and washed them down with a good Valpolicella.

"What the bloody fucking fuck did you just do?" John demands in horror. "Is this what you wouldn't tell me before? Is bargaining yourself for drugs some kind of habit with--"

He's striding toward Sherlock with an incensed cast to his small features, but then he isn't real, maybe none of this is real, soon the morphine will tell Sherlock so, will wash new ink over all the ugly, ugly words of this story, and thus everything is fine after all.

Following a really cracking night's sleep thanks to the morphine, Sherlock spends the fourth day working on the table and the drinking fountain and the digital clock and the flat-screen telly. He makes every effort he can to dismantle them using a toothbrush and oiling the screws with hand lotion before prying at them.

It doesn't work.

Dinner (pad Thai with a glass of sparkling something or other, Sherlock could never quite tell a great prosecco from a middling cava) is accompanied by morphine again.

Sherlock takes it. The water is so, so cold, and the drugs are so sweet that he almost, for a single moment, doesn't want to jump off a rooftop.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to," he tells the vent icily as he heads for his (no, Jim's, I'm his prisoner) room.

"You can't do this," John says gravely. He's sitting cross-legged at the end of the bed in his dressing gown. His kind face is pinched at its every corner. "Not the grand arc of the thing, I mean, you're a bit under the weather, everyone gets that, of course you can do that, losing it, but the narcotics? Narcotics? Sherlock. You fucking cannot do this to me. This of all things. God, Sherlock, you...I know. I know. Trust me, please, I know. Can't you try?"

I am trying, Sherlock thinks furiously.

"No, you're letting him alter your brain chemistry, and that when you can fathom perfectly well--"

I don't need a fucking invisible friend to judge my choices while I survive being a POW, thank you very much.

"But you're going to survive?"
Yes.

"Will the morphine help with that, y'know, goal, do you think?"

Stop badgering me! Sherlock cries in his mind.

"I'm not actually here, Sherlock!" John shouts in return, which effectively settles the argument.

Apart from the progress he has made in breaking out and forming weapons (none) and the salient points of this conversation, Sherlock deletes everything that happened on the fourth day. It takes him twenty minutes.

But when he has managed the task, he no longer feels like sobbing.

On the fifth day, Sherlock obsessively tidies the prison with his towel and when dinner arrives (fried rice with beef and broccoli and a Tsingtao), he bins the morphine and most of the meal, having foregone breakfast and luncheon. Before sleeping, he deletes everything save for binning the morphine.

On the sixth day, Sherlock starts an imaginary chess match with his brother. It can't hurt, he reasons, might even help to pass the time. He bins the morphine and after dinner (steak with salad and a glass of cabernet), he deletes everything save for chucking the drugs and the details of the chess match.

On the seventh day, he figures it out (how could I possibly have been so slow?) and has a conversation with the vent in the mirror room.

"You want me to want you to hurt me," Sherlock announces at 4:23 in the afternoon, two minutes after his epiphany. He laughs, clapping his hands. "Oh, brilliant, that's cracking. Best idea yet. Really, my cap is off. You want me to be so desperate for sensation--and you provide all the sensation, don't think I haven't noticed--that I'll beg for it. You want me so debilitated that I crawl to you and plead for floggings and brandings and long for you to rip my teeth out just so I can feel something. Well, fuck you."

The telly, predictably, says nothing. So Sherlock pivots dramatically to face another vent, still high on his single success thus far.

"It will never happen," he exults. "You could keep me here for decades and I'll never want your knife playing over my back. I'll never need you for that. I'll never ask you to ruin me. I'll never long for your attention, not in any capacity. You can have me, just this tiny fraction of me, this is the shell, Jim, this is the fucking laptop's case, do you understand, just the husk, but fucking mark my fucking words, Jim, I will never want you, not for anything, not for as long as I live. Do you know why?"

The flat screen remains entirely lifeless.

"I did it all for him," Sherlock hisses venomously. "I am here because of him. You don't even enter into the picture. You're nothing. A shadow cast by a closet door, a monster under the bed. You're irrelevant to me. How does that feel?"

To his shock and horror--but not inconsiderable satisfaction--this is the moment that the telly
springs to life behind him, and Sherlock whirls to meet Jim Moriarty's wicked smirk face to face as the hissing of the electronics coming to life fades like a disinterested serpent.
Hey folks, like I said at the start of the previous chapter, updates are slowing down for me during the summer months. I do get in the dumps from time to time, but at the moment, work/life are simply very busy, so don't imagine I was in a graphic hydroplane accident--I adore how careful you all are with me since you know how loud my head is, and you can always tweet me @wordstrings if you fear for my health. Slow but steady wins the race, and there's plenty more where this came from, and I completely sympathize with your very uncomfortable situation, and I am genuinely sorry for the tortuous nature of the WIP. I will try my best to keep you supplied with new chapters!

Jim seems at the peak of good health, complexion hale, dark suit clean and pressed carefully enough to be a second skin, sitting in the same nondescript dining room as before and wearing the expression of a cat which has destroyed something of great value that its owner hasn't found in shreds just yet. The look sends a silver thread of fear down Sherlock's spine, because Jim knows things Sherlock doesn't.

Plentiful things. A great deal can happen in seven days.

Sherlock was well aware of this, tried his best not to fret uselessly over his ignorance, but he doesn't need total helplessness thrown in his face. Jim smirks at Sherlock from the flat screen, and Sherlock is enraged before they've so much as exchanged a single word, so he affects the bored hauteur that always so infuriated his uni professors when they were being dogmatic and nosy and 

"Didn't you miss me?" Jim drawls, touching his lower lip with his index finger in a coquettish pout.

"No," Sherlock says dryly.

Smiling softly, Jim crinkles his eyes at the screen. "You've turned solitary confinement into a bare stage and cast yourself as Van Gogh. It's bloody brilliant telly. I missed Top Gear the other night to watch you washing your hair."
Rolling his eyes, Sherlock absolutely does not flinch at this information. At all. That would be an unforgivable indulgence.

Jim examines his manicured nails. "I kind of expected you to be half barking by now. That was the plan, to be honest. You know, come to that, I want to be honest with you from here on out. Can we always be honest with each other? Forever, now that we have forever? Tell each other every little thing? Honestly and sincerely? Isn't that what all the truly immortal couples do? Yes, good, it's settled. So. Why aren't you drooling into your own lap?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Sherlock sneers frigidly.

"Yes! Yes, I would, darling, I'm gagging to know."

Sherlock huffs a derisive laugh.

"And since we're being honest, you can tell me," Jim coaxes, tilting his head in his weirdly oscillating manner.

"I don't think so."

"Come on, just a hint."

Sherlock has no intention of telling Jim that he has imaginary friends, or that they kept him relatively unscathed by the torment of solitude. "You'll have to take a wild guess."

"Oh, I can guess," Jim chuckles. "Shocking habit, destructive to the logical faculty, but I can guess that it must involve that ridiculous monologue you just delivered. John this, John that. Is the idea that you stay sane for your pet so you can still take him out for a run when he needs to piss on fire plugs? A happy reunion is not in the cards, dear. Or were you just calculating pi, or listing prime numbers all this while, and you're too embarrassed to tell me?"

"When I wasn't solving the Mideast crisis and curing cancer, I was mentally listening to the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach," Sherlock drawls, and then immediately files this concept away for consideration at a later date, as it's not a bad idea.

"Interesting man, Bach," Jim concedes. He drags a tumbler closer and sips what Sherlock recognizes as the amber liquor from before and assumes is either Irish whiskey or scotch. "Couldn't bear to leave a composition unfinished. Neither can I, you realize. Which means this doesn't stop until I take what I want from you."

"And that is...?"

"Oh, absolutely everything," Jim purrs. "I'm going to rip your soul out through your throat and spread it on pegs and dry it so it's suitable for framing."

Silence follows this remark, while Sherlock determines whether or not Jim believes this to be a factual statement rather than a metaphorical one.

Jim, after all, is stark staring mad.

"Good luck with that," Sherlock says at length, though his stomach is churning.

"Thanks! You'll love every moment. You're going to be licking my boots by the time I'm through with you."
Sherlock shrugs, seemingly unaffected. "Talk some more. It's cheap."

"It really isn't, though. In a world of locked rooms, the man with the key is king, and honey, I am your sovereign fucking lord and master, in case you haven't noticed."

Dropping to his heels, Sherlock gracefully sits cross-legged and then leans back on his palms, facing the screen with a wry expression. He has no intention of admitting it, but speaking with a real human, even if it's Jim, and even if Jim horrifies him, is flooding his frame with endorphins, soaking him with sensation, slathering him in skittering feeling, there is material here, substance, data, and so what if it's fear and anger and hurt and excitement and intrigue and agony all at once, at least it's something, and if he is getting a bit drunk on spoken language with non-imaginary arch-villains, John needn't know, need he, no he needn't, or rather Jim needn't know, yes that's right, Sherlock meant Jim and not John, Sherlock can keep his high over being spoken to and no one the wiser.

He was so tired of this clean floor and these white walls and this unbearable silence.

"Aw, you did miss me, didn't you, angel?" Jim leans back in his chair, grinning like the rabid lunatic he is. If he were a dog, Sherlock thinks, he would have been put down for hydrophobia decades ago.

"Oh, you don't need me to flatter you, you're cracking along so well yourself."

"But I want you to say it. I'll give you presents and everything. Do you want more morphine next time?" Jim asks sweetly. "Not enough to do any real damage, but I could see my way to giving you a better fix."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, I'd love that. Yes, please. John has been getting all the fun, hasn't he?"

"Don't talk about John."

"But he's your favourite topic!"

"Not from your mouth," Sherlock hisses.

"I vowed not to touch him if you play fair, I didn't say I wouldn't mention your pygmy boyfriend. He's furious with you, by the way. The drugging him? Nice touch, that. Really did a number on his trust issues. The man is a walking zombie these days. I couldn't have managed it better myself."

"Shut up."

"Don't worry! I've been keeping an eagle eye on him. I'll monitor him for you, don't you fuss. He looks like Death took a shit on the sidewalk and someone painted a portrait of an army doctor with it, but you probably didn't think about that part when you threw yourself into my loving arms."

Jim blows a small kiss, simpering.

"Shut up," Sherlock growls, his heart throbbing, because this can only be true, and it occurred to Sherlock, he thought about it, of course he thought about it, about the depth of loyalty and love, and about the transference of suffering from soul to soul, but if John is alive and in pain because Sherlock is missing, then John is fucking alive to be in pain, and that is all there is to it.

Jim lobs Sherlock a flirtatiously crooked half-smile. "He thinks you left him to be with me"
because of all the beautiful puzzles I made for you."

"No, he fucking doesn't," Sherlock protests, then snaps his teeth shut thinking, _idiot, stop giving him precisely what he wants._

Jim laughs merrily, a crazed hyena cackle that jiggles the fangs of his snake tattoo. "You broke his heart, you know, and I could never have orchestrated that, so well done, you. He thinks you didn't trust him with your life. He thinks you realized he was just a junk heap of damaged goods held together with scrap wire."

"No, he doesn't." Sherlock injects as much weary ennui into this denial as he possibly can.

"Fine, you caught me. He's actually relieved you're gone, you know, but I thought you might like to think he cares even if he doesn't."

"Yes, he does," Sherlock drones, and now it's far easier to sound completely disengaged.

"All right, he does. Come on, darling, don't you want to hear about how he cries and cries for you?"

"He doesn't."

"OK, he doesn't, but don't you wish he did?"

"Don't you have people to be blowing up?" Sherlock sighs, carding his hand through his hair. "I thought we'd taken this relationship to the next level, the one where we don't tell fibs. This is growing appallingly repetitive. Go cover someone in semtex and leave me alone."

_Something, anything, to change this subject._

"Now that I have you?" Jim winks. "Why shoot fish in a barrel when you've netted the White Whale?"

"Moby Dick was the death of Captain Ahab," Sherlock reminds him.

"Christ, you've read that garbage?"

When studying to be a pirate as a youth, Sherlock read every volume he could lay hands on if it had to do with seafaring, and he forgot to delete a good percentage of this knowledge. Jim need not know this, however, so Sherlock merely releases a luxuriant fake yawn and then pretends to make an apologetic face that he knows will be recognized as purest sarcasm.

"Bored?"

"Rather," Sherlock lies.

"You really shouldn't be."

"I really am, though."

"Then let's play a game. Where do you think you are?" Jim asks, starting to sound a bit impatient at last.

Sherlock is desperate to learn this information. It has been haunting him for a week now, burning over every inch of his pale skin, crawling along his ribs, this sensation of floating in the void of space in a set of white rooms, he has steadily been suffering worse and worse vertigo from the
complete lack of geographic identifiers, and he would give Jim one of his limbs in exchange for pinpointing his exact place in the world. So he lifts one shoulder in an attitude of boneless unconcern and says, "A locked room with an AV feed. I'm not blind."

"No, doofus," Jim snaps viciously. "Where do you think you are in the fucking world."

"I never liked riddles."

"Learn to."

"Hmm. No."

"How does it feel, that you don't know?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, ha ha ha, clever, very clever, so clever, ha ha, clever you. Deduce it."

"I can't be bothered, I haven't started on the complete Chopin opuses yet and I've always rather liked Xaver Scharwenka."

Jim's gloating face takes on a very odd cast suddenly. Sherlock can only liken his expression to a sullen gorilla's, for his mouth turns down dramatically, his jaw jutting out, giving himself a slight underbite, his brows drawing together into a thick black line, and it would look comical except that it doesn't, nothing about this is comical, it looks bloody frightening as all holy fuck, and now Jim rounds his shoulders and leans toward the camera and taps his fingers on the table top before him and looks positively apelike in his profound disgust.

"You're here to play with me, Sherlock, not to be ordinary," he growls.

"I'm here to play with towels and electric shavers and show you my bare arse." Sherlock waves his hand languidly. "If you wanted something to wank to, you could have just put a camera in my flat. As it is, this is frankly embarrassing. No, pathetic. I'm only here because I walked straight in, not because you did anything extraordinary."

"You're here because you're mine," Jim grits out. "You belong to me."

"God, it's worse than the BBC. Is there a way of turning this off?" Sherlock asks, affecting to peer around for a switch.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you."

"Muting the volume at least?"

"No, and if there were, you wouldn't."

"Try me. I'm not here for a cream tea and an idle chat."

"No, you're here to break, Sherlock. This is your problem, your final problem, how to withstand an eternity of nothing, which is the cruelest thing I can fucking think of, and thanks to you, I have in fact been in solitary!" Jim all but screams. "Welcome to our worst nightmare, which is staying alive--not living, not dying, just staying, always, forever, static, just existing, and only yourself to mark the passage of time and me to pick the daily menu. It's supposed to wreck you. And after you're in jagged little pieces all over the floor, Daddy will build you good as new again."

"Sorry to disappoint." Sherlock quirks one side of his mouth. "Are you finished? I have things to
do."

Jim is breathing hard now, and the simian posture has turned into a menacing hunch. "Answer my question or you'll regret it. Where are you?"

Groaning exaggeratedly, Sherlock sits up straight, ticking items off his fingers. "Smell of new-painted drywall when I first arrived, indoor air circulating, large space, heavy duty exterior door with equally serious locking mechanism, vents but no one to hear me through them, dumbwaiter that doesn't call attention to itself on lower floors. I'm in a warehouse of some kind, and you built this cage exclusively for me. But where I am doesn't fucking matter, you see, only how I respond to it matters, so I'm not playing your game or answering your absurd question, my physical location could be the south of France or the lost island of Atlantis for all I care, so kindly fuck off and leave me to my peace and quiet and to Fantaisie-impromptu, you are boring me to death."

A few seconds pass before Jim bares his teeth. His lower jaw is still thrust forward in animalistic aggression, so when his lips peel back, he looks a feral creature from a nightmare world. The snake tattoo on his neck quivers with passion, the apple dancing, and Sherlock watches as Jim snaps his fingers. Moran, wearing a pair of well-cut jeans and a black V-necked jumper, appears instantly, affecting a deadly, professional slouch.

"Oh, hullo," Sherlock drawls. "Perfect. The mad tea party is complete."

"He says he doesn't care where he is," Jim murmurs, sounding almost sad as he looks wistfully up at Moran. "He says it doesn't matter. I...this is awful. So get rid of the mirror."

"Already?" Moran asks, cocking an eyebrow. "Isn't it too soon for that?"

"Get rid of the mirror," Jim says quietly, taking Moran by the hand and swinging it like a schoolboy who fancies a classmate, "or I will put your hand in a microwave and watch it fry."

"Right," Moran says, shrugging as he smiles darkly. "No need to get tetchy." Disengaging himself, he pulls a laptop into view and types in a command.

At first, nothing happens. Then the lighting changes. It dims in the white chamber even as Sherlock registers a click from behind him, and seconds later he is entirely shrouded in darkness.

Whirling, he gets to his feet, the anticipation of a new data set making him dizzy with want.

The mirror is a one-way, it must be. It's a heavy glass surface coated thinly with metal, most commonly aluminium, so that if I am in the light and it's dark beyond my prison, it looks to be a mirror, when in fact it's actually only a...

All thought is derailed.

When Sherlock recognizes what he is looking at now that the lights have been turned on in the small space on the opposite side of the mirror, a horrified cry escapes his mouth before he can stifle it.

"Now are you bored, Sherlock?" Jim says slowly, almost kindly, and Sherlock thinks he might actually faint from the strain and the shock of it.

There is a gap of about two feet on the other side of what was once a mirror, and beyond this lies a plain industrial floor to ceiling window. Outside the window is slanting afternoon sunlight on shabby brown brick, a row of residential flats, and below the brown brick is painted white stone, and set deep within this is a black door with gold numerals, just to the left of the red awning of an
unassuming café.

Speedy's. Baker Street.

Sherlock is in the empty house.

His mind reels in disbelief, numbness creeping along his fingers and another shout lodged in his throat. Mechanically, he walks to the glass and puts his fingers on its cool surface, remembering the swiftness of repairs to the building following the explosion, the extra days Jim took over the final pip before Sherlock circumvented it altogether, the shiny new glass Sherlock had noted without being the slightest bit alarmed by it, viewed from his own window in 221, flat B, as a free man, a very stupid free man, and Sherlock sees movement in the chamber opposite, and he has to plant one hand firmly over his own mouth to prevent himself giving Jim further evidence that yes, when it comes to mental torment, the ex-con is proving uncommonly skilled.

John.

John has twitched back the window curtain and is peering out into the street. Jim was right. He looks like hell. Sherlock can only see his outline and faint traces of his hand and his hair and the edge of his jaw, but if John were in the middle of a war zone, Sherlock doesn't imagine he would look any different. You did that, he thinks. That is entirely your fault. You wanted him, and you took what you wanted, even though you didn't deserve it, you made him care and now look what you've done. John has aged ten years in seven days. Every movement is both exhausted and taut with self-imposed control, his hair is a mess, and he seems to be tensely speaking with someone. Who is in their flat with John? Sherlock cannot tell. He also cannot quite make out John's eyes, nor read his lips, nor study his clothing for more clues as to his state.

Sherlock bites his lip, hard, and rests his fists against the cold, implacable barrier which was once a mirror. Imaginary John has been speaking in Sherlock's head for seven days now, an eccentric but comforting development, but now imaginary John has been silenced, because here is real John, close to enough to call out to if there weren't two incredibly thick layers of glass between.

John moves aside, and the curtain shifts.

"Turn it back," Sherlock says hoarsely.

"What was that, dear?" Jim asks mildly from the screen behind him.

Sherlock cannot tear his eyes away from 221B. "The mirror. Turn it back into a mirror."

"But you don't give a fuck where you are," Jim reminds him in a pleased undertone.

"Don't," Sherlock says, and he is pleading, already, only a week and this will be what breaks him, a fucking mirror and a magical glimpse at his former life and his very much alive colleague John and the damage Sherlock's absence has wrought, this will unhinge him. "I can't...I just can't. Make it a mirror again. I'll stop trying to occupy myself, I swear, I'll let the blankness have me, I'll be round the twist in a matter of hours, maybe a day, what was it you said, drooling into my own lap? I won't fight it anymore. Just bring back the mirror."

"Nah. It wasn't really working for me," Jim drones.

"Bring it back!" Sherlock screams, pounding his fists on the glass, because there is John again, John whom he loves so tenderly he thinks loss might have split his heart through its core, John alternately spitting instructions into his mobile phone and listening, face drawn with grief and impotent rage, while he stares down the street waiting for--what? Sherlock? To come
miraculously striding along Baker Street with his Belstaff billowing?

"Ooooh," Jim sighs. "You're so much prettier when you're begging. Enjoy the view, dear, while I fuck off and leave you to your peace and quiet."

A slightly metallic hiss tells Sherlock the telly screen has gone dark.

John rings off and puts his mobile in his pocket. He rakes a hand through his hair and turns away from the window. Whatever he wanted, he hasn't got it yet. John is unsatisfied and Sherlock is undone. Baker Street is brown and white and gold, and the sun is sinking, and the white room is utterly silent.

Sherlock puts his brow against the pane, sinks to his knees on the floor, and screams for all he is worth.

The hunger strike Sherlock embarks on is entirely accidental in nature.

After screaming himself hoarse on the seventh day, Sherlock walks very calmly into the bedroom and removes the mattress from the bed frame, dragging it and the sheets and pillows and duvet into the long room. He sets everything as close to the glass as he can and then curls on his side with his knees drawn up to watch.

This continues, with brief breaks for the loo and to drink water, for five days.

Three times daily, he throws away a meal. *I'll eat the next one*, he thinks. *I'm not hungry*, he thinks, and truthfully, and the John who was once in his head is silent, because the John across the street is haggard and grey-faced. Sometimes John is alone in the flat, and Sherlock cannot see him. Sometimes John is out searching for Sherlock in the wrong places. Sometimes he is probably at the Yard. Sometimes Sherlock sees John at the window. Sherlock catches glimpses of Lestrade, Donovan, Mycroft, Bradstreet, Molly, Anderson, Mrs. Hudson, Shinwell; Baker Street seems to have been appointed a headquarters of sorts.

Everyone is weary. Everyone is sad. Everyone is angry.

Sherlock watches, numb.

The weather shifts. It rains on the ninth consecutive day of his captivity, two days since the mirror became a window, and Mycroft arrives and departs with his brolly unfurled, looking pinched and pale.

The rain dries, and Shinwell appears with bags of Chinese takeaway. Sherlock wonders whether John eats it. He hopes John isn't too hungry or too cold or too bereft. Sherlock imagines John eating, imagines him satisfied, and falls asleep when the sun sets with a faint smile on his face.

Sherlock awakens with the dawn sometimes, and at other times in the night, and at other times in the early afternoon. Sherlock watches. He ventures into the kitchen and investigates the dumbwaiter periodically. When there is wine, he drinks it, and when there is morphine, he takes it with water. He bins fried chicken, Greek salad, cheese ravioli, eggs benedict, crepes with berry compote, udon soup.
When the lights go out in the other buildings, the light in Sherlock's bedroom remains on whether John is at Baker Street or out searching. John never turns it off. Sherlock wonders why. If John is absent, it glows like a beacon. If John is present, his short, sturdy silhouette paces up and down, up and down, before collapsing on the bed.

Sherlock watches.

He showers when he begins to smell himself, and shaves when his face itches.

He doesn't care about any of it.

Sherlock watches as Johnslowly grows frantic with worry. He can see it in jerky head movements and palms pressed together before his mouth, the way Sherlock always used to do. If it would make John feel better, Sherlock would trade his life, die in earnest, but that wouldn't make John feel better, nothing will make John feel better, and Sherlock cannot stand it.

"I'm right here in front of you," he whispers once, and the words hurt him so badly that he decides never to say them or anything else ever again.

On the twelfth consecutive day of his captivity, Sherlock has accidentally failed to eat for five days, and the telly comes on. Jim's voice rings out in the long room.

"Sherlock, my dove, you really do need to eat something," Jim sings. "This is ridiculous. I've been watching you lie curled up on a mattress for ages now, and it's dull. Show a little pluck, honey. Where's that fuck you spirit I liked so much?"

Answering would be tedious in the extreme, so Sherlock merely pulls the duvet tighter and watches shadows crossing his 221B sitting room.

"Sherlock," Jim says more sternly. "You're going to answer Daddy, he's had enough now."

Under normal circumstances this phrasing would disgust Sherlock, but now he barely registers it.

"There are consequences for defying me, precious, and trust me, you are not going to like a single one of them. You are really begging for a little discipline here."

Flipping the bird to the room sounds entertaining and appropriate, but Sherlock decides that a stationary lump of bedclothes is rather more eloquent and does nothing.

"Sherlock," Jim hisses, "you're not actually playing fair any longer, are you? If I have to come in there and strap you down and force feed you, I will, but I think you'd rather eat the fucking chicken soup I just sent you and talk to me."

A grim smile creeps onto Sherlock's averted face. He hadn't thought of it before, but this is actually leverage. Sherlock is faint much of the time now, walking is becoming incredibly difficult, and his head aches, and his joints burn, and his eyes are sore with trying to keep them dry. But his body is still his for the moment, and if barely moving and not talking to Jim and not eating get Sherlock a little of his own back, well it's all just transport, isn't it? The John who was in his head might have objected to this gambit, but that John is gone.

There is only real John, who hasn't been eating much either, Sherlock can tell. And Sherlock, who is wasting away.

And Jim, who is now bored.
Jim hates being bored.

"Sherlock, if you don't fucking walk into that kitchen and eat, I will punish you in ways I promise you haven't thought of yet."

Sherlock merely snugs further into his pillow, strangely happy despite his weakened, shivery state.

The darkness in the long room reverses suddenly, a blaze of light shining, and Sherlock bites back a hurt sound as his eyes flinch shut. The mirror is a mirror again. The lights are painful after so long in darkness. Jim took Baker Street away.

**Fine, Sherlock** thinks, closing his eyes. *Now perhaps the other John will come back.*

Next there is a strange hissing sound.

Sherlock rolls creakily onto his back to stare at the vents. They are the source of the noise, like a leak in a tyre, and Sherlock at the first sickly whiff of airborne sedative finds that his earlier suspicions were confirmed: if Jim or Moran are coming in or out, Sherlock is to be completely at their mercy when the outer door is open. It's nothing he had not anticipated, but the fact he has actually thwarted Jim's designs in however small a fashion paints a smile on his face as oblivion beckons.

*Do your fucking worst,* he thinks, and then darkness swallows him down into the deep.

Sherlock wakens only very slowly. He is dreaming that he is with John. He recalls vaguely that he was drugged and is probably now strapped to a rack or hooked up to a feeding tube like a baby bird, but for the moment, John's voice is still gentle and insistent and he can feel the ghosts of John's steady touches like the handprints children paint with their fingers. *So the John in my head does come back when the mirror is here. Lovely mirror. Don't take it away again.*

Sounds blanket him, faintly soothing but nevertheless urgent. They own a harsh quality like the comfort of warm wool. Sherlock has no desire to wake up from this, ever again, so he makes no effort to do so.

"...trying for me. Please? Come on. Sherlock, I really need you to open your eyes. Christ, shit, shit, what has this sick fucker done to you. Sherlock. Love, talk to me. Now."

*This,* Sherlock thinks, *is how I choose to spend the rest of my life.* He is splayed on his mattress still, eyes resolutely closed. A phantom hand smooths down his cheek and another is propping up the nape of his neck. The latter tightens.

"It's going to go like this," the voice in Sherlock's head murmurs. "You're going to come round any second and look at me and we will fix you. You will tell me what this fucking evil prick did, and god, Sherlock, please just say something. Do something. Non-responsive with your blood pressure this low is just not on. You're barely breathing and your lips are fucking blue. Do not fuck with me like this, Sherlock Holmes. I'm really not in the mood right now, I've had a shite twelve days."

*Stay asleep,* Sherlock thinks desperately, his eyes watering. *Stay asleep and starving and delirious forever.*
"No, no, no. Jesus, what is this?" Thin pressure that feels like John's imaginary lips brushes his forehead. "Why in bloody hell are you fighting me, you brainless fucking ponce? What did he do to you? Wake up. This instant. Your vitals are fucking _low as fuck_, Sherlock, wake up for me."

Sherlock can imagine--his head is swimming and he can't quite feel his extremities.

"Right, if you're nervous I'm going to kill you for knocking me cold and doing a runner, yes, hell yes I was planning to kill you, but you're half dead already. And Shinwell told me why...Shinwell told me everything. Yeah? I chinned him, knocked his nose off kilter. He said it was a badge of honour. Or something like that. Something much...wordier." The voice is growing more strained. "Sherlock, please. I want you to do this one single thing for me, and that's wake up. I don't care what it takes. I need you."

Wincing in despair, Sherlock covers his eyes with his hands. One of his forearms brushes something...solid. Not unlike an arm.

"God, there you are, thank you, thank god, now just look at me. Please. It's me. It's John."

"I know who it is," Sherlock rasps. "You're not here. I made you up."

"Did you really," the voice says, and it's thick with relief. "Neat trick, that, you should try it at parties. Do you have great pink bunnies for mates too? God, I missed you, I was going spare, Sherlock, absolutely fucking mental, I couldn't stop imagining--never mind. Just keep talking to me. Seriously? Nothing? All right, fine. Deep breaths. Good, better. Now, look at me before I slap you senseless."

Half out of sheer frustration, Sherlock removes his hands and opens his eyes. Spots swim before him, great swaths of technicolour. He blinks. Objects come into focus, but not many--white walls, vents, a mirror, a flat screen, the mattress.

John.

John half-smiling, looking wrecked and rumpled and only very recently drugged himself, wearing the same white shirt and cotton trousers Sherlock is clad in, only in his own proper size.

"Hello, love," John says softly. "I tried to find you quicker. I'm so sorry."

It takes a full three seconds for Sherlock to remember how to scream.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I want to say to everyone that, while I can't help the fact this took me so long, I regret making so many people deeply uncomfortable. :) I also want to say that I have literally hundreds of comments stacked up that I would like to answer, but the task is proving very daunting to begin because you've all been so lovely and said such meaningful things to me. So despite the fact I can't really bring myself to address everyone individually right now in the comments, please know that I appreciate all your love and support more than words can say.

There will be a gap of a few weeks before the next chapter, not a few months, and as I've said before--I know how this sucker ends! Stick with me, and thank you again for being so kind.

"This can't be happening," Sherlock breathes as soon as the scream exhausts itself.

John, who merely flinched gamely at Sherlock's half-strangled reaction to his presence, emits a low sigh. Other than the horrible blank terrifying clothing his own has been replaced with, the doctor looks no different than he did through the two-way mirror into Baker Street, wan and disheveled and fraying with care, so at least Jim doesn't seem to have harmed him.

Much.

Yet.

Still. Enough. Other than the drugs and the kidnap and...

"Oh please, god no," Sherlock chants softly. His eyes fall shut. When did Jim replace his eyelids with Kevlar? Was that the only surgery so far? The detective can't be sure, but raising his lashes has never been this difficult, not even following days and nights without sleep, long twilights marked by cups of cooling coffee and scattered case files and web searches and the hum of bad government lighting at New Scotland Yard. His corneas burn and scratch. Everything is a muddle when Sherlock forces his lids open a slit, white walls spinning and the white room elongating in a vertigo effect, the whites of John's eyes and the flash of his teeth as he opens his mouth in rapt concern. "God, no."

"Nice to see you too," John deadpans. He lowers Sherlock's head gently back to the pillow, and Sherlock breaks out in a cold sweat as the world tilts wildly. Fingertips are taking his pulse at the throat. "Sherlock, breathe deep for me. Come on, sweetheart. Slowly."

Sherlock tries.
Shallow panting appears to be my only option at the moment.

"What the hell did he do to you? Have you been drugged all this while? Is that it?"

"You're not here," Sherlock groans. His empty stomach lurches. "You're back at Baker Street with the light in my bedroom shining all night through. You're not here, you can't be here, god no."

"I did leave your light on." John's voice is tight with restrained anger. "I...how did you know? Did he tell you? I didn't...I'm not sure why I did that. You left it on when you drugged me, you comprehensive son of a bitch, and something...I couldn't stand the idea that you'd not be back to switch it off again. The thought of turning it off made me ill. So I left it alone. The others never said a word about it, but they noticed all right. Picturing you escaping, you coming home, maybe hurt or confused or maybe needing me, and finding all the lights dimmed...I couldn't do it."

Sherlock feels his face wrenching into a grimace. He had wondered about the light. This John knows about the light, and his explanation is both simple and heartbreaking, which can only mean that Sherlock is not hallucinating. John Watson is truly here, in the bare prison, wearing snowy cotton and measuring Sherlock's frantically pounding heartbeats.

It's devastating.

"All right, settle down, Sherlock, just keep breathing. Christ, but you're a wreck, your skin is like paper and you could ship all the tea in China with the bloody bags under your eyes. Dehydration, malnutrition, what, drugs, sensory deprivation, what else? Tell me. How did he hurt you? Tell me everything."

"There's not much to tell."

"You've been alone all this while, then?"

"No, not precisely."

"I don't understand."

"You should have that put on a t-shirt," Sherlock snaps, suddenly outraged at the wretched unfairness of all he has been through, all for John (well, a little bit for Sherlock,) but after John's arrival tackling Abernetty it became all, all, everything for John, and all in vain. Not even dying was enough to save him.

"You've had visitors, then?"

"No. And yes."

"I still don't understand."

"And there's the back of the shirt."

"Don't be a prick, Sherlock, not when you're barely conscious and I require some fucking information. Do you know where we are?"

Sherlock positively howls with laughter.

Tears are running down his cheeks seconds later, though he doesn't think he's crying. John, making short, sweet hushing sounds, half-lifts him and now Sherlock is folded in his friend's lap, shaking with hysterical amusement because yes, he absolutely does know where they are. His
bones feel as if they're about to rattle their way clean out of his skin, perhaps snap like twigs with
the force of the miserable laughter. This doesn't sound like any noise he's ever produced in the
past, more a high rasping scrape against his vocal cords than anything resembling mirth, as if
someone had taken a belt sander to his chest and throat. There are hands in his curls, fingers
wiping away the tracks of saline from his face.

"Yes," Sherlock gasps when he can breathe. "Yep, I know where we are. That was rather the
point of the place."

"I don't understand, and if you make one more crack about t-shirts--"

"Is the mirror still a mirror, then?"

"Yeah," John says slowly. "But..."

"Ye of little faith. I've not gone completely mad quite yet, it's a two-way."

"Oh." John's voice sharpens with intent. "All right, more on that after we get you sorted. Do you
know how long you've been missing?"

"Twelve days, assuming we didn't both lose a day to the last round of sedatives. I'm assuming he
drugged you too."

"Yeah, I was on my way to the Yard when a bloke came out of nowhere with a syringe. Woke up
on the box spring in the other room with this kit on and a whopping headache."

Sherlock imagines Jim Moriarty touching John Watson's unconscious form and prays with all his
heart that God is capable of small mercies, and that it was thus Moran instead.

"Are you--"

"I'm fine, unlike you," John answers, exasperated. "This fucker is a dead man, Christ, Sherlock, I
can't tell you how fucking terrified I was, and now I find you and you're a skeleton. Has he been
feeding you?"

"Ah. Well," Sherlock coughs, face heating with shame. "Come to mention it, he, um, has. Now
you bring up the subject, I seem to have lost my appetite in light of circumstances. And if I'm
reasoning correctly, it's probably my fault you're here. He said if I didn't eat, I'd regret it. No, he
said he'd punish me in ways I hadn't thought of yet. Yes, that was it. And wonder of wonders, he
was correct. I...did not think of this. This is worse than anything I had anticipated. This is...the
limit. Beyond cruel. I'd have died first. I tried. And since we're on the subject, if I had known he
meant to bring you here to snap me out of it, I'd have eaten, I swear to God I would have done, on
my life I would have."

"This was, what? A hunger strike?" John's voice is shockingly gentle. Sherlock brushes the back
of his wrist over his eyes to scrape away the last of the hateful moisture.

"Not a deliberate one, I assure you."

"Get lost in the mind palace?"

"Nothing of the kind. That would have been a comparative picnic. God, I'm so sorry." Sherlock
finally manages to force his eyes wide, looking up, and John's practically silhouetted, his haggard
face wreathed in shadow. "He promised, John, he promised not to touch you, he swore it to me."
A dry chuckle shivers through John's slight frame. *I'm not the only one who's lost half a stone,* Sherlock thinks. "Yes, well, cheers for the thought, and for the optimism, but maybe next time we decide not to credit verbal agreements from murderous psychopaths, eh?"

"It was all I had left," Sherlock whispers, nuzzling his brow against John's compact thigh. "You were going to die."

"Shinwell told me," John husks, tracing Sherlock's face with steady fingers. "And now I'm going to kill you."

"He told you everything, he did as I instructed?"

"He said I was the fifth pip." John clears his throat. "He also said a lot of...other things. There were Bible verses, or I think there were, before I punched him in the face. That surprised me for a tick, but you recall that ridiculous diamond-studded Jesus necklace he sports, so I guess it makes sense. There were also tears, and something about Harry Potter dying to save the wizarding world, I wasn't really listening by that time, and I want you to know that you have the single most absurd drug dealer in the history of, dunno, forever. Also, I never wanted this for you, never, do you fucking understand me? But thank you. I know what you felt like, and...thank you. I'm so angry I can barely see straight, but for god's sake don't suppose I don't find you the most unselfish, noble twat alive."

"I'm a total failure. You're here."

"You're not a--"

"I'm sorry you're here. God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Sherlock--"

"No wonder you want to kill me, when it was all for nothing in the end."

"I need you to calm down, all right? My death threats are harmless. Well. When directed at you, they are, but on the other hand--"

"I'm sorry, please believe me, I... Wait, I can fix this," Sherlock gasps, lurching out of John's lap. "Jim!"

"What, he's here?" the soldier demands, shifting instantly to a defensive crouch even as he grips Sherlock by the arm. "Is that what you meant?"

Sherlock shakes him off impatiently, stumbling to his feet. When he falls like a wet colt, he crawls towards the screen, nauseous and dizzy, shouting, "Jim! Jim, we need to talk. Man to man. Now."

"Oh my god," John says faintly, his mouth twisting sideways in disgust as he realizes what the screen is used for. The detective can hardly blame him.

"Jim!" Sherlock yells. He drags himself up, knocking against the screen with a shaking hand. "Send me something in the dumbwaiter. Is there something there already? I'll eat it, I swear to you, only let him go. I'll eat anything you like, you can fucking feed me yourself for all I care, you sick sod, you win. I'll do it. Feed me like a fucking baby bird, just let him--"

Strong arms wind around his shoulders a second later, and the sound of his own begging grows fainter in his ears. When Sherlock is aware that he can barely stay upright, and that he is pinned
against John, both men face to face on their knees, he allows himself to collapse a bit more fully against the doctor. Black spots swim in front of his corneas, darting hither and thither like flies swarming a corpse. Sherlock shudders, remembering the body of a drug dealer he discovered in an abandoned skip once years ago, the way when the lid opened the carrion flies buzzed and spiraled, the way the smell was thick enough to clog his nose and grease his skin, the way he hadn't got the sickening aroma out of his pores for days.

All right, I have you, he thinks John is saying, and then someone is lifting him, murmuring nonsense about that's better, that's better now when nothing is better or could ever be better now that Sherlock has dragged John into hell with him. Nothing will ever be better again, even though Sherlock is floating away into the glacial whiteness of a blinding crystalline cloud.

When Sherlock awakens, the taste of broth lingers in his sore throat, and the ghostly handprints of palms against his neck and jaw. Almost certain it was Jim, he gags once, choking on the spasm, but "Oi, none of that, please," John advises, and Sherlock goes limp again, drifting. He is propped up in bed--the bed with the frame, not the mattress before the window screen revealing Baker Street like some untouchable dream, and his back is supported by soft pillows. Clearly John must have been rearranging their new domicile. The white clothes and white sheets are rough against the sleuth's oversensitive skin, and his body, unable or unwilling to regulate his temperature properly, feels feverish.

"Good lad. Let's try this again."

Paper is set against his lip, and Sherlock recalls he has promised Jim to eat. Maybe if he sips the broth John holds--lukewarm, smells like beef tea, which isn't entirely unpleasant--John will go away and be safe and Sherlock will stay here to be tortured and he'll not have entirely cocked up the life of the man he loves so much that he tried to abandon him entirely.

"Smashing. Now, I suspect you're past due for these."

Sherlock cracks an eye. John holds a pair of morphine pills, kneeling casually on the duvet with the broth in his other hand. His blue eyes are crinkled in resignation, but a strong undercurrent of roiling rage flows beneath the placid surface. John's pupils are deep sea caverns--gentle ripples above, monsters lurking in the darkness below.

"Come on, take them."

The sleuth lies immobile, shocked and vaguely frightened of whatever sort of test this is.

"I'm not angry."

As this is patently untrue, Sherlock scowls in disbelief.

"This isn't your fault."

Quirking a brow, Sherlock attempts to convey what the fuck have you been smoking, you idiot without opening his mouth, as he feels decidedly queasy.

"Right, let's get one thing straight here," John growls. "Locking a genius drug addict up in a
perfection. A featureless, room with nothing but solitude and morphine for company would be an inhuman enough plan with a mirror as a prop, let alone with the alternative to that mirror, which I saw when it switched back to a window half an hour ago. We're across the street from two two one B, and despite the fact you lost your last marble and thought I'd be better off if you turned yourself in—"

"You would have died," Sherlock insists in a harsh, almost toneless rasp. "What alternative would you have suggested? I resurrect you?"

"...The point stands that you did not torment yourself for years and then imprison yourself in a Sartre-worthy version of existential hell. I am neither surprised you took the morphine nor angry at you for taking the morphine. I am going to rip Jim Moriarty's head from his shoulders at the next opportunity, and I am going to give you these pills because you are currently starving to death and if you go into mild withdrawal symptoms from depriving yourself even of this low dose, all the nutrition I am attempting to get down your neck is going to come back up again. Take. The pills. Sherlock Holmes. We will solve this problem when he's dead. One step at a time."

Taking the pills, Sherlock drops them in his mouth and allows John to tip the cup against his lips again. Things are about to get very bad, he knows, but for now there is morphine and there is the warm broth sloshing in his gapingly hungry belly and there is John, the white shirt making his fine blond hairs look richer and the neat, hard curve of his lips the most fascinating thing Sherlock has ever seen.

This is the look he wore in troop movements and battle convoys, Sherlock knows, and though there were shades of the expression over the course of the past few days, I am coming for you dropping calmly from the doctor's lips as if it weren't the most impossible promise in the world, now here John is and he smells of sandstorms and gun oil and home.

"Shinwell seems to have taken up residence at Baker Street since I...left," he says calmly. He reaches for something further down on the coverlet Sherlock hadn't noticed and lifts a packet of biscuits. "Ready for solids yet? Right, sip some more of this, we'll get there in the end. Yep, I can't say as I'm fussed over his taking over my armchair, what with Mrs. Hudson hidden away and no one to mind the property if one of the homeless network turns up there with news. I...Jesus, Sherlock. We've been looking round the clock for you for twelve bloody days and here you were under my nose. I almost feel like I ought to have known, somehow. Should have...felt you or something. Heard you going quietly mental over here. Please forgive me."

"Forgive you for not what, having some sort of magical extrasensory bond with me? Did you really just say that? Right, sorry, I forget sometimes you're the mad one," Sherlock observes thinly.

John shrugs, smiling. "I know it doesn't make any sense, but people in high-stress situations like this often indulge in daft episodes of magical thinking. It's love, not logic. Look at me, with the leaving your bedroom light on, and...you don't know what it was like."

"Yes, I do."

John's lips press in and out, and he licks them after barking a short huff of bitter amusement. "The mirror is the exception rather than the rule, then? He made you watch me going steadily barmy. Fucking pervert."

"Perverts everywhere are offended by that comparison."

"Truer words, truer words."
"I didn't have audio," Sherlock admits. "What's been happening?"

John sighs, rubbing at his jaw. "Nothing useful. You went off the grid when you went out the back of the Tesco. Mycroft managed to trace the vehicle you were placed in via some pretty snappy triangulation, but it was dumped. They seem to have drove you in circles, went into a car park, switched transportation, and poof. You vanished. I'm...I'll never forget what that felt like. Christ. So we've been following every lead possible, but Moran and Moriarty both seem to have gone deep underground. I was confused about that, but now I see the telly screen and the dumbwaiter, it makes perfect sense. They could be sending anyone to feed you via that thing and it would only look like someone carrying a takeaway bag down Baker Street."

"I was an idiot not to have noticed how quickly it was repaired," Sherlock says, willing John to make sense and hate him already.

"You were a genius who didn't think glass going up in the heart of Westminster dodgy because it wasn't dodgy."

"The explosion was for a reason, I should have seen that. It's still my fault."

"Stop it," John says in a quietly steely tone. "Right buggering now."

Sherlock shakes his head, but obeys anyway. "Lestrade was working with you too, and Shinwell. Anything useful?"

"Oh, sure, some bleeding ace work done by everyone involved indicating that you had disappeared into fucking thin air and might not even still be in London. If I hadn't been terrified of botching the search for you, I'd have been pretty tempted to just get arseholed every night, won't say I didn't share a nightcap with Bradstreet once or twice, but that was when I was ready to put my head through a wall. If we had known there was an electronic feed between their location and this one..." He shrugs. "There was no end of the trail to lead back to them. Now there is, but we don't have a way of alerting Mycroft, I take it?"

Sherlock shakes his head minutely. "It's not like they gave me a phone, or a carrier pigeon, or even a fucking pen, John."

"I get it, I get it." John holds his hands up. "There must be something we can do, though. You've been here...Christ, a good long while. What can you give me?"

Finishing the broth, Sherlock allows John to take the cup and place a thin biscuit in his fingers. He eyes this dubiously, then settles for holding it. But the morphine is working by this time and he thinks, with luck, he might manage the feat of consuming solids in a few more minutes, and the sooner the better, because maybe then Jim will be merciful. Maybe, despite everything, Jim will keep his vow. He must have absolutely loved the begging, after all.

"We have no weapons and no means of making them," the sleuth says wryly, organizing his scattered thoughts.

"Your brain. My fists."

"Fine, we have no weapons that are a match for a gun, not to mention an airborne sedative delivery system. All the food is delivered in paper. We have electricity and water, but no means of combining the two meaningfully. We have a bed, a mattress, some linens, and toiletries delivered in travel packs. Sometimes he gives me fresh pants. Anything we could do to get him here physically is a good idea, at least it gives us a chance by means of proximity, but so far I've not
done anything interesting enough to change the game other than by bringing you here. The wine he sends is decent. The electric shaver is surprisingly effective. There's a steel table I tried to dismantle for an entire day and a two-way mirror I threw myself against until I was black and blue. That's it, that's the list.

"Your arm looks better," John says, neutrally cheerful.

"Oh." Sherlock hasn't spared a thought for the bullet scrape in days. "Yes. How is your side?"

"Practically good as new."

Sherlock pops the biscuit into his mouth and, as a reward, investigates by rucking John's shirt up a little. The navy has faded to purple, the sickly yellow to a healthier pink. The detective allows himself a single brush of knuckles against John's skin before he retreats, landing with a defeated sigh against the pillows.

"I take it we're being watched?" John surmises almost teasingly.

"Think of us as glorified goldfish," Sherlock agrees, gesturing at one of the ceiling vents.

His eyes had fallen closed again, so Sherlock gasps in surprise when John kisses him, and then the detective makes a sound in his throat pitched high with anguish and affection. He cannot help but kiss back, warmth suffusing him in liquid light as if John just turned the sunshine on there in that horrible room, as if a bit of Regent's Park in July was recessed in the ceiling all along and John's lips whipped away the shade to free the trapped glow.

"Stop. We can't," Sherlock pleads, voice raw. He opens his eyes. His hand is grasping John's nape as though the doctor were about to be swept physically away, body flying through an open hangar door on a jet aeroplane. Sherlock doesn't know if he's clutching him closer or pushing the smaller man away until John's mouth brushes open-lipped against Sherlock's once more, and the doctor pulls back of his own volition. "I want to, but he'll, oh god, what will he--"

"I know, love." John settles back on the bed, running soothing fingers along Sherlock's temple. His eyes, hard as granite previously in stony amusement, have gone liquid with affection. "I just really, really needed that. I needed that more than whatever the consequences will be, because we're in for a spot of bother no matter what we do. You know that, right? Our actions are largely irrelevant. We could probably snog for a few hours and bung in a quick shag while we're at it and not do any worse in the long run. So I needed that, because I was beginning to think I had lost you for good, and that was unbearable, but here you are alive if not well, and now I'll be your colleague again. I won't get handsy unless you want me to. Okay?"

Breathing too hard, Sherlock nods. He studies the bright creature leaning over his pillow, a smile playing over the military man's kiss-dampened lips, and his heart is so grieved and so guilty and so full that he wonders if it might crack his ribs without Jim so much as laying a finger on either of them.

"John, there's something...I should say," he begins, faltering, "I, I've meant to say always, and then never have. So since--"

"Sherlock Holmes, shut the fuck up."

Startled, Sherlock feels his eyes widen in disbelief.

John is suddenly furious. His eyes are slitted, his ears pinkening.
But that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever.

John wanted Sherlock to belong to him, John was the one who said *does this mean I get to keep you*, John was the one who told Sherlock he had fallen in love, so why does he now look livid enough to spit bullets? Sherlock feels his heart clench, the unexpected rejection on top of everything else squeezing the organ in a death grip. Why are John's shoulders like that, why are his ears practically flattened against his skull?

*John kissed me. Seconds ago. John has every right to hate me, but then why should he have kissed me? Do people kiss people after they grow to hate them?*

"I thought I might as well say it now," Sherlock admits hoarsely, feeling utterly helpless.

"Yeah, and you were dead wrong," John snaps, sitting back emphatically. His fists close, open again. "You are not saying goodbye to me, Sherlock. You are not lying there half-starved in a madman's cage and saying goodbye to me because you think I need to hear three little words. I don't. You don't get to tell me you love me because you think one or both of us is about to die, you get to sit on that and when we get out of here, you can tell me you love me every minute of every goddamn day, assuming that's actually the case. I was there at the *Friesland*, so I'm pretty sure of myself. But you don't get to give this to me like a fucking farewell letter, just because you've had your wires scrambled by Jim Moriarty and now you want to tie up loose ends."

"But--"

"I am not a loose end, do you hear me, I am your motherfucking colleague, and when we're through with this you can tell me anything you like. Not before. I love you. Now, shut the fuck up, rest a little and see how that biscuit treats you, and I'll be back when I've done my own search. I'm not likely to see anything you missed, but this is not the time to get lazy. Are we clear?"

Sherlock nods silently. John swoops down and kisses him at the edge of his mouth again, sideways and gentle. "Go to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

*That's precisely the problem*, Sherlock thinks as John stalks away.

When John is gone, Sherlock grinds his fist against his own heart, swallowing black despair and willing himself, as he has been doing far too often of late, not to shatter like the façade of the empty house.

Sherlock awakens slowly, listening to the faint sound of voices. One is dear and familiar and kind and a bit rough around the edges, the voice of a good man who has shot a gun at living human targets. The other is also familiar, the Irish lilt of a chap who has murdered hostages and blown entire families to smoldering smithereens.

The detective flings himself from the bed so fast that his shoulder strikes the wall painfully. Half-lurching and half-trotting, he heads for the long room. The voices continue. Why is this taking so long? *The corridor wasn't like this, the bedroom wasn't this far from the third door before, I swear to god it wasn't.* Sherlock's head swims. *This corridor is too fucking long by half.* The Irish voice is laughing.
Move, Sherlock thinks, coldly loathing his own ill-advised weakness.

"I believe you'll find I'm perfectly serious," John is saying when Sherlock staggers into the chamber facing Baker Street.

He has his arms crossed, at perfect military rest, his bare feet slightly apart and his round chin jutting, the brackets around his mouth creasing in a vicious half-smile.

"Hullo," he says when Sherlock weaves his way over. John's hand shoots out, catching his elbow. "Steady on, love. There." The hand drops casually. "I was just having a chat with this human piece of feces, glad you could join us."

Jim is in shirtsleeves, trying to smile while glowering. It's actually rather impressive. He has his cuffs rolled up, and he cracks his neck ostentatiously, making the snake undulate. The ancient animal fear creeps through Sherlock's belly at the sight of him, even though--what, an hour ago? two hours?--he was pleading for Jim to appear.

"What are you doing?" Sherlock demands before his head whips back to John. "John, what is he doing? Jim, listen, I've eaten, I'm--"

"Stop right there," John warns quietly.

"No," Sherlock snaps. "What have you been saying to each other?"

"Your little terrier here is proving slightly more interesting than I thought," Jim drawls. "As a matter of fact, he was suggesting that I let you both go. Just like that. Finito. Thanks for coming, cheers for the do, dinner was cracking, jolly good time had by all, who's safe to drive, and now let's all go back to our lives. Appalling idea."

"It isn't, though." John shifts easily, scratching at the back of his neck. "You want to."

"This will be the fun part, Sherlock, watch," Jim sniffs, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly. "All right, Johnny, the fifty million dollar question: why do I want to?"

"Because you loved to watch him dance," John answers softly. He hasn't looked at Sherlock once since preventing his fall. "Everyone does. God, I do. Look at us both. All those cases you had him solve--now, that was the dog's bollocks. This prison of yours? It's pretty duff, mate. I have to be honest with you. I didn't want him to admire you, your pretty puzzles and locked room crap and nasty games. I was jealous, and that showed. But he did admire you, your brilliant murders and all these subtle clues you left him, and you loved it. You got to watch him doing what he was born to do, and now you're free to watch him forever if you like. Christ knows we're not having any luck in catching you. You know you want to see him shine again, you know you miss it same as I do. Who's to say we couldn't go on as we were before, you doing the devil's work and him on the side of the angels?"

"He may be on the side of the angels, but don't think for a second that he is one," Jim retorts.

"What, can't be fagged to set up any more riddles? Locking us in a white room is the best you can do for the rest of eternity? Are you out of ideas? Some criminal mastermind you make."

John is brilliant, Sherlock thinks desperately, and then John is insane, and then Jim's lean, handsome face twists into a smirk.

"You know, Johnny boy, you have a point," he admits. Jim throws his shoulders back, arches a little, preening for the camera. "But I know something you don't know. Well. I mean to say.
What you don't know and I do know would fill an Olympic swimming pool, but there's something specific I'm referring to, as you've probably gathered.

"And what's that, then?" John answers steadily.

"You're perfectly right," the ex-convict hisses, his jaw jutting ominously. "I am bored half to tears with Sherlock lately, and he needs to be taught a stern lesson. Which is why I'm paying you lads a call shortly. I've something absolutely marvelous I've been planning ever since Sherlock here turned himself in for your sake. You'll adore it. You'll absolutely die," he concludes before snapping his fingers, and all at once the vents have begun hissing again, and Sherlock shouts something strangled, struggling for consciousness, until John's face blurs like a watercolour and the world dissolves in static.
Wherein I suck at updates in every way, apologize again, and present to you the climax (this has been a WIP for so long, I seriously owe you that admission). This is NOT the ending. Not at all. But the chapter will make decisions, and cause consequences, and resolve some circumstances. WARNINGS for intensity and graphic, deliberate violence. There will be blood. But you probably knew that. It's been in the tags all along. Still--do not hurt yourselves, my darlings.

Later, whenever Sherlock remembers waking up for the last time in the long white room, recollects it with a dull *crack* as if the muscle of his heart just snapped as he emerged from a deep sleep, he will only recall what he saw, and not what actually happened.

Later, whenever Sherlock tries to plug the gaps in the unspeakable narrative, he will fail, and not know whether to be furious at himself or at John, for forcing him to do what he did, for disallowing him to bear witness.

Later, whenever Sherlock attempts to see the scene as it played out in truth, his mind will stutter and spark, fuming firecracker smoke and charred chemical glimmers, just as John guessed it would. John who made Sherlock do it. John who robbed Sherlock of what really took place. John who took it on himself when Sherlock would have died before letting that happen. Made every effort to, in fact. John who blinded him deliberately.

Later, whenever Sherlock tries to rip aside the grey veil of forgetfulness, it will crumble in his fingers like ash only to reveal the same false painting.

Excepting the beginning and the end, of course.

The beginning and the end are branded on Sherlock's memory, and no amount of effort save surgical removal will lessen the scar.

"Sherlock," John is saying.

Twitching, Sherlock attempts to move and learns that his limbs have been replaced with plastic doll parts. Is he already a mannequin, then? Inanimate so soon?

But no, that isn't quite right--his fingertips tingle and his tongue squirms in his mouth, dry as a limp pink eraser. The back of his throat throbs with residual sedative fumes. Gagging a bit but soon
recovering, he lolls his head from side to side. His neck works. That's a start. He isn't a brain in a jar quite yet, then. And he seems to be...upright. Is he upright? Gravity pulls at his brow, at his jaw, dragging him forward. His ankles hurt and when he shifts to move them, they hurt more. And they don't shift. Or move.

Why can't I move?

"Sherlock, you have to listen, and you have to listen right now."

Sherlock only coughs. His head is still spinning and maybe that's what's confusing his center of gravity, but shouldn't he be on the ground? He feels trussed up somehow, pulse recalcitrant in his veins. Lips tingling, eyes fixed shut. It's cold in this room.

Why is it so bloody cold? It wasn't this cold before. His neck prickles with chills.

"Tell me you can hear me. Instantly, do you understand? Give me some sort of signal. If you can hear me, say something."

"I hate you for being here," Sherlock rasps, because he isn't allowed to say the Other Thing, and it works, because John produces a coal-black laugh.

"Cracking. The feeling is mutual. All right, mind what I'm saying, Sherlock. We've not had time to practice this properly even though we chatted about it, so we're going to bodge our way through and that'll be better than nothing. You're still half under, but he's going to be back any second, and you're going to do exactly as I say without question. If you don't, things are about to get very, very bollocksed from here, and you trust me. Yes? You have to trust me. There is nothing else for you to do right now other than exactly as I tell you."

John is still here, Sherlock understands groggily. Jim kept him.

But I ate, I did, I did just as I was told, and John isn't meant to be here any longer. It was all for him.

"Am I understood? Sherlock?"

Before Sherlock can manage to pry his eyes open or to speak, he smells the unmistakable rusted-pipe tang of blood.

He hurt me, Sherlock thinks, though he cannot determine how.

Good. He said there would be punishment, and if Jim is hurting me, then at least he isn't hurting John.

But even when Sherlock struggles a bit harder, parched lips falling open, he fails to ascertain in what precise manner he has been wounded. Jim must have strapped him to something and butchered some flesh, the evidence is alive in his nostrils, but while everything aches, nothing hurts in any sharp, meaningful fashion. Immobility is maddening, but as for physical damage...he can't find it, doesn't know where to feel, can't brush his fingertips over his sides and pelvis and thighs, and even if he could, he wouldn't know where to start, because apart from being pinned like a butterfly, everything seems fine, which can only mean...

Opening his eyes at last, Sherlock blinks them into focus and would absolutely scream again if his tongue were not embedded in sand.

Or perhaps he wouldn't have, he thinks later. After. Perhaps for a moment, the horror was enough
to turn him, however temporarily, to stone.

"You are allowed to look at me for exactly as long as it takes for you to understand your instructions." John's voice husks, but beneath the scratches lies polished steel. "Clear?"

Sherlock cannot answer him, can't even breathe to attempt it.

From what his still-bleary eyes can gather, Sherlock is propped somehow against the wall by the locked cabinet at one end of the long room, the end with the door to London and the unreachable, impossible, beautiful, dull, normal world of Baker Street, Westminster beyond. John is at the other end of the vast stretch of whiteness by the other locked cabinet. He is shirtless, face scored with pain he is resolutely ignoring, with his white (previously--it's red now) t-shirt (formerly--it's torn into strips) tied tightly around his left leg at the bottom of his calf. A small (not small enough) pool of blood has gathered round his ankle and linked to the wild game trap (Sherlock sees a bit of its triangular teeth sunk into raw flesh and can deduce the rest, though he can't tell if it's the sort for bears or for smaller mammals like foxes) is a chain (thick) running directly to a metal plate attached to the wall (with six screws).

"No," Sherlock says, and he hates himself when he hears how small and how broken the sound is.

"Shut it this instant," John hisses. There is love in his red-rimmed blue eyes, yes, but no tears, only veins where his agony scarred the whites. "This doesn't break me, not by a long mile, so it sure as fuck doesn't break you. That is an order."

"I'm not a soldier. I never was. Oh, god no, this isn't--"

Miraculously, John is on his feet now, limping towards Sherlock with hell in his countenance.

"Stop!" Sherlock cries, his throat scraping horridly. "Don't, don't. John. You'll only injure--"

"I'm already bloody injured," John says calmly, though he does come to a halt.

_The chain is ten yards long_, Sherlock thinks. Perhaps even longer. John is obscuring part of its loops with his body. _How long is it?_

"Listen to me. Are you listening?"

Nodding, Sherlock wills himself to examine his own situation, discover how he might tear his body away from this wall and rip the cruel teeth from John's leg with his bare hands, when he realizes exactly why he was cold, and how he has been immobilized. At first, he can't quite bring himself to believe it, even though it's spectacularly predictable.

Considering.

"John," he says after several seconds--seconds John gives him to adjust, Sherlock understands this. "Am I tied to a cross? Because that would be pretty bad news." Sherlock hits the _t_ of _pretty_ in his best public school plosive.

"It would, and you are. Propped against the plaster, yeah." John agrees. "It's just ropes restraining you. At the moment. But that is some thick lumber, and it's definitely...crossed. Seems kind of, um. Meaningful."

It enters Sherlock's mind that he ought to be numb with terror just now. And part of him, the child who read letter after sickening letter and never feared the wolf at the door or the monster in the closet because he was too busy being frightened of Jim Moriarty, is cowering. That part wants to
curl up in warm oblivion and never wake again. But an angry fire has commenced simmering in his guts, a rage which threatens to burn all else away, *John was off limits, he was meant to be safe, you promised, you promised, and now he's tethered like a dumb animal,* and if the inferno of hatred towards Jim Moriarty isn't checked soon, Sherlock fears self-immolation will ruin their chances of survival.

"That's better," John approves, grinning a gallows grin.

Thrashing, Sherlock tries to dislodge himself. But the ropes are tight, beginning to cut off circulation in fact, and now he's fully conscious he can see his fingers are turning bluish. He's wearing the white trousers still, but his shirt is missing, which is why he's shivering. The bare torso adds to the effect, he supposes dryly. Grunting, he tries to flail again.

"Easy there. Though the attitude is spot on."

"How long?" Sherlock snarls, jerking with his legs. The bonds there are equally tight, and he's standing on a little length of board like a platform, ankles lashed to the vertical post, arms spread wide. Motionless save for futile floppings like a beached salmon. If he's too violent, he'll upset the balance of the contraption and send himself crashing to the floor, so he stills.

John meditates, frowning as if surveying a field of land mines he's keen to cross. "You were already strung up like Jesus when I came to. I snapped awake pretty fucking fast when he closed the trap on my leg, I tied a tourniquet and a bandage, he watched me work, gloated for bit, left, and you woke up. I've been trying to get your attention because I can't physically reach you, not by a long shot. He'll be back soon. I can't imagine why he left in the first place, which concerns me."

"Undoubtedly. Was he alone?"

"Not exactly."

"Sebastian Moran?"

"Tall bloke, lizard-skinned mercenary type? Yeah, he was here. Didn't look any too comfortable. If I didn't know better, I'd have said he was worried."

"Curious."

"Sherlock, shut up and listen. I need you to trust me. I need you to do what I tell you."

How much pressure can a braided nylon rope of eight millimeters in diameter stand? Supposing the relationship between mass and force can be calculated as \( m = F/g (1) \), always taking into account the rope has been passed round each wrist four times and finished with a self-tightening knot, the odds of breaking free when adrenaline is factored into the equation--

"Sherlock!" John repeats. He isn't shouting, but the tone pierces walls. "I need you to go away."

"What?" the detective says, the numbers in his head turning dizzying pirouettes with dumb courage and the ferocious pang of imminent heartbreak.

"Go into your mind palace." Sherlock has never seen John look like this, like he is delivering a dying wish, and John can't be doing that, not that, *he can't.* "You can't move. I can't free you. I can't get close enough, and I can't get this buggering trap off my leg. He locked it somehow, knowing I'd pry it loose otherwise. If this is your punishment for half starving? We're not sticking around for seconds. I need him to relax when he comes back, enough for me to do the only thing I can think of, and I'm afraid he's going to either hurt you or hurt me first, very badly, so I want you
to keep him talking. You're going to distract him with your nasty jokes and quips and sweet talk and sarcasm and take the piss from inside the palace, all right? I need you to go deep enough that you can do this for me, and we can go home."

"No," Sherlock spits immediately. "And stop fidgeting, for god's sake. Look, you're dripping on the floor. You've started it bleeding again. I just need--if I can slip--"

"You can't slip out of those!" John cries. He clenches both fists, turns again in a half-circle, smears blood with bare feet as he pivots. "I watched Moran tie them while you were unconscious, more closely than I've ever watched anything. Don't you think I'd know if you could free yourself? After Moran helped get you onto that contraption and they propped you up like a crucifix, I did nothing but record how they secured you. Forget about escaping those knots. We have maybe half a minute before they come back, and you will do as I say."

"You can't--"

"Sherlock, you tried to be a hero, a martyr, and you succeeded, all right?" John says with quiet desperation fraying his every syllable. "It was brilliant. That's why he's doing this. He thought he'd created a game with no solution, but you took yourself off the playing board and bartered that for me and it worked. You won fair and square."

"That's not--"

"It's the truest goddamn thing I've ever said. You wanted me unharmed, and you won, you gave him your life, and so he's doing what every psycho infant does when his toys won't behave properly. He's smashing them. What does a man like that do when his pet disobeys? He fucking kicks it in the ribs. What does he do when the world doesn't suit him? He straps innocent people in semtex. What does he do when he loses? He changes the rules of engagement, Sherlock. Well, fuck him sideways. He can have my leg, but he can't have your mind. Not when I need it. Talk to him when he gets back. Buy me time. Please, will you do this for me?"

Speechless, Sherlock blinks the despair from his own eyes.

"This is what people do when they're out of options," John insists. His expression is so clear, so sure, and under that...so horribly resigned. "They follow orders. This is me, commanding you. Disappear."

Shaking his head, Sherlock whispers, "I can't leave you. Or not all the way."

"No?"

"Not if I'm talking."

"Oh, right. Okay, I understand. You'll still hear me, hear him so long as you're conscious and engaged." John takes another step and flinches this time, his face instantly returning to forced calm, as if he's afraid of Sherlock watching. "Christ, that stings. These trancelike states, you said you could launch them at will, control them. Just don't see this anymore, all right? Don't be here. Don't feel it. Go."

A piece of his hair is mussed, it occurs to Sherlock, without any control over his marvelous faculty. Deductions are simply happening now, falling into his skull like rain into a puddle. He reached up and grabbed it with his left hand, yanked it hard not a quarter of an hour ago, probably trying not to give vent to the pain through his vocal chords when the teeth snapped shut into his flesh, he locked his jaw when Jim locked the trap and he held onto that soft mass of straw-coloured
follicles, and I can't smooth it back for him, can't move, probably won't ever touch him again if
matters continue going as well as they have been so far, and who could have anticipated this, in
what world could you have thought it possible, that not being able to push back his hair where he
hurt himself to keep from waking you with screams would be what makes up your mind.

Sherlock will not go out begging unless as a last resort. John is right about the rules of
engagement. The detective already offered his life, and Jim gladly took it. Pleas and tears may
have their place in future as tools, but not now.

Not now, when John refuses to flinch because Sherlock can see him.

So Sherlock is leaving.

"John, look me in the eyes." Sucking in a breath, Sherlock holds it and then exhales. "You truly
have a plan?"

"Truly."

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

"No, because it's so simple that you'll think it's ludicrous. But it'll work." John shrugs, and the
casual gesture somehow radiates confidence.

"Tell me this disappearing order is honestly because that way I can distract him."

"It's because that way you can distract him."

"Not because you think I'll dissolve like...like before. When he would contact me."

"It's because I think you won't dissolve, and reeds bend. Stones shatter. I need you...bendable."

"Fine."

"Fine," John says, almost smiling.

"I never made you coffee that day you came to my flat after Angelo's, when I was thanking you for
tackling Abernetty. Afterwards, there was too much, and it slipped my mind. Do you remember
the day we met? I promised you coffee. Don't forget that."

Sherlock's voice doesn't break. It takes John a moment, a moment when he drags his hand down
his face to hide a gutted look, but John's doesn't either.

"Yes, yes, you love me." John nods once. "Glad you mentioned it, but I already knew that. See
you in a mo'."

"Goodbye, then."

As soon as Sherlock's resolve is taken, John steps behind himself to put some distance between
them, nearly stumbles and stifles a noise, and the sleuth's determination shrivels again. The white
walls expand and contract with every heartbeat. John is the only solid figure in the vertiginous
space, fastened to the bare floor with red glue dripping, dripping, dripping, dripping.

How long before there's no more blood left? He already looks so pale. How can Sherlock unsee
this enough to vanish away from it? The love of Sherlock's life is chained up like a fucking spaniel
with gore oozing down his leg and this wasn't meant to happen and the room bucks and churns and
Sherlock hears muffled footsteps behind him, metal tumblers turning and clanking, a key rattling in
a complicated lock, and John continues to back away.

"Go," John commands, pointing a steady finger at Sherlock. "Now."

The door begins to swing on soundless hinges.

"Go!" John screams, and the white walls hemorrhage colours, scarlet at first and then blues and emeralds, blossoming into a rainbow with gilded edges and leaden panes and golden lamplight.

The reading room is not the depths of Sherlock's mind palace, but neither is it the doorsteps or the front parlour. He uses it as a clearing house of sorts, under usual circumstances. The library contains voluminous information he will need inevitably, sooner or later, codified and categorized. Other nooks and foyers hold more specialized knowledge, like the poisons all labeled in the misty greenhouse or the concertos filed in the music room or the corpses buried in the garden beds. But the reading room, located in a friendly round turret off a spiral staircase, is different. Sherlock fills it with whatever he needs to synthesize at the moment, crams all the leather-bound books with relevant data and replaces the maps on the walls with whatever streets are germane to his latest unsolved conundrum. When he was at uni, he used it for tests in deadly dull subjects (like economics, and poetry, and people like Grant and like Eric).

Now he is using it as a halfway house between reality and optimism.

Sherlock stands before the bow window, cushions and maroon curtains and a few potted plants behind him, with his hands resting lightly on the back of a comfortably upholstered armchair. He can't move them, but that's to be expected. The reading room is facts brought to life, not a magic other-world. A soft piano air emanates from the record player, jazz by...yes, Dave Brubeck. The noise is quietly eerie.

Wrong. Perverse.

John is seated across the room, sunlit under the uncovered windows, his face white, his bare ankles demurely crossed before the claw feet of his chair. His friend's lined face is drawn with suffering, but he doesn't fidget, sits perfectly still with his chin propped up on his hand, one finger thoughtfully against the hinge of his jaw.

Jim Moriarty sweeps into the reading room and clicks the paneled door shut. It ought to be unbearable, this mass murderer finally only feet away from Sherlock, but incredibly, John was right. Here, inside the palace, it is no worse than watching the twisted sod onscreen. No worse than the phone calls. If Sherlock were deep enough not to hear this malevolent maggot, he reflects, the detective probably wouldn't be fussed over his being there at all. Brilliant, genius, John may actually be a genius after all. Jim's impeccably dressed, as indeed all three men are, in tailored smoking jackets and crisp cotton shirts. Sherlock's is open several buttons down and when he notes he's still shivering, he pushes his awareness further away until the frigid draughts stop caressing his throat. Jim watches, eyes lingering on Sherlock's body before roaming over the classically appointed chamber.

Sherlock is dimly aware that he himself is the only one who can see the carefully dusted bookshelves, however.
"Well, well, well," Jim croons. "Together at last in the flesh, eh? Though we've never really been apart, I'm proud to say, Sherlock, not in the ways that count. Never in our hearts. Still. This is definitely a turn-up. Isn't it?"

Sherlock sighs, looking carelessly past John, directing his attention to the grounds of his mind palace beyond the diamond-shaped panes. He wonders tensely why Moran is nowhere in sight.

"Oh, no more pouting, not after you've put me to so much trouble," Jim pretends to scold. His smile is all arsenic and decay. "I was really worried for you for a second. I wooed you, for Christ's sake. Couldn't have you dying on me. Almost came charging in here like the cavalry with smelling salts and a bodice ripper after all that languishing like a fucking Victorian princess."

"I wasn't languishing," Sherlock sniffs. It's difficult to sound casual with his throat dry as a dune, but he manages. "I was bored."

"Were you?" Jim's eyes twinkle, and the snake tattoo tightens its fangs into the apple as his neck tenses. He cracks his vertebrae, the same habitual posturing twitch, whiplash sounds echoing. "Funny performance, that. Kind of melodramatic, come to think of it. Do you always scream when you're bored?"

"No," Sherlock hisses. "I only scream when I'm tricking a skulking rat into showing his face. Didn't you notice I was shamming? No? Oh, how embarrassing. Never set you down for quite that gormless, Jimmy, but then again, prison can dull the wits, they say."

Jim laughs, the explosion loud but quickly dissipating. Not for an instant does he actually appear amused. He stalks, quiet as a panther, giving the innocuously quiet John a wide berth that only serves to remind Sherlock his friend is still as good as staked to the ground.

"So this is all in accordance with your schemes, then." Fluttering his fingers, Jim executes a brief spin. "Your plan was for me to fasten you to a cross and have my way with you while your boyfriend watches, the latter bleeding out as we speak? God, you're so morbid. Clever, clever you. I was fooled, in that case! Shown up by the boy wonder again. My hat's off to you, my pet."

"I'm not your pet."

"Mmm, agree to disagree."

"Really not, though."

"Want to make a wager on that?" Jim growls, rubbing his hands together.

Next he blows into them ostentatiously, as if he's standing in a snowbank. When he deems them warm enough, he steps forward, luxuriously dragging three fingers down, down down down, over Sherlock's Adam's apple and skimming the hollow where his carotid thumps, thump thump thump, ending where the scant dusting of hair between his pectorals brushes the fingers in return, brush brush brush, as if welcoming them against the sleuth's will, and Sherlock longs to lift his own hands from where they rest on the back of this goddamned armchair, but he can't, and vomiting doesn't seem practical, so he simply breathes.

"No. I'm not your pet, and I don't bet on sure things," Sherlock forces out. "It's suicidally tedious."

"Pity. I only bet on sure things. Like you eating out of the palm of my hand, literally lapping milk up like the precious puss that you are, by this time next week. Did I say literally? Good. Smashing. That's a promise."
"I dunno," John puts in evenly, though his voice is strained. "If I was to have a flutter on it myself, I'd still give Sherlock odds over a toxic lump in a posh suit."

Then John reaches to the side table nearest him, lifts the squat brass clock from the marble top, and starts smashing it over and over again into the stone. The noise is shockingly loud and clangs rather more than it should. Cocking his head, Sherlock considers this stratagem. But he knows what John's doing, and it makes even less sense in the real world than it does in this one.

*Clang. Clang. Clang,* goes what Sherlock knows to be a length of chain against the floor.

The jazz music ceases.

"Stop that," Jim says pleasantly, smiling.

"Is he bothering you already?" Sherlock mocks. "I had no idea you were so sensitive."

Chuckling, John beams at Sherlock.

*Clang. Clang. Clang."

"Okay, dunno what you thought I said, might have been 'stop that,' can't recall," Jim trills, "but what I really meant was, if you want me to start torturing our mutual friend here already, and so soon, by all means keep up the decibel level."

"Why does it worry you in the first place?" John questions. He sounds sincere. "Is it because you know if I do this for long enough, the chain really will wear out after a decade or so? Or are you just not used to dealing with men who don't give a toss what you say?"

Shifting his wrist over, John bangs the clock against the wall behind him for emphasis. And if it sounds like metal against plaster instead, Sherlock doesn't question the doctor, as bemused as he finds himself.

*Distract Jim,* he recalls. *That's your mission. And possibly your last one.*

"Why aren't you answering him?" Sherlock attempts.

"I find conversations with dead men futile at best," Jim replies, stifling a fake yawn. "I much prefer chatting with you, my dear. Everyone else can go hang. Didn't you see how I felt, when I showed you the cases? Couldn't you feel it too? All those unsolved crimes I gave you, and every last one of them proving mankind is garbage. All except us."


"Shut the fuck up," Jim hisses, whirling at the army doctor.

"He must really be getting to you." Sherlock smirks, pleased though he has no notion of what John means by all this. "I always assumed you would be a tougher nut to crack, Jim. How disappointing."

Sighing, Jim strides to one of Sherlock's bookshelves. He removes a key from his jacket pocket and opens one of the glass-fronted displays. *That isn't a bookshelf,* Sherlock knows. *That's a steel cabinet.* And John's stony face hardens further while Jim's focus is turned away, hardens to the core of a meteorite after it has withstood fiery destruction and lived to tell about it. He abruptly
stops banging the chain against the floor.

"All right, back off," John warns.

"Or what?" Jim demands, still with his head ducked and his reptilian shoulders bowed as he rummages through books and the jumbled trays of pens and office supplies Sherlock keeps here.

Turning at last, he brandishes a pencil. Ordinary red paint, wooden casing, lead tip, finely honed point.

John drops the clock, visibly horrified, and lifts both hands up. The posture reeks of surrender. Sherlock's blood curdles, but he manages to regard the pencil with only mild interest.

"Are you actually stupid enough to think that I make empty threats, Johnny boy?" Jim sings, edging nearer to the doctor, but never too close. "I don't think you are. I could lobotomize you quite easily with this, though, and then your intellect would match the idiotic games you're playing."

"Fine, use that on me all you like," John spits out. "Not on him."

"No," Sherlock can't help but gasp.

"Shut up, Sherlock," John snaps.

"No, no, let's hear him out." Lifting the pencil, Jim Moriarty admires it in the lamplight, turning it from side to side, his ivory skin aglow, his lips twitching with anticipation as he smiles. "This is ultimately his home after all, not yours. It's your final resting place, perhaps, John my sweet, but let's listen to what Sherlock wants since he's practically the host."

"Point that at him and I will kill you."

"Oh, you poor deluded angel. Did you think you were the only one about to be left bloodied from this session? The first of many, as you already know all too well."

John starts shouting his lungs out the instant Jim turns back to Sherlock with the pencil, the small doctor hunched into a smaller crouch and banging the chain against the floor and the wall and the floor again, it's a clock it's a chain it's a clock, and the reading room steadies itself as Sherlock sets his spine and grits his teeth and distract him distract him distract him. Why is Jim smiling so, and what is a pencil when it's not a pencil? It's only a pencil. Not a pencil. Why is John so upset?

Sherlock fights a wave of dizziness. The maroon curtains in the snug chamber flash to white paint, flickering, seizure-inducing, but he forces the fabric back to velvet trimmings with a violent blink.

"You wanted to be a savior?" Jim clucks, shaking his head as he uncurls Sherlock's fingers from where his left hand grips the armchair. "Your wish is my command."

"Stop, stop. Not that. You are a fucking dead man," John yells, and the feral din from the other side of the room worsens.

"I'm really not the type for self-sacrifice, actually." Aware his voice is growing fainter, Sherlock pinches his lower lip with his teeth as Jim sets the pencil tip against his palm.

But even as he says this, he is strangely aware he is wrong.

Sherlock Holmes flashes back to the memory of himself slumped in Molly's laboratory, asking
John about string theory and universes in which he could have saved Rita from being blown skyhigh. His mind's eye lights upon John's hand when he first shook it, the way they were two puzzle pieces fitting. He thinks about love at first sight, and why it didn't seem strange at all. Why didn't so monumental a thing as love at first sight frighten him? It ought to have been harrowing and it was as simple as falling asleep with John warm in his bed and part of the army veteran's gun in the microwave. It was entirely out of character for Sherlock, for a man who has always been achingly alone. If string theory is real (and Sherlock has always believed in it), is he always blindly trusting when he glimpses John Watson? Does he always need him so? Does he always love him?

For an instant, he marvels over having been so ready to die for someone not two weeks ago, until he realizes that in every world, every time continuum, along every string, in every set of circumstances, John is risking, and Sherlock dies. Whether it's a psychic vision or severe *deja vu* or a product of being in the mind palace under these extreme circumstances, Sherlock cannot tell, but of one thing he is certain.

Sherlock always dies.

*He is a scientist colleague of John's in 1560, the astronomer and the medical man, and Sherlock walks up to the stake surrounded by oil-soaked kindling.*

*He is standing on the plank of a pirate vessel, John watching with a flintlock to his head, and Sherlock steps backwards into air and mist.*

*He is an archaeologist in 1827, and there is enough food left for only one partner to make it to Aleppo, and Sherlock walks into the midnight desert alone.*

*He is a detective running for his life in Switzerland, standing at the edge of a roiling waterfall chasm, and Sherlock's mortal enemy attacks him with long, grasping arms.*

*He is a spy captured in 1943, John's cover not yet blown though it is about to be, and Sherlock marches into a German camp and surrenders.*

*He is standing on the roof of St. Bart's talking on a mobile, and John is looking up at him, and Sherlock drops the phone and falls, falls, falls.*

The pencil point doesn't feel like a pencil, and suddenly a great many things happen.

Sherlock chokes on a shriek, mostly successfully, as the walls of the reading room blaze into pure white. Screwing his eyes shut, Sherlock forces back the water which sprang into them, clamps the whimpers down with ruthless force. Jim is laughing, laughing fit to burst when Sherlock wrenches his eyes open again. The crazed banging hasn't ceased, here is the long white room again, John's shouts, and yes, *that's a massive nail gun in Jim's hand, and a quite thick nail in my palm, yes, that makes sense doesn't it, ought to have deduced as much*, and no one notices at first, least of all Jim, when the racket John is making morphs into slightly different sounds.

One moment John is frothing with impotent rage, frenziedly whipping the chain against every surface he can reach.
The next moment, despite the trap in his leg, John has flipped onto his back, placed his feet against the wall, wrapped the chain around his fists while still swearing a blue streak, and torn the entire metal plate out of the weaker plaster wall.

Jim, eyes flaming with pleasure, doesn't even turn around.

"Journeys end in lovers' meetings," the madman whispers tenderly, reaching to cup the detective's face. "And this is where you end, Sherlock. Someday."

Sherlock means to reply, he really does.

Shock prevents him.

John by now is already perched on Jim's back like a weirdly calm demon, the length of chain held in a death grip, choking the escaped convict and the army veteran not even looking as if he's enjoying it particularly. Jim's shock hits Sherlock like a sonic boom as his tormentor staggers, unable to gasp or shout or even struggle very much, what with John practically hugging him as he drains the life from his body, and again Sherlock has seen this before, *John in an old-fashioned tweed suit grappling with the Old Shikari in this identical empty house, who is the Old Shikari, John in a green coat covered in semtex and the smell of a chlorinated pool, why a pool, John...*

"John!" Sherlock cries just as a panicking Jim Moriarty reels and squeezes the huge nail gun and fires a second round into his side.

"The fuck no, you didn't," John snarls, and wrenches the chain length, and Sherlock isn't paying attention as raptly any longer, but Jim slumps to the floor a few seconds later, very dead.

Untangling himself, John rises.

Someone is moaning with his teeth pressed shut.

Someone is lifting Sherlock, panting with the struggle, and then the cross is on the floor, and the ceiling is so white, too white, unbearably white.

Someone is making soothing sounds and someone else is hyperventilating.

"No, no, you have to stop," John pleads, urgent but soft.

"Get me off of this thing!"

"I can't. Calm down, love, you have to calm down. You're in shock and you're bleeding, um, much more than I'd like. Please be still for one moment. For me, for me, quiet now."

John's face vanishes from Sherlock's vision and he doesn't scream, you can't scream. His hand is pulsing red fire and his gut has a hot poker pressed into it. When the doctor returns, he is still talking. His arms are full of bed sheets. He begins to pack them around Sherlock's injuries and Sherlock doesn't scream, but he thinks he may have bitten off a good piece of his tongue. Thank god his stomach is empty or its contents would be on the floor by this time.

John adjusts a makeshift bandage and Sherlock yelps, then heaves quick, shallow swells of air. He's still freezing. Now the white room feels like a whopping great refrigerator.

"Hush. You were perfect. Amazing. But you can't breathe like that." Plentiful fabric is now in service and John is bleeding too, everyone is, there's blood fucking everywhere. "You're making it so much worse. No, I know you can't help it. Shhh. I know. I know, I know. Quiet now. I'm
sorry.  Please forgive me.  Not your hand, never that, I wasn't fast enough, and the second shot was an accident, I'm sorry, I had to make sure he was--

"The cabinet is still open," Sherlock rasps.  "Get a knife from there, there has to be one.  Get me loose, look in the cabi--"

"If I cut you loose, you're going to bleed out." John cradles Sherlock's face.  The doctor looked businesslike before, so matter-of-fact over throttling Jim it was surreal, but now Sherlock is actually dying and he looks as if he's dying too.  "Stop breathing like that.  Please, love.  I cannot simply rip your hand off this sodding--"

"Yes, you can."

"And if you sit up and start thrashing around, this gut wound--"

"Please," Sherlock begs, mindless with distress.

"You're having a panic attack.  Presently, that could kill you.  Shock alone could do it.  You were barely even alive when I arrived.  Breathe through your nose.  Right now."

"For fuck's sake--"

John places an implacable hand over Sherlock's mouth and the sleuth sees starbursts in the whitewash, galaxies in John's eyes.  The doctor's lips plunge down to caress his temple in small, aborted whispers.

"You were perfect.  I'm so sorry.  Don't leave me now, not after that.  Calm down just a little for me and I can go get help.  No, no, no, shh, all right, I won't leave you alone, I promise, but you're kind of doing really fucking poorly here, love, and I need to...  Fuck.  Fuck.  Sherlock, he's dead.  I won't let anyone hurt you again, but we have to find help somehow.  It's all right.  I'll make it all right, I'll--"

Both men freeze at the sound of multiple sets of footsteps barreling towards the outside door.

John flings himself off of Sherlock with a bitter curse, claims the nail gun with both of his steady, gore-soaked hands, and aims it at the door with his body squarely shielding the detective's pinioned form.  Despite this, thanks to John's crouching position, Sherlock thinks he sees a fever dream of Shinwell Johnson charge through the unlocked portal, bearing an AK-47, clad in jungle edition camo pants and an Amy Winehouse graphic t-shirt.  It's a shame it can't be true, really.  Because it would have made for a nice end.  Now imaginary Shinwell is bellowing, and real John is bleeding and barking orders, and everything is whirling like a carnival nightmare, and there is Jim Moriarty dead on the floor--the only motionless character remaining in the passion play, eyes open, staring reverently at Sherlock from where John just tossed the convict like a broken rag doll on the floor.
Chapter 31

At first, Sherlock is only aware that his head is buzzing. The white noise emanates not from without but from within, a flurry of tinsel snow shimmering in his eardrums, drowning out all extraneous sound. The sensation is a bit like drowning in a sea of pale glitter. Helpless to fight it, Sherlock simply marks it, listening as the layers of susurration slowly fade into rhythmic whispers. Frothy waves on a monochromatic beach. His consciousness ebbs and swells along with his shallow breaths.

Next, Sherlock becomes aware that he is frightened out of his wits, though he doesn't know why. It's a quiet fear, but it stretches for aeons. Bone-deep and bone-bleached, white-knuckled and white-hot.

He wants out.

Third, Sherlock grows steadily more aware that he is in excruciating pain.

Then the universe unfolds itself, expanding in a big bang rushing through his ears and his lungs and his mind, and suddenly where there once was nothing, there is something.

*Let there be light*, Sherlock ponders, barely awake enough to grasp his own quip.

His eyelashes flicker.

The taste in his throat is metallic with dread. The light above him is a cruel artificial sun, he thinks as he blinks balefully at it, and everything smells of cold tiles and astringent cleansing products. The sudden deluge of data torments him. People scurry to and fro in the glare, working with their blurred newsprint heads down and their smeared photocopy expressions shuttered. Tentatively, Sherlock tries to sit, and is wholly unsuccessful save for creating the sensation he just drove a knife into his own belly.

He's strapped down.

*Is he strapped down? Or was that before?*

He's been drugged.

*Has he been drugged? Or was that in the other white room?*

This new room is white too, but the shadows are strangers and there's a sheet over his body.

*I'm dead*, he deduces, vaguely relieved.

*I thought death would hurt less. It was meant to be before-dying that was the dicey part.*

Seconds pass, decades pass, *this too shall pass*, all shall pass, and then a fuse box in the mind palace blazes back to life again and Sherlock jolts more fully awake.

Mycroft is standing over him.

Only maybe it isn't Mycroft, because he's wearing tailored blue jeans and a cashmere jumper, and both items despite their obvious expense are over five years old if they're a day, and his thinning gingerish hair hasn't been combed, and there isn't a single pore on his fatuous face that looks remotely smug.
But no, it's Mycroft after all, only there's been some kind of emergency. It's the dead of night and Mycroft was summoned with dire haste, the sleuth knows without even bothering to make a deduction, because his brother wears black-rimmed glasses instead of his contact lenses. They make him look older, but less oily. Overall, an improvement, but he only wears them when civilization is collapsing. He's speaking, probably some sort of last rites over Sherlock's remains, Sherlock supposes.

Sherlock recalls a man named John, and wonders where he might be. He investigates by flicking his eyes to and fro, to no avail.

This John fellow is nowhere in sight, whoever he is.

"--quite useless, I told them as much before, but now I can see you. There you are. Hello, Sherlock."

Mycroft never sounds like this. Or...well, he did, on the glorious occasion Sherlock fell out of a tree and arrived home with a five-inch gash in his arm. But the younger sibling cannot remember much more on the subject. It's obvious to conclude since he didn't delete the tree that Sherlock used to revel in Mycroft's concern, maybe even positively swim in it, who knows, impossible to say for certain, but now he only feels exhaustion and pain, pain everywhere, and he suspects it's a waste of perfectly good affection, really, because he cannot manage to register it.

"Two weeks. Two weeks, Sherlock, with every resource at my disposal devoted to finding someone across the street from his own residence. Must you so inconvenience me at every turn?" Mycroft waxes on, but his eyes are positively cavernous. "And don't pretend you can't hear me, you impossible creature, I can see by your vitals and your pupils that you can."

The calculated combination of stroppiness and objectivity drags Sherlock further up from the depths.

*He's not dead.*

He must be in hospital.

*Yes, only A&E has such insufferably dull wall clocks.*

Mycroft must have been worried.

*Considering the glasses, and all.*

They must have loved each other, long ago.

*Perhaps they still do.*

Something is beeping somewhere, Sherlock discerns. *Beep-bip beep-bip beep-bip beep-bip beep-bip.* Like a smoke detector with the battery run near-dry.

A vision of Jim--dead on the floor with his eyes agog and his neck crushed--flashes into Sherlock's head and he gasps, triggering another flare of nauseating pain. Instantly, a hand clutches his shoulder.

"Settle yourself, now. Just breathe through it."

Helpless to disobey, Sherlock complies with grinding teeth.
"Right, I see you're desirous of some context, but I sense by that reaction you're correct regarding
the general lay of the land. You lost consciousness at two-eighteen Baker Street seconds after your
extraction from James Moriarty's base of operations. The mission was finally accomplished by Mr.
Shinwell Johnson and three members of your...peripatetic collective of metropolitan itinerants.
After nine-nine-nine was called, Dr. Watson took the liberty of removing the nail affixing your
hand to the cross with a large pair of pliers Moriarty doubtless intended for another use entirely.
Removing it from the wood, not from your hand, mind. It remains in your appendage. They cut
you loose, and emergency services arrived. All this occurred a small while ago, during which
period you have never quite regained full awareness until now. The physicians are about to
perform triage to salvage the use of your hand, but more importantly, to repair a worrisome internal
rupture caused by the other nail. Which brings us to your inconveniencing me."

Swallowing nothing save air, Sherlock senses that:

1) Mycroft is aware I truly would want to know what in fuck happened at the climax of the greatest
struggle of my life rather than be comforted directly.

2) Mycroft is aware that if he drones over my head like one of his own unmanned surveillance
devices, I'll conclude I'm not in fact about to die.

3) I may in fact be about to die.

"If I die, will you shut up?" Sherlock says in a ghost of a voice.

The smile which breaks across Mycroft's face looks like fine crystal shattering. "Don't think you
can shut me up that easily."

"What if I punched you? Would that do it?"

"No, I needn't concern myself over your tendency towards pugilistic antics, Sherlock. You're
restrained on a gurney as a precaution, and please for the love of god don't let that send you into a
tizzy. Dr. Watson informs me that you were disturbed by the circumstances leading to James
Moriarty's demise, and I regret to repeat that you've not yet been into surgery, though your x-rays
and other scans are now complete. A thing worth being done is worth being done right, after all.
Thus your movements have been limited until your anesthesiologist's helicopter lands on the roof,
which ought to be..." Studying his watch, Mycroft nods his approval. "Ten minutes from now.
Your vitals are quite a mess, you see. We'll knock you for six shortly, never fear that. You shan't
have to suffer this part much longer."

Now that Mycroft mentions it, Sherlock agrees that he is in fact suffering. Terribly.

One thing might help if only a little, he muses.

"Say that Jim is dead. Out loud."

"Moriarty is dead," Mycroft says firmly. "Never to rise again."

"And John is alive."

"John is entirely alive."

"And Sebastian Moran is...?"

"Oh, gratifyingly dead."
"Just tell me the sodding story," Sherlock groans. "Or as much as you can. Take my mind off this, it's horrid. If I'm to be tied down listening to you, make it count."

Pursing his lips, Mycroft pushes his glasses up his nose.

_He really does look a fright_, Sherlock confirms to himself.

"Before you negotiated the arrangement to turn yourself in so that John might go free, Moran was instrumental in warning you, is that right? By telephone, Mr. Johnson told me. It seems that when Moriarty abducted John anyhow, his mercenary objected. From what I can gather via Moriarty's own closed security feed within the building, they quarreled over John after you were arranged in that distasteful religious posture. Having already worked himself into something of a strop, Moriarty killed Moran, knowing him disposable. I believe he smelled a traitor--it was a simple execution-style gunshot. Doubtless he intended to find a more loyal servant."

Mycroft continues, but annoyingly, it's too low to catch. The sleuth tries to read his brother's lips to no avail.

Everything is fragmenting into puzzle pieces. Frowning, Sherlock tries to rearrange the numbers on the wretched clock back into some semblance of ugly sans-serif order, but they flutter away again.

Setting his jaw, he revives himself with a low, gritted sound, shaking his head. Someone takes his uninjured hand and presses it warmly.

"No, it's all right, Sherlock," Mycroft says, his cultured tenor still nearly too soft to discern. "You can slip off again whenever you please. I'm here to stop you being frightened, not keep you awake."

"Where's John?" Sherlock asks, recalling sandy hair and _I love you, you stupid, stupid prick, I love you_.

"Meeting your anesthesiologist on the roof. I found myself unable or perhaps unwilling to restrain him."

"Is he very badly hurt?" Sherlock mouths, trying to force air through his vocal chords. "You said he wasn't dead, but is...is he hurt very much? I just want to know how much, please."

"Oh, brother mine," Mycroft says with great tenderness.

Something is tickling the elder Holmes's airway, for he coughs decorously, facing away. Then he removes his glasses and polishes them with a plain cotton handkerchief from his jeans pocket. All this is so familiar and yet so unorthodox that Sherlock gapes at the spectacle, head swimming against the current of a whirlpool.

"We removed the device from his leg and applied preliminary bandaging, but he has refused further treatment in lieu of consulting with your surgeon over your scans, and your anesthesiologist over your condition. The damage to his leg is confined to soft tissue. He'll be in good care soon, and right as rain soon after that. And so shall you. Any moment now. I brought in the best, Sherlock."

"And who did they leave to expire on their respective operating tables?"

"No one of importance to me," Mycroft hisses.

"Are you angry I tried to save John by giving myself up?"
"No." Mycroft clears his throat. "You love him. I'd have done the same."

"For whom?"

This is all so terribly confusing.

"Never mind whom. I wasn't given the chance."

"Do you know how it ends?" Sherlock asks helplessly, having reached a point beyond exhaustion. "The story, I mean?"

Sherlock thinks that it's just possible he needn't actually die as long as he appeared to do so. But he can't be sure. The other strings are all tangled, braided into tangled skeins, the Swiss waterfalls and hospital rooftops and desperate measures. Gravity is a spinning top and light is a lance and Mycroft is slowly pushing tangled locks from his face, and that can't be happening no matter what universe this is, so Sherlock closes his eyes and pretends the caress is real.

"Go back to sleep, little one," Mycroft whispers. "It's too soon for the end. You must wait to hear the rest. I'll tell it to you when you wake up."

The world turns, and Sherlock dissolves into seafoam like the voiceless creature in the tale his Mummy once told him, the one about forbidden love on dry land. It's a shame he deleted it. It might have guided his way through the afterlife he's entering, splish splosh splosh like a river flowing underground, dipping thereafter into a darker cavern still.

Sherlock's return to consciousness is at first as pleasant as awakening curled up huddles warmly in his coat, only having done a smidge of cocaine the night before, and just having solved a cracking good case with another brilliant one already certifiably on the horizon. He stretches languidly, unsure what has happened. Probably, since he feels so catlike and contented, he's at Baker Street, since nowhere else is half as good, but then again the sound of traffic is muted.

Not muted, missing.

Sitting up, Sherlock rubs the sleep from his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, feeling better than he has in...well, years, come to think of it. There's a distinctly homelike aroma here, and though he's having a spot of trouble focusing, he senses mild morning light through a window to his left.

There's no rush, after all. Not here anyhow.

When Sherlock finally hums contentedly and sets himself to figuring out where he is, he falls back against the sofa blankets in shock.

It's the reading room of his mind palace. There is the little green desk lamp, the mullioned windows, the world beyond the turret that doesn't extend terribly far. It looks to be a clear, calm day with clouds lazing about in the sky, and nothing has been affected by Jim's visit here. There is the tufted armchair where Sherlock's hands rested, there the chair John sat in, there the glass-fronted shelving.

"What the fuck," Sherlock says aloud.

When his head is a bit clearer, he realizes that on the blank wall with the green damask paper
where he generally hangs maps and notes and documents and letters and materials relevant to his current investigation, there hangs a prettily framed blank white canvas.

"What the fucking fuck," he repeats, his heart skittering.

Wrapping his beige dressing gown tightly around himself, though it isn't at all cold in here, Sherlock kicks the blanket off his feet and pads over to the new wall hanging. Frowning, he examines it.

It's not painted white, he concludes, it's simply a raw canvass. The framing is sedate gold and matches the rest of the furnishings here.

Frustrated, Sherlock taps the surface.

There is a deafening ripping noise and the painting roars to life in Technicolor, with surround sound that blasts the detective's eardrums like a detonation.

"--the plan here, is what I'm asking!" John is shouting.

The sleuth's hands fly to his hair and scrub wildly.

He sees himself, attached to far too many machines, lying in a hospital bed looking as if he'd been sculpted from clay.

He's surrounded by people. There is John, wearing blue scrubs and a haggard expression. John. He seems otherwise fairly healthy. There is Mycroft, who has changed into one of his quietly expensive grey suits and has exchanged his glasses for contacts, though otherwise he looks worse and not better. Two other figures hover around the detective. White letters float above both of them, and though they're dressed in generic hospital attire, their faces are entirely featureless blank ovals. One set of white letters reads nurse and one reads doctor.

"What in the name of fucking fuck," Sherlock breathes.

"It may in fact be the best thing for him at the moment, though I know it's not precisely what we'd hoped for," says doctor.

John takes a breath so deliberate that he looks as if he's winding up for a punch, pressing his lips together in anger. "Listen, I know what you're saying, but this is not medically induced. If it were medically induced, yeah, I'd take your point and I'd not be a bit on edge at the moment. He was non-responsive when I found him and had been living off morphine and water for god knows how long. You know this."

"A week," the Sherlock in the reading room says, fear flooding through his body. His legs tremble.

They aren't my legs, he realizes, and closes his eyes in despair.

"Which is why you understand the complications," doctor replies. Her voice is clipped but not cold. "His blood sugar levels were dangerously low, and even if he hadn't seized on the operating table--"

"I what?" Sherlock cries.

"--As you know, the nail grazed his intestinal tract. When you ask me what the plan is, I hear you, but right now we are throwing everything we can at this infection. Getting his blood sugar levels
up and hydrating him will help his own body to fight this off, and I'm very optimistic that there isn't more swelling. The entry site, while an unfortunate locale for a puncture wound to be sure, was small, and thus internal bleeding was minimal. He was given very swift assistance. We have every cause to be thankful that he's breathing without intubation and--"

"And he's still in a bloody coma," John snaps.

"John." Mycroft wearily places a hand on his arm, and instead of shrugging it off, John nods, shifts his neck a few times, and regroups.

Taking a shuddering sigh, Sherlock steps back from the frame and likewise tries to calm himself, glancing around at the plush carpeting and embossed leather books and soft light of the reading room. It isn't Baker Street, but then neither is it another fucking white room, so things could be worse, after all. The white room he can only see in the painting, where nurse is departing and John and doctor are now together at the foot of the bed as Mycroft checks his phone.

"I comprehend it can be difficult for physically compromised patients to come out of anesthesia, which is why I'm thankful everyone has been so brilliant, but this is...well, in your own words, not what I'd hoped for," John says quietly in lieu of an apology.

doctor nods. "It's only been a day, Dr. Watson, and I'm sure we've both seen far more severe coma cases brought on by sepsis. Yes, we're touch and go at the moment, but his bloodwork shows no sign of the infection worsening, and if it were, we'd both expect his fever to be higher."

"I know. Thank you."

"No need. I'll be back in a few hours, but I have some other patients to see to who are not at all well," she quips, and John cracks a wan smile at the gallows humour. "You'll be here when I return, I expect."

"If I'm not, send search and rescue for me, because someone will have dragged me out."

When doctor is gone, John moves to the bedside and tucks a curl behind the dead-looking Sherlock's ear. He continues lightly stroking his temple, which Sherlock can feel even in the reading room. The sweetness of the contact after so much has happened is too much to bear just now and he rests his haunches against the back of the sofa, swallowing his grief like a pill.

Mycroft pockets his phone and approaches slowly. "I am, you will forgive me, desperate for a cigarette. Shall I bring you anything from the cafe? Mrs. Hudson has packed some clothing and other items for you and I've a courier delivering them from Baker Street."

John doesn't answer, merely shakes his head. His fingertips never stop brushing, but they confine themselves to a small area at the edge of Sherlock's brow, touching him as if he's going to disintegrate at any moment.

"Coffee, then," Mycroft says, nodding decisively.

"How can you be so calm?" John whispers, though his attention does not leave Sherlock's face.

The elder Holmes glances back from the door with a burning expression that could incinerate the entire hospital.

"Practice," he answers.

Oh god, Sherlock thinks, and then I'm so sorry, and then I want my brother back, in the old way,
from before.

John, after considering, turns and nods. "Yeah. Of course, I should have... I apologize."

"Don't." Mycroft checks his watch. "This is going to be the best cigarette of my life so far. Then I've a few calls. I'll be back in an hour."

The room seems much emptier without Mycroft. Shaking his head as if to clear it, John moves, but only to pull up a chair to the bedside. He sits and picks up where he left off, his fingers sweeping back Sherlock's hair and his thumb occasionally running along his brow.

"You might well be able to hear me," he husks. "If so, a few things: first off, I want you back, so don't go anywhere. Also, since you're probably curious, apparently Shinwell located us because a member of the homeless network was finding three free untouched meals a day tossed in the bins behind the empty house, and when he mentioned them, Shinwell was clever enough to know that empty houses don't produce regular single servings of untouched food, so thank you for the hunger strike even if it's killing you. You knob. Because it actually sort of saved our lives. That is truly bizarre, but then everything about you is bizarre. Third, I know you think your brother's a git, and I agree with you, but...he's also pretty brilliant."

The waxen Sherlock says nothing, and John smiles at him.

"Thought that might get a rise out of you." He continues stroking. "Never mind. You've had a time of it. I'll be here when you wake up."

For long minutes in the hospital room, nothing happens, and in the reading room Sherlock feels his eyes beginning to slip shut from the sensation at his temple and a deeper exhaustion. Numb with frustration over this newest--and perhaps, in light of what he's already been through, ugliest setback--Sherlock curls into a catlike ball on the sofa. He lays his curly head on an embroidered pillow he thinks must have originated in Mummy's office (or at least the pattern did) and allows his burning eyes to sink closed.

*What happens if I actually fall asleep while inside a literal coma?* he wonders grimly.

But all is still and the painting now equally as silent, and sometimes despite one's best efforts, one can't help but die just a little, and so he sinks into the upholstery as if sinking into a softly cushioned grave.

Several visitors appear over the course of the next three days, at various times, to offer shows of support which frankly shock Sherlock. These callers also exchange kind words with John. Because John never leaves.

Mrs. Hudson is the first. She brings apple bars with crumble topping for John and coos over Sherlock tremulously.

"Silly, silly boy, worrying us all like this," she says. "You must come back to us just as soon as you can, dear, and take up crashing about the flat again. I don't know how I'm dealing with all the quiet. If it lasts much longer, I'll go spare. Come home and I'll cook you a nice roast and you'll
play violin for us all when...oh! Oh, you poor sweet thing. When you're better, I mean. Yes. When you're better."

Lestrade and Bradstreet come. They both appear tired but well, and astonishingly concerned.

"Mate, you'd better snap out of this right quick, or you'll have me to answer to when you do bother to come round," Lestrade says gruffly.

"No one's criticized my taste in clothes for far too long, so I wore this dress special for you, you maddeningly fit thing," Bradstreet says, and she doesn't mean it cruelly at all, not in the smallest way.

Later that night, Shinwell stops by, obviously drunk.

"Maybe it ain't my place to say so Mr. Holmes," he slurs with great passion and spittle, "being as it were not a member of what you yourself might think of as the inner circle, as it were, begging your pardon for putting words in your mouth in your condition of course, that being unfair and meself already feeling a right dickend for doing it, all things considered, but nevertheless our relationship having commenced as that of two business acquaintances, might I still point out that I am keen as bleeding mustard at the prospect of your swift recovery, always owning that present company in the form of your medical bloke here is keener still, and that if you were to kick it, that would be about the poxiest event I could imagine, and if anyone says otherwise, that individual is an unreformed plank, if you want to know my feelings on the subject, and I'll say no more on the matter."

The next day, Molly visits, bringing a bouquet of gardenias.

She says, "Oh, Sherlock!" and kisses his brow.

Then she hugs John for half an hour as she cries into his button-down.

"Well, I hope you're happy," John says with hideous forced cheer. "Now you've really gone and done it."

Sherlock was dozing, but John's voice calls him awake like the trumpets heralding the Resurrection. Lifting his head from the tasseled cushion, Sherlock regards the painting representing his true state and checks the digital clock hanging on its white wall. 3:46 am, not a time for anyone on earth to be awake in a hospital intensive care unit speaking with a man in a coma. It's the same day as when Molly came—John hasn't changed clothing from the blue shirt he wore, and his coffee cup hasn't been cleared away from its perch by the bouquet Sherlock is categorically unable to enjoy. One of the ivory gardenias is shriveled brown on its outer petals. It reminds him of John's expression.

Slowly, Sherlock stands and pulls his thick beige robe tighter. The painting is much larger now.

Come to think of it, it's been growing all along. Before, it stretched only the width of a normal painting. Now it covers half the wall.

*What does that mean, for Christ's sake?* Sherlock thinks, furious with his own brain.
John paces in fitful spurts, around and across the chamber, stopping, swaying, pulling his hand over the place where his spine and skull meet. His eyes are pinned to Sherlock. If he's waiting for a response, as he certainly seems to be, Sherlock can do nothing but fume over inability, however.

What's got into you? I'm exactly the same as I was this morning.

"Not going to ask what it is you've done this time, are you?" John says, again too brightly. "No, course not, you're resting. Anyhow, you've broken Shinwell, I'm sorry to report. That was kind of, er, inevitable if you ask me, the man is several peas shy of a pie, but there's a candlelight vigil set up in front of the empty house."

Oh.

Sherlock purses his mouth, deeply troubled. Shinwell doesn't take trials lightly. Even when they come in droves, as they have of late. Neither does John Watson, but there he is, practically dancing on the linoleum in his agitation.

"Said he couldn't take it and that he had to do something. And he certainly has done...something. Bless him. Blew up a giant photo of you, one of those press shots where you're smiling like a wolf licking its chops, and surrounded it with candles from the corner store. The homeless network have covered half the block with flowering weeds. Notes. There's plenty of bouquets from clients, loads and loads actually, how many cases have you solved? And clippings, all that rubbish. Spotted a fair number of incense cones. Somebody left a teddy bear holding a heart, guessing that might have been Shinwell's, come to think of it. Cigarettes as tributes. No, you can't have the cigarettes. What's that? Of course I didn't leave you," John growls, hands fluttering in agitation at his sides. "Shinwell sent me a picture of it from his mobile, looks like a bloody shrine if you ask me, Sherlock, like a memorial, looks like you're dead, if you want to hear my opinion, but of course you don't, because I'm both ends of this chin wag and you cannot answer me."

Twitching with frustration, John collapses into the chair at Sherlock's side. He takes several deep breaths, takes a pause, takes Sherlock's uninjured hand.

"I shouldn't be like this around you," he whispers. "I'm sorry, love. I'm a doctor. I know full well you might be able to hear every word. But god, I miss you so."

The Sherlock in the bed does nothing. The Sherlock in the reading room crams his fist against his full lips, hard, willing himself to say something for the love of mercy. Flicker an eyelash, tense a muscle, Sherlock doesn't care so long as it brings John a particle of hope. But the white sheets fail to move, and soon John slumps with his elbow on the bed, studying the detective's statuelike countenance.

"I just want to hear your voice, you know? Mycroft's is, god, not the same." John attempts a heartbreaking smile. "That's my sole wish at the moment, you ragging me about...something. What do you want, though?"

The man in the bed is silent.

"I could make some educated guesses. To get well again and move on from here? For none of it ever to have happened this way? I'd don't know which I'd pick, in your shoes."

Breath huffing, John shakes his head.

"Yeah, there's a proper question. God, just. Penny for your thoughts on this one, I know what you wanted just before you walked straight into a madman's lair. But what did you want back then, the
day before I came along? Safety, of course, but what did you think the good life looked like? Was it locked rooms, perfect murders, endless crime scenes in a mobius strip? Can you even remember? Everything's so fucked. Would it have been better for you if I'd never shown up? Sometimes I can't help but think your brother would have launched a drone or something and you'd have been spared all this."

Shaking his head rapidly, Sherlock takes a few more strides towards the painting. John hasn't shaved in three days, hasn't showered in two, hasn't eaten in god knows when. His eyes suggest he's not taking his pain meds with proper care about timing, slightly overlapping so they never falter.

This is worse than the white room Jim devised, Sherlock concludes. At least in the white room, Sherlock wasn't listening to John Watson's mental collapse.

"Christ, I..." John trails off. Plays with Sherlock's fingertips, and he can feel it, understand it even as it's happening, but response is utterly beyond his ken. "While we're discussing the subject, since I've nothing else on tonight, I'll make a confession to you. Should have been man enough to do it before, but that doesn't matter, does it. D'you know what I really wanted, back then? The day before Abernetty? I'll tell you. If you were awake, you'd laugh. You're not, um, awake are you?"

John's lips suggest this is a joke, and his eyes suggest this would be a lifeline, and meanwhile Sherlock cannot throw it to him.

"Thought not. Ella, my therapist? When she'd talk about me having trust issues, in my heart I'd agree with her, but not really thinking there was anything to be done about it, fuck it all, yeah, because when you don't trust yourself, how are you meant to go about trusting the other poor wankers on the street? After Helen, I was one step from being a murderer and not just a killer, and that only by happy accident, so. Figured I'd never trust anyone again and that was that." John strokes the webbing between Sherlock's index and middle finger. "But what's in fact pants about trusting no one is that no one can get near you, not in any way that counts, and I used to fantasize about having...just somebody for the little things. Not sex, that was sorted, but falling asleep in the passenger seat while a person I cared about drove to the seaside. Staying over. Giving someone my chip and pin card and sending them off to get me flu meds when I was under the weather. Knowing someone well enough to fight over the telly. You're listening, right? Good."

If Sherlock's eyes worked, he surmises, he might already be crying by now. It's not impossible. The Sherlock in the reading room's throat works furiously.

John coughs, settles, breathes through his nose against Sherlock's knuckles for a moment, and continues. "You once called that all the rest of it. Or anyway I think that's what you meant. Everything apart from the, you know, steamy bits. Pathetic, I thought myself, that I could regularly get a leg over with a woman as pretty and smart as Sarah but I couldn't slip into a shower stall with a living soul, or hold anyone's hand at the cinema. Pick a bit of lint off their eyelash without their flinching. Still there, right, love? Right. So. I used to dream about having that, the all-the-rest-of-it those fuckwad boyfriends never gave to you. The difference being that I'd tried it before the tours of duty, so I wanted it back, you see. Again. Just once. Maybe just for a month or a week or a day even, to remember if it really felt as bloody warm as I remembered, having an arm around a tidy person's shoulders all night through. I was a sad sod who dreamed of arguing over who's turn it is to hoover. And then..."

Choking, John covers Sherlock hand in both his own, clutches it fiercely.

"You. You have no idea what you were like. You didn't just want me." John's voice wavers terribly, a reeling voice, a lost one. "Everything with you was magnified. I couldn't heat beans for toast without you watching me like I was cresting Mount Everest, even before we...um, we started
anything, and...you might have thought you were the one starved for intimacy, never having had it, but I'm here to tell you that I had, and that nothing compares to you. Nothing. Do you remember when you snapped at me for using up my mobile data because it meant you couldn't download a list of significant eras in Chinese pottery, and this after you'd pickpocketed my phone? That's what I wanted with you. It was madness. I still do want it, every cracked moment. And I never told you, never explained that it was me all along who was desperate."

John takes several harsh breaths, tosses his head in disgust, and seems to snap back into some semblance of his former soldierly control.

Then he crumples again.

"You scared me witless," he says through his tears. "God, I'd have shagged you the first night you asked me over for coffee, lord knows I wanted to, and you still owe me fucking coffee, remember that, Sherlock, but you didn't want a shag. Did you. You wanted my aftershave on your pillow and a pair of toothbrushes in the same stand. Don't think I didn't smell the ridiculous hair products you use when I slept in your bed at night. Alone. Before all this nonsense. Afraid of what you meant to me so quickly. Terrified you'd come to your senses. Bloody buggering hell, I was such a liar. Every day. Sherlock says he's eccentric. Sherlock doesn't feel that way about you. Sherlock couldn't possibly want anything more than an ex-army friend until Moriarty is thrown back in maximum security. Even if Sherlock is willing to put his head in your lap for a kip, you'll hurt him. What a fucking waste. Every second I didn't spend laughing over a text of yours or forcing takeaway down your throat feels like...I can't even describe it. Why would a seemingly reasonable person lock himself in solitary? Sherlock, I'm trying to have a conversation here. Can you be awake now, please?"

For a few seconds, John hides his despair against Sherlock's hand and simply weeps there.

Sherlock feels himself sinking to the carpet in horror within the palace.

"I told you I loved you and I told you that you made me a coward," John continues when he can speak through it. "You want the final proof, look no further than the fact I interrupted you when you were about to say it back to me. You'd every right, and I muzzled you. That was, um, terror. Right then. Terror that you were tempted to give up. No excuse, but. There's your reason. It's too late, and I'm not asking you to forgive me, because I don't deserve that kind of consideration. I'm not asking you to forgive me for breaking my promise either--I swore I'd not let him hurt you, and he did. He's just about killing you here, love. I failed you. If you come back now, you're a free man, all right? I'm not holding you to anything, not under these circumstances."

Take it back, take that back this instant, Sherlock screams, but all is silent, and he lurches forward, clutching at the painting's ornate frame.

"I just wanted you to know," John finishes on a whisper, "that you were never not good enough. You're a miraculous man. Watching you lift your teacup was worth a wedding day with anyone else."

No.

No, no.

John.

John, please.
John, I am a ridiculous man, redeemed only by the warmth and constancy of your friendship.

John.

But John has already descended fully to the bedclothes, Sherlock's hand trapped beneath him as he shakes with sobs there, and Sherlock had no idea previously that doing nothing at all could feel so much like killing a man in cold blood.
Eventually, John stills. He doesn't settle, not exactly--there are twitches and mild jerks while he lays prone over Sherlock's bed, as if the knowledge that Sherlock is still insensible will not allow him to sleep fully, pricks at him with tiny relentless electrified needles every few minutes as his lashes tremble like cornered prisoners. At longer intervals, he starts breathing quickly and shallowly enough to nearly be panting, and though this always dissipates back to normalcy, Sherlock detests viewing the gently heaving shoulders. It's identical to watching a long-tormented animal having a nightmare, though the detective is unaware whether John is deep under enough to really be in a haunted REM sleep, or whether every slow second of watchfulness is already a hideous altered state for him now, the way is it for Sherlock.

The way it might always be from now on.

*If you never got to go home again, would there even be a difference between reality and hallucination when all's said and done?* he wonders bitterly from his cross-legged position on the rug, slumping his back against the sofa. His chest is heavy with the thought, as if his blood has coagulated and his heart now must expend treble the effort to force the stuff through his veins.

The living painting becomes the object of Sherlock's focus now that John has ceased drenching his corpselike body in tortured confessions to which he maddeningly cannot respond. Slowly, his eyes stop drifting, and begin to latch onto the right angles of its borders, each of the four in methodical turn. The painting is a very odd kettle of fish indeed. He knows it's growing. But he can never quite see it shift. No matter how long he focuses on the softly gleaming frame, it remains stubbornly fixed, but nevertheless he is certain that it has changed drastically. The rankest mouthbreathing idiot of a Yarder can tell the difference between an object the size of a flat screen telly and an object the size of a garage door. Or at least, Sherlock hopes they can. Admittedly, he hasn't met them all, so possibly not.

The question is: should Sherlock be seeking ways of encouraging this growth, or frantically trying to stop its progression?

*Is it going to swallow me whole, and I'll die when it completes itself?* he wonders with a familiar roil of nerves in his pelvis.

*Or will it turn itself inside out and deposit me back in the hospital bed? All of me, not just the grey sack of meat Jim used for a pincushion?*

*And however can I answer that query?*

Sherlock, in the profound silence, is growing sleepy again. But he feels too deep an affinity with John's stiff positioning, and too deep an anguish over his own impotent nearness when he ought to be offering comfort, to nestle on the cushions as he usually does. Instead he locks himself into as small a shape as a tall man can, a snail in a shell on its side with his head resting on his elbow, and continues watching John's fretful sleep from the carpet. He does this for nearly an hour, until the desire for slumber positively overwhelms him, and his eyes sink shut like a portcullis closing.
Then the answer occurs to him.

"It was when I slept here!" he exclaims aloud, rolling over onto his back and drawing his knees back up. "Oh. What a moron I've been. The answer was literally right in front of me. Every time I fell asleep here, in the reading room of the Mind Palace, the painting was bigger when I woke up."

Sherlock has been having very odd dreams here in the Mind Palace. They're starkly vivid, and lucid no less—he has complete control of himself within them, and John is always there. He has been many different versions of Sherlock Holmes in the past few days, in many different time periods, and a startling array of settings, and there is something uncannily true about each of them, the way Sherlock just before Jim shot him with the nail gun understood with absolute purity of conviction that he always dies for John H. Watson in every permutation of every string in every universe including this one. While he is always a genius in these visions, his career changes drastically, and while John is always a recovering army veteran—and usually a doctor—his is altered at times too. They meet in different fashions, in different countries, and it's impossible for Sherlock to predict what he's about to be up to when his head hits the sofa cushion.

Sherlock has been an internationally renowned translator who speaks twenty-two languages perfectly, and he meets UNICEF physician Dr. John Watson during a mission to Syria. He has been a world famous Oscar-winning actor who meets fellow actor (but still ex-military) John Watson on a film shoot. He has been a commander on a starship exploring strange new worlds, a physician himself at a hospital in New Jersey, a professional tennis player. He has been a brilliant Jesuit monk and John the captain of an armed force employed by the Vatican for its most complex and dangerous missions. (That was a particularly enjoyable one, because he and John were hiding from a ruthless assassin in the catacombs, and they stole a kiss under an already-crumbling archway, next to a peaceful skeleton, and it was perfection.)

Every time, he wakes up wishing he could simply go back to his John Watson.

And every time, the painting has grown.

Listing his head to the side, he studies it again. The real Sherlock, the one on the bed, might be getting worse. It's possible that his organs are still leaking rot into his blood, drowning him in his own filth. He might also be getting better. It's possible that the holes in him are mending themselves, edges inching together like vines creeping across a jungle floor. Who could say? Sherlock hasn't overheard doctor for some time now, as John and Mycroft have free access to his chart and seem almost manically obsessed with discussing obscure numbers with the nurses, complex data which sadly means nothing to Sherlock. doctor seems as resignedly hopeful as ever during their somber conversations, and as impossible to read. Mycroft's gravitas is steadily peeling away like potato skin sloughing into a bucket, and John is...John is bereft. Nothing concrete can be concluded from these signs.

Still. Coma patients sometimes remain in them for years.

Decades, Sherlock corrects himself, and feels himself laugh just as a spill of tears sloshes from his eyes like water from a jostled pitcher.

"Enough!" he growls, furiously dabbing them with the sleeve of his robe. "Take a moment, and think. For him. Why can't you just think? Go on now. Muddle it through, if you're such a proper genius."

Still on his back, but crossing his legs, Sherlock steeps his fingers before him. The scene John just enacted was...graphic. Almost unwatchable. How many more will there be if Sherlock stays
here indefinitely? How hollow a shell will John Watson become? How many more psychic
gouges can he withstand before he is a cave inside, an emptiness littered with eroding gravestones--
perhaps one empty grave already dug, the case hopeless, only waiting as the months pass to be at
long last filled by Sherlock?

Shivering violently, the sleuth breathes into his tented hands.

How much of his proud demeanor can Mycroft afford to have sliced off his skin?

How many weeks in here before Sherlock's mind rebels and his body follows, ending it?

So.

Either Sherlock will die when the painting grows to its limit--maybe when it covers this wall--or he
will wake up.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he whispers to the lowly gleaming chandelier.

Having made up his mind, Sherlock rolls elegantly over the back of the couch onto its seat and
plunges into a slumber that feels like sinking into the inky chasm of a malevolent waterfall.

"Of course I'm angry, you comprehensive fool," John is saying through the tightness of his visibly
strained throat. "God, how could--after all these years, and after how many instances when you--
how could you possibly ask me such a question?"

Sherlock wonders where he is this time. Something tickles his brow, and when he reaches up to
scratch, he brushes thick cotton bandaging there. He can also feel that his hair is much more
closely cropped, no unruly curls in evidence, and it has been slicked back into ruthless neatness
with some sort of pomade smelling faintly of bergamot.

Interesting.

Frowning, Sherlock slowly lowers his hand as he glances around him.

He is still on a sofa, but on another sofa, this one very worn but once well-upholstered, and still
neatly brushed. It smells of pipe smoke and cigarette smoke, hearth smoke, candle smoke,
industrial smoke, it smells of every form of smoke ever produced by combustion, and he breathes
his happy fill of the aroma. His head is on a goose down pillow, and the pain in his temples is
something ferocious. As expected, this is not the reading room of the Mind Palace any longer--it's
a cozy and incredibly untidy sitting room, with a set of windows just beyond the dinner table, a
pair of cluttered desks, a fireplace with a crackling blaze going, and so many books it might have
served as a library if two or three years were devoted to organizing it. There are papers scattered
about and stuffed messily into handy crevices in the shelves. The walls are a warm beige and the
curtains flowered with a dark background. A couple of historical-seeming portraits are in
evidence and, just at the edge of his vision, a stunning antique chemistry set.

Everything seems familiar somehow, though, or at least far more familiar than the other strings
have proven. There's a violin case tucked lovingly in a corner and a Persian slipper hanging
above it. Understanding prickles at the back of his neck.
It can’t be.

But it must be. Everything about this room feels overwhelmingly right. He can be nowhere else. This is--

“Baker Street,” Sherlock murmurs, awed. He knows it to be true somehow. "I'm back in London. It isn't the same, but it's certainly Baker Street. I'm home."

Taking two paces towards him, John growls with real fear in his voice, "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I--"

When Sherlock tries to sit up, he first realizes that he is wearing a half-buttoned white shirt and black trousers with a dressing gown--dressing gown?--the colour of field mice thrown over it, and second that he shouldn’t have tried that. A searing spike of pain lances through his skull and suddenly John is sitting on the edge of the settee--settee?--tenderly forcing him back to a reclining position with an expression that could cure leather.

"No, no, no, lie down now. Just as you were. No, please be still. That's it. There. My dear Holmes, what the devil are you doing?"

"I don’t know exactly," he breathes, his brow wrinkling at the use of his surname. As quickly as it flares, the confusion is gone, however.

John is gripping Sherlock's shoulder with an exasperation bordering on fury, his other hand clenched over his own knee. He's wearing a well-cut tweed suit with a green tie, he has a well-groomed moustache, and his well-maintained composure is visibly cracking as he gnaws at his well-ordered teeth in dismay. None of this seems very foreign to Sherlock, so he continues attempting to better orient himself. The doctor was out of doors only minutes previous, for his clothes are colder than the ambient temperature, while Sherlock has been here for enough time to arrange a little bed and don his slippers. Danger was involved. Possibly shots fired. That's obvious from his friend's expression, the adrenaline still pulsing through his veins. They arrived home separately, though. So they cannot possibly have been working in tandem.

John hates that, Sherlock recalls.

"Holmes." John clears his throat, obviously trying to calm himself. "Right."

"You have questions."

"I do indeed. Why did you attempt to stand just now when it's obvious you barely made it home under your own steam?"

"It seemed a reasonable idea at the time."

The laugh that emerges from John's lips is a challenge, a slap across the face with a glove. "Did it? Did robbing the lodgings of a depraved murderer seem like a reasonable idea at the time? Did tricking me into learning the rudiments of Chinese pottery sound equally appealing? Did bringing a fallen adventuress with a yen for revenge tonight seem like a sober-minded plan?"

"You'll have to better inform us both as to that, because I'm extremely confused at the moment, but it does sound like me."

John bites his lip, his countenance grim. "My dear fellow, please tell me that you weren't expressing surprise that you were in your own parlour just now."
"I...may have been, yes."

"For the love of heaven, you maddening, impossible..." Stopping, he shakes his head. "Very well. Holmes, where did you just come from? What were you doing this evening?"

Since the answer is impossible to deduce, Sherlock responds, "I haven't the faintest notion."

At this admission, which Sherlock thinks fairly innocuous considering the fact his head is pounding like a great gong and is swathed in bandages, John's face collapses entirely. It's a gruesome sight, like viewing a proud beast being felled with a rifle shot--the hand on Sherlock's shoulder goes slack as well, though he doesn't remove it, and he takes a conscious steadying breath.

Never a good sign where John is concerned.

"It will always be like this, then. Always. God."

"What do you mean?" Sherlock asks softly.

For a moment, John looks ready to strike him, and then the anger is replaced with something more resembling despair. "Do you know, somehow at times I managed to convince myself otherwise? I thought that one day your callousness might lessen a bit, might mellow. The more fool I. Well, that is hardly shocking, is it, that I succeeded in duping myself so thoroughly? You are the prescient one, the all-seeing oracle. I see you that way and I wrote you that way. I am only a pensioner with a pen, telling myself fairy tales. Heroic myths. Dozens upon dozens of them, and for what, Holmes? Where has it gotten me? I'm a blind slave to sentiment, apparently. Perhaps I always have been."

Stunned, Sherlock blinks. His lips open, but he can find no words, because he doesn't know--

"Still a trifle out of sorts, Holmes?" John--his perfect, his only John--sounds shockingly close to tears. "Fine, I shall tell you the story. We'll pretend this is all fictional...actually, that will be an effective approach, I think. This isn't the first time this has happened, you see."

"No?" Sherlock manages past a dry throat.

"No indeed. I believe the first occasion was when we returned from France and you pretended to suffer a nervous collapse in front of me when we were staying at Colonel Hayter's residence whilst you recovered. The second, and might I add far less excusable, was when you saw fit to convince me you were dying, and then hide me behind a bed so that you might catch out Culverton Smith. At the time, I imagined that would be the worst day of my life, which in retrospect is altogether laughable, I think you'll agree. Next you sent me to Baskerville Hall with the absolute assurance that I was needed there, for you would remain in London. I am almost sure I mentioned on that occasion that you used me, and yet do not trust me, which is the crux of the matter. Several more minor incidents occurred--no, dozens--and then you died tragically at the hands of Professor James Moriarty in Switzerland. Except you didn't. You lived, and returned three endless years later."

Here John stops. He removes his hand from Sherlock's shoulder, face hewn from stone, visibly willing himself not to succumb to his emotions as he clasps his fingers together into a single woven fist. He stares into the fire. His shoulders are broader than Sherlock remembers, his jaw more square, but he is still John. Everything about him screams it, despite the antiquated suit and the oddly romantic facial hair.

"Now you are beaten and concussed by a perverted villain who would have attempted to hunt you
down like a dog had you caused him any more serious inconvenience, and not only did you convince me that you were feigning the symptoms of brain injury, it appears that you were not feigning the symptoms, and your mind has been seriously affected. I ought to have known as much. And just now--directly before you began to suffer this disorientation--you asked me why I was angry."

John swallows hard, nods his head in a very military fashion calling to mind drawn sabers and the distant rumble of cannon fire, and turns back to the detective. He lightly passes a hand over Sherlock's bandage in what could be a medical quirk of checking such things, or could instead be a caress.

It could be called deathless love. If you looked at it closely.

"I am angry because after decades of single-minded service, and having informed you previously that your treatment of me is at times indifferent to the point of cruelty, you would do such a cold-hearted thing." John's voice is not tearful any longer, but there is shrapnel in it, slicing at his vocal cords, stabbing at his palate, tearing at his tongue. "I am angry because you did not allow me to thrash the hide off of Baron Gruner when I offered, and now we come to this pass."

"But--"

"Yes, I know you have the book. I offer my sincerest congratulations, Holmes, truly I do, I always have. You are a wonder. But at what cost?"

"To you?"

"Not only to me! To yourself!" John cries, clutching a handful of Sherlock's carelessly buttoned pale shirt and inadvertently dragging neatly trimmed nails across the pale skin within. "I have a single project, Holmes, a career if you will: every day I build a castle of sand I call your health and well-being, and then you kick it to pieces before we retire."

"When--"

"Tonight, I can see, you are weak enough to let me tend to you. When you are stronger, you will shrug all off as nothing and brightly chatter at me about the history of tidal almanacs or some such, heaven knows, that is until you take up arms to ruin yourself again, to say nothing of the sea of troubles in which you deliberately wallow about. As to the former, I can do no more than I have done regarding the morphine and the cocaine. As to the latter, you know that I share your adventures willingly, joyfully, so long as you tell me the truth. Or at least so long as you do not...deliberately blind me like a horse you've hitched to your cart, and harm yourself in the act of deceiving me."

This feels painfully accurate to Sherlock, who after all is only visiting this parallel universe because he recently drugged John in order to skive off and die at the hands of a crazed prison escapee. Something about the dream compels him to try to make it right again even if it's only a vision, just as he would if it were his John. Because this is excruciating. But first he needs more data on the subject at hand. Maybe he can sneak down and do research after John is asleep. Yes, that's it! He can make this work, he can fix this string. He can take all the necessary steps in secret, so long as John disappears very soon and allows Sherlock to find journals, a commonplace book--commonplace book?--some sort of record of their lives together so he can repair what was shattered between them, glue the pieces back together and hide the jagged edges in cracks and seams. Scars.

"We could speak more of this in the morning, when we're less...weary?" Sherlock offers weakly.
His breath is caught in his chest, making his pulse throb in his already-ringing ears. John seems not to know that he still has hold of his shirtfront--shirtfront?--yes. "I know you're in a strop, and it's my fault, but if you'll only go upstairs and--"

"I don't live here anymore," John interjects, tense shoulders slumping again. "My dear Holmes, I don't--Holmes. I took rooms in Queen Anne Street. I saw that you'd been injured in the newspapers, for god's sake. It was horrifying. You don't remember even so far back as last month?"

"But that's impossible."

"Which part?"

"Your leaving me."

Tragedy writ large is unveiled in John's face as the curtains of his self-control finally break apart. He seems as if he is about to speak, and then he shakes his head again, flinching. Methodically, he lets go of Sherlock's shirt and smooths the fabric back into its former orderly state. After he has gathered himself, his face clears like a lake after a storm has buffeted it. Unchanged, but not unruffled. Churned, even battered perhaps, but a fixed point on the map of the world nevertheless.

"My dear fellow, there are religions other than Christianity you will not be surprised to learn I have explored after encountering them, out of curiosity and a taste for learning the practices of foreign cultures," he says softly. "I know you have no interest in such things, but in India, some believe that when the spirit leaves the body, it returns into another and receives thereby myriad second chances. Perhaps in one such lifetime, we will know each other again. I hope so. God, I hope so with all my heart. And I hope that in that life, wherever and whenever it is, I will never leave your side."

"What are you saying?" Sherlock whispers.

John's eyes fill, and he blinks the moisture away with what seems a practiced motion. "I'm saying that after I see to your injuries, I am leaving it now."

Panic instantly overwhelms Sherlock, wolves formed of smoke and regret clawing at his throat, their charred teeth nibbling at his gullet.

"John, please don't leave, whatever awaits you in Queen Anne Street. The events you just described sound like a truly noxious summary of my own shortcomings despite the fact I can't remember all of them, but supposing you'll stay--"

"Please don't make the hardest thing I've ever had to do any harder, Holmes."

"But this is madness! This is the wrong story, I tell you. John! Listen to me."

"All I do is listen to you," John returns brokenly. "And you're right--this is the wrong story. It's my life as it actually is, and you as you actually are, and Christ what a marvel I will always, always find you. But I cannot suffer these indignities any longer, not when they damage you as well as myself, and it seems clear that you will press on committing them! You've expended enough of your energies in destroying me. I am not a moth to be willingly incinerated by your flame."

"Destroying you? What sort of person do you take me for?" Sherlock cries.

"The best and wisest I have ever known. I've told you that. I told the world that, my dear fellow."
"Then stay."

"For the love of god, what do you want from me, man?" John pleads, his steady voice at last cracking. He begins to rise.

Frantic, Sherlock catches him by the hand. The doctor looks down at their joined fingers with a very peculiar expression. It's as if he's never seen something so strange before, and he is unsure of his own eyes. The flickering orange-tinted light from the fire illuminates them only partially, and John looks hauntingly beautiful as he stands there crumbling, a perfect classical statue losing pieces of itself in every war of aggression, every hateful battle, every senseless coup. Why are the perfect things always the ones sacrificed on the war path? Sherlock wonders. Museums ransacked, works of priceless art destroyed without a second thought.

And why must I always be the war?

"John, you can't do this. Please, it isn't right. You know that it isn't. I can change, I'll swear it on a Bible, only please don't abandon what we have this way."

Lip lifting in a disbelieving snarl, the doctor growls, "Since when do you call me John?"

"You'd be surprised. Sit down and--"

"And now, after everything else, the deepest cut yet! You are deliberately manipulating me. What, do you think me a puppet, that calling me by my given name for the first time in our lives will magically erase all the heartless acts I have been forced to become inured to? Let go of my hand. I'll find my medical bag and check your dressings and then--"

"This is perverse," Sherlock insists wretchedly. "You're wrong, you don't leave me, you never leave me. Not in any of our lives together. There's always two of us. Sometimes you come and you go, so do I, but you inevitably return. It's always you, John Watson, you keep me right."

"Holmes, you're raving. Have you taken something for the pain?"

"I don't think so. But it's possible."

"Oh, for god's--"

"John, listen to me," Sherlock pleads. "You are not a puppet. You are everything. You are the only thing. I can't exist without you."

"You can, actually," John husks, and this time the tears glimmering in his eyes spill, precious drops he pays no mind to tracing his cheeks. "You did, for three years. I'm begging you to stop this display. I deserve better than to watch you give a tour-de-force performance only to see the playacting dissolve like so much mist when you tire of the gambit. Up to this point, you've only ever hurt me by accident, and I can accept that it is not in your nature to care overmuch. But this is deliberate torture. I may be your only friend, or at least the only acquaintance you call by that name, but I hate to see you lower yourself in this manner simply because I've surprised you. You've lived before without having someone to breakfast with, someone to trail after you on cases, someone to admire you. You can do it again."

"Acquaintance?" Sherlock repeats, disbelieving. Heartsick. "John, that is the most asinine thing you've ever said. You're my entire world."

"Why are you doing this to me?" John demands helplessly, wiping at his cheeks with the back of his free wrist. "I knew I meant little enough to you, but do you actively hate me? End this farce, for
the love of Christ. If you don't let me go, I'll force you to, and in your present condition, you know I can manage it."

Instead, with a supreme effort, Sherlock uses John's hand to pull himself off the settee.

"Sit back down this instant."

The doctor's blue eyes are deep wells of sorrow and regret. Sherlock places his palms to John's damp face, swaying a little, leans down, and kisses him.

John turns as still as stone.

His lips are soft but unresponsive at first. Sherlock is insistent, moving his own mouth in sweet increments, caressing John's, trying to swallow the bitterness, eat the silent suffering, inhale the despondency, take it all on himself. After a few seconds, with a startled gasp, John reciprocates. His mouth yields, Sherlock's tongue nudges forward, John's head tilts, and suddenly they are kissing as if kisses could break evil spells. The soldier's strong hands find their way to Sherlock's narrow waist, gripping hard enough to redden, and then hard enough to bruise.

All at once, he pushes Sherlock away. His face is fever-flushed, his eyes wide with shock.

"What in bloody hell are you doing?" he hisses.

A rush of weakness overwhelms the sleuth. Sherlock's hands fall to John's shoulders, grasping them, holding himself up.

"Kissing you."

"I gathered that. Why? Why in the name of the devil would you do such a mad thing?"

"Because I wanted to."

"Is this truly how selfish you are at heart?" John cries, inexplicably horrified. "Are you in fact such a monster? I tell you I am leaving and you are so determined to retain your Boswell that you pretend to have...have that kind of feeling for me? You would make of me your plaything, mimic an unnatural attraction so that I will be tied to you still more inextricably?"

"You're already tied to me," Sherlock says, breathing heavily. The air has turned winter-cold, numbing his lungs. "John, you belong to me. You're mine."

"God help me," John whispers. "I am. And what of that?"

"I only wanted to show you that I belong to you too."

"Liar." John's teeth are bared in a feral show of anger. "You're a liar. You don't belong to anyone. You never have. All emotion, and especially any emotion remotely akin to love, is abhorrent to you. If anything, you hate me, you are proving it now, and in that you are not alone, I assure you. I hate myself far more."

"John..."

"What is it then, lust? I had not known of your...inclinations, but in retrospect I suppose I am unsurprised, though you hide it masterfully. Is this convenience? I already fetch and carry for you, pass the butter dish for you, risk my life for you, now you think if I also fuck you, that will save us?"
The word fuck on John's lips is biting and sharp-edged, a veritable detonation of consonants. He makes it sound ugly, as if what they would be doing were tantamount to bare knuckle boxing, or shoving each other's faces in the mud. John's eyes are wild, and Sherlock doesn't know how to reply.

"Well? That solves everything, does it? I'm already your willing servant in all other things, and now fucking you will complete the picture? Or did you want to fuck me instead? I'm altogether at your disposal, and you know it, so it's therefore perfectly natural that I should add catamite to my list of duties?"

"That's not--"

"Damn it Holmes, in your disordered and brilliant mind, does this mend what's broken between us?"

"No. But it's a start."

"What of your profession? Your career? You expect me to believe that you would risk your very freedom in a corrupt ploy to trap me? Why? Tell me, Sherlock Holmes, why should I believe you would indulge in such lunacy?"

"Because I love you."

The world swims in muted firelit tones, and John's grip on Sherlock's waist is the only thing that prevents him from tumbling to the floor. The doctor's forearm snakes behind, catching the taller man. Laying him on the settee with exquisite care, John settles Sherlock's head on the pillow. Sherlock, blinking, tries to focus. John is standing before him, eyes narrow, lips parted and pinkened, one hand at the back of Sherlock's neck, looking as if someone just stabbed a knife in his ribs.

"I'll send up a doctor," he rasps at last. "At once. Goodbye, Holmes."

The rustle of a coat reaches Sherlock's ears, and he struggles to think of something--anything--to stop his friend from leaving. But an ice pick is lodged between his ears, and the walls are singing coloratura soprano, and he can't breathe to form the words anyhow, panting thinly as he tries to stop the world's reckless spinning.

The door shuts with deliberate firmness. John is gone.

After a few minutes reclining in a veritable ocean of misery, Sherlock manages to read the wall clock. It's a quarter past one in the morning. He can't get up, so he's stuck here until he awakens in the Mind Palace. Meanwhile, his head hurts unbearably, his heart still more so.

"Goodbye, John," he murmurs belatedly.

Ten minutes later, just as he despairs of ever leaving this terrible Baker Street, he hears footsteps. They sound exhausted--doubtless the doctor, whoever he is, was abruptly woken from slumber and hasn't fully awakened. Sherlock appreciates John's parting gesture, but he doesn't want to stay for this portion, doesn't want to force himself to be civil while a strange locum patches up this version of himself.

He wants to go home. And John is home. So there is no such place in this string.

Not anymore.
Which is why when the door opens and shuts again, and a lock is turned, and it's John standing before him, carelessly throwing his hat and coat on the carpet, his face raw and wrecked, Sherlock emits a gasp that sounds like a dying prayer has been answered.

"You came back," he whispers.

"Yes. It appears I was wrong."

"On what count?"

"I am a moth," John says fiercely. He sits beside Sherlock's torso and pushes a trembling hand inside his partly open shirt, pressing his palm against his friend's heart. "I am yours to incinerate. Burn me to ash, Sherlock Holmes."

John slots his lips over Sherlock's and this time there is no hesitation, only heat. Their tongues intertwine, John's other hand gently gently gently oh so gently buries itself in Sherlock's impeccable hair, both destroying it and improving it by a factor of a thousand. The detective can barely move his head for pain at this point, and he's still dizzy as a newborn colt, but he doesn't care. He lets John claim his mouth, close his teeth over his lower lip, devour his shattered sighs, taste his voice. In this string, it was a long time in coming, it seems. In this string, as in all the others, they almost lost each other.

The thought is nauseating. Sherlock makes an urgent sound at a particularly clever caress of John's tongue, and the doctor says, "Shh, shh, I've got you, you're all right," and he quiets. John shifts, kissing the edge of his mouth, kissing his his ear, kissing his throat. His lips are slack and infinitely tender. He lifts up again and kisses Sherlock on both his eyelids. Kisses him on his brow and simply stays there for long moments, breathing through his nose against his hairline.

"How did you know I was in love with you?" he mouths against Sherlock's skin. "I thought I masked it rather well."

Sherlock opens his eyes, and John pulls back a fraction to stare voraciously into them. What had been wells of desolation are now roiling seas. Sherlock could drown there.

He wouldn't mind.

"I didn't," he confesses. "But I knew I was in love with you."

Removing his hand from Sherlock's hair, John brushes his fingertips against his friend's lips in awe. "How long?"

"A very, very long time. When did we meet?"

"Eighteen eighty-one."

"Then since eighteen eighty-one. You aren't leaving, then? Please don't leave. It would destroy me."

Tears spring into John's eyes once more, and he smiles the saddest smile Sherlock has ever seen.

"I would never destroy you. That's your job," he replies, kissing his mouth again, sweet and soft. "I heal you. That's mine."
Startling awake, Sherlock sits up. He is back in the reading room. There's a crick in his spine from falling asleep so suddenly and he stretches, yawning.

The painting, when he turns to it, is now the size of the entire wall.

Excitement buzzes along Sherlock's forearms, tingles in his fingers. Quickly, he hops up and pads across the chamber. John is no longer in the hospital room, which as far as Sherlock knows is unprecedented. Perhaps he went for some coffee, or a much-needed shower. But Mycroft is present, sitting in an uncomfortable chair, reading a dossier with his glasses on. He's wearing a cardigan and the same pair of designer jeans. It's 7:46 in the morning now, and the Sherlock in the bed is as still as death. Every so often his brother glances at the wasted form, and there is no one to see the elder Holmes, so the agony he is suffering is undisguised.

"I'm coming," Sherlock whispers. "I always die, and you're always there for me. I know that now. But I always come back."

The sleuth walks up to the very edge of the world, walks until his nose is nearly touching the living canvass, and thinks a simple, silent prayer.

*Don't be dead.*

Sherlock shrugs his robe off, opens his arms wide, closes his eyes, and falls into the painting.
When Sherlock's eyes flicker open, they are aimed at the white ceiling of the hospital room. The awful white sans serif clock on the equally white wall reads 8:12, and based on the sharpness of the white light through the window and the searing white glare of the bedsheets, it is morning.

He is back.

He is in the real world.

He is alive.

He is in agony.

Sherlock manages to croak a wordless expression of pain, and the dossier that Mycroft is studying spills in a merry white paper waterfall to the white linoleum.

"Oh, Christ," Mycroft gasps. "Sherlock. No, don't try to talk just yet, you're--God, I thought you'd--just be still while I. Yes, there we are."

Sherlock is vaguely aware of his brother pressing some sort of alarm or call button. That seems a prudent idea. He has heard Mycroft stammer once or twice before in their lives, when they were very young or Sherlock had taken a particularly alarming cocktail of boutique poisons. But three aborted attempts at independent clauses in a row signals the Second Coming. Possibly an event yet more dramatic. The detective's throat and eyes burn as if blasted in a kiln, his tongue where he bit it days previous is still a swollen mass, his hand very decidedly has a throbbing hole in it, and his side aches in a persistent dull shriek like the whine of some unseen banshee. His body feels coated with grime, though he knows John washed the lifeless husk twice (because he could feel it in the reading room and the act made him so sick with thwarted affection and the memory of that life-altering bath at Baker Street that he had felt physically ill even from the safety of the Mind Palace). The sludge in his veins feels poisoned, he is itchy and damp with fever, his head is an over-inflated balloon about to burst, the light is blinding him, and he is ravenously hungry.

He has never felt more grateful to be awake in his life.

Turning his head proves a task too daunting to complete, and Mycroft catches his cheek lightly in his palm. The elder Holmes has lost at least four pounds, and his eyes behind the glasses are rimmed in the poppy crimson of extended sleeplessness, and possibly worse activities. It makes Sherlock's chest hurt to look at him.

"Hello, brother mine," Mycroft says softly.

Swallow. Blink.

Blink.

Breathe.

"Congratulations," Sherlock manages to rasp. "The diet is working."
"You patently absurd, utterly ridiculous boy." Mycroft shakes his head in despair. A shattered laugh escapes his lips. "Incredible."

Attempting an aloof smile, Sherlock produces a slight quiver of the lips.

"This is the last time, do you hear me, William Sherlock Scott Holmes? The very final occasion on which you worry me half to death from a hospital bed. I freely grant that it was not entirely your fault in this instance, but it is nevertheless the last instance, because I won't tolerate this sort of behavior any longer. I am putting my foot down. I have been through this enough times, and therefore you are being given final notice. Dying is henceforth off limits. I will invent ways of punishing you that you cannot possibly conceive if you dare to go against that order. Do you understand me, young man?"

"Forgive me," Sherlock whispers.

"Forgive you," Mycroft repeats as if stunned. A brief silence follows. "Of all the...you were held against your will by a sadist. Forgive you for what, Sherlock?"

Waving near-lifeless fingers, Sherlock indicates the equipment, the hospital, his own body, and the horror of repeated instances of same.

Some of them self-inflicted.

Mycroft heaves a great sigh. This seems to settle him, and the mask of professionalism slides back into place as soundlessly and smoothly as one of the high security doors in his secret lairs. His palm leaves Sherlock's cheek and the sleuth marvels at it having been there in the first place.

"I already did," he replies quietly. "Years ago. Couldn't you tell?"

Just when Sherlock begins to think surviving might be overrated supposing it hurts this much, doctor comes bustling in, her face brittle with restrained concern which smooths to satisfaction when she finds Sherlock staring at her. She is a pretty woman, mid-forties, with bold silver streaks in her severely bobbed straight black hair. A tag on her lab coat reads DR. CHANG.

"Well, well," she greets him coolly. "Mr. Holmes, it's good to finally meet you." She is joined by nurse, a blonde equine-faced caretaker with kind eyes and a galaxy of freckles on her arms.

What follows is a confusion of gently probing questions and the studying of readouts. Mycroft hastens to fetch ice from down the hall, and after a few chips, Sherlock can speak a bit better. Yes, he can understand them, and yes, he can talk if only very haltingly and with an unfair amount of pain. Yes, he comprehends that his breast feels like a donkey kicked it because he seized on the operating table four days previous and they were forced to employ electrical paddles during the period he was deceased. Yes, he will make every effort not grow overstimulated.

"Your latest bloodwork is very promising, but I believe in being honest with all of my patients, and you gave us cause for profound concern," Dr. Chang informs him as she adjusts an IV drip bag.

"That was about as close as I've seen anyone come and manage to fight their way back. But fight you did, I'm pleased to say, though you aren't completely out of the woods yet. Your fever hasn't entirely dissipated. And naturally, the wounds you sustained are in only the very beginning stages of healing themselves. What's important is that I believe we have the sepsis under control. The coma was difficult for your loved ones, but may have ultimately worked to your advantage--it was your body's way of preserving the last shreds of your resources."

Loved ones, thinks Sherlock with an agonizing flood of gratitude.
But they aren't all accounted for.

His throat may feel like pounded meat, but thankfully the detective doesn't need his voice where Mycroft is concerned, so he asks the question with a slow sweep of pale grey irises.

"John stepped out," Mycroft answers in a clipped tone. "When they're through here, I'll speak to you about it. Everything's all right, don't look like that, Sherlock. Lie still and let them do their jobs. John would say the same, were he present. And he will be. Soon."

Queasy with hurt and uncertainty, Sherlock allows his reflexes to be checked and the nurse to fuss over his morphine dose (it's too high for her liking, but Sherlock can't be arsed to care). When they depart about ten minutes later, with stern admonishments that Mycroft not overtax him, Sherlock slaps the blanket with his uninjured palm in impatience. It requires an incredible effort on his part.

"Desist immediately, you've been out of a coma for all of twenty minutes," Mycroft scolds. A measure of his hauteur has returned, but since he's wearing denim and a jumper, it comes across as mother hennish rather than deadly. "No flailing about like a handcrafted marionette as you so dearly love to do. No speaking unless not speaking would do you still more harm."

_Please_, Sherlock mouths desperately.

"Yes, well, as to John." Mycroft removes his glasses, polishing them on the hem of his sweater. "I'm afraid there was something of a scene. Unfortunately. Your army doctor and I have been under considerable strain, and while we have both done everything in our power to ensure your complete recovery, I fear that your continued lack of consciousness began to wear rather profoundly on us. John raised the query whether I was accomplishing all I was able to, whether I ought to bring in other specialists. Or better qualified ones. It was a reasonable question, but I fear I responded...poorly."

Sherlock twists his eyebrows as his stomach churns in apprehension.

"If I tell you this story, will you stop working yourself into a froth?"

Snarling is impossible, but Sherlock bares his teeth fractionally and Mycroft sighs in resignation.

"No, you never did do well with unfinished tales. I may have indicated to Dr. Watson that I had settled for nothing less than the very best in the first place, as I have always done where you are concerned, and suggested he was grasping at straws due to his own feelings of impotence in the face of a harrowing situation," Mycroft admits ruefully. "He said if I was so keen to play God, why hadn't I kept you from being taken at all, or caused Moriarty to be eliminated long ago? To which I replied that at least I managed not to get myself kidnapped along with you, at which point the discussion grew rather heated. Stop scowling at me, child, you're exhausted and a hair's breadth from passing out again, if I'm any judge. John wanted to know why I couldn't manage to spare you this experience with the entire British government at my disposal, and I wanted to know what good he imagined he'd done watching you be torn apart with a nail gun. I daresay neither party emerged the winner. We were both...distraught, sincere apologies were exchanged, and he declared himself in need of a wash."

Horrified, Sherlock grimaces.

*He already said that he failed me. He already said I wouldn't be held to anything.*

*He already called me a free man.*

*Mycroft, what have you done?*
"I'm no better pleased with the situation than you are," Mycroft continues in an even undertone. "I ought to have retained my composure, even supposing he had lost his own. Should you like me to look for him? I cannot imagine that he left the building entirely."

"All right, sorry for bunking off, but I'm sorted now," comes John's voice. It's strong enough, but faded as grey as his complexion and the loose-fitting sweats he wears. He's framed in the doorway, dark blond hair towelled nearly dry and neatly combed, holding two coffees. Not raising his eyes from them. "Again, I'm...well, never mind, you heard me the first time. That was the most cack-handed conversation I've ever conducted, but it won't be repeated. I promise you."

"John," Sherlock rasps.

Sherlock, when in a state of boredom or impatience, greatly enjoys random acts of destruction--shooting walls, lighting matches, smashing busts, punching walls, etc. But he has never before seen two full paper cups of steaming Ecuadorian blend descend in slow motion to join Mycroft's papers where they still lie on the floor, the liquid exploding in a brown fireworks display and the air immediately drenched in the aroma of roasted caffeine.

John makes no move to see to the mess. He wraps his arms around himself and then covers his mouth with one tightly clenched fist.

"I'll just inquire about a mop," Mycroft says silkily, stepping with catlike distaste around the twin puddles. "No histrionics, I beg. Within reason."

He shuts the door behind him.

For several long seconds, John stares. His eyes fill. He quickly blinks the moisture away. Sherlock wants to crawl to him, bury his head in John's belly and wear him like a winter coat, but he's too thin and too weak to move and John...John looks uncertain beneath the tide of feeling.

No, not uncertain. Ashamed.

Sherlock suppresses a shudder.

"You're awake," John says at last, his voice nearly cracking.

"Obvious," Sherlock grates even though words feel like acid.

This produces a broken little smile. John walks to the bed, limping visibly, yes, yes, closer, as close as you can stand it, and bends over Sherlock's emaciated frame.

"God, Sherlock," he says wonderingly. The smile lines edging his mouth are like riverbeds, and the double sacks beneath his eyes that can lift so readily into dry laughter look heavy as stones. "I...shit, I have, just. So much. There's so much. To say to you. But that can, yeah, wait. Until you're stronger. Mycroft is right. So. He's been taking good care of you, the best, really, but unfortunately, you're not going anywhere for a while. Welcome back to the land of the living. Has Dr. Chang been in?"

Sherlock nods.

Touch me.

Please.

Don't just stand there, can't you see I'm starving?
"Hurts like a motherfucker to talk, doesn't it?" John winces in sympathy. "I remember from being shot. I was out for days, too. Er. Yeah. You know about that. Feels like you swallowed a bag of razors?"

Lifting a shoulder, Sherlock agrees. He doesn't care about his voice. Still wracked with concern, he flicks his gaze down towards John's leg.

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Right as rain. A few rips and tears, but nothing that chipped the bone. Some damage to the *tibialis anterior* and the *soleus*, mostly punctures, what you would expect. All sewn up now. Nothing to fret over. Thank you for asking."

John's face is now carefully blank, glancing from machine to machine to check data, skimming the bedclothes, darting towards where the chart hangs. It's the most frightening thing Sherlock has ever seen upon waking up in hospital, and he more than once snapped into consciousness only to be plagued by drug-induced nightmares of Jim Moriarty standing over him with a buzzsaw or a leashed slavering hog with artificially sharpened teeth--images from the letters.

This is worse.

"They have you on a fair amount of morphine, as you probably already know, but are you in a lot of pain?" John questions in a professional tone. "I mean, of course you're in terrible pain, I'm sorry. That sounded daft. But is any of it unexplained or unusual or too severe to manage? Anything I ought to be aware of?"

Sherlock regards him in a state fast approaching panic.

"Hey, settle down, mate, I know this is awful," John soothes with his attention now fixed to the heart monitor. "Christ, I do. I'm not trying to upset you. Quite the opposite, so you have to tell me if the discomfort is anything approaching unbearable. You might well benefit from a sedative to put you back under. I'm not cocking about, you aren't meant to be tortured just because you've got an unholy tolerance, I could probably get them to--"

The detective cannot be expected to bear this for any longer. Reaching out, Sherlock clasps John's hand. Merely that small amount of contact, skin to skin, makes both men pull in a breath. He tugs the doctor forward, setting John's wrist over his chapped lips, and he leaves it there, drinking in his heartbeat as if it's the antidote to everything that ails him.

"God, Sherlock, I..." His friend's mouth dives down at one side. John lifts his other limb, slides faintly trembling fingers into the tangled swarm of curls. "I didn't. Look, you don't have to. Sod it. Is...is this all right, then?"

Sherlock signals his confusion with a pleat above his nose.

"Just..." John flinches hard, stroking his friend's temple with the thumb that isn't buried in his hair. "That all came a cropper at the end, a complete and comprehensive shit show, a disaster, and it. Bloody hell. It was my fault."

Shaking his head, Sherlock presses a more determined kiss to John's pulse point.

"You bet your arse it was," John growls tenderly. His dark blue eyes are again glassed over, the navy glazed porcelain-bright and just as fragile. "Yes, we put paid to the sick fuck who's been haunting you for your entire career, but not before he hurt you, and Jesus Christ, Sherlock, that was not meant to happen. No, you know what? We can't have this conversation in your condition. You're going to be swarming with nurses any second. We're changing the subject, and you're fixing
your heart rate before you break the goddamn monitor, OK? That would be...so typical. But we're not trying it."

Glowering, Sherlock sets his lips in a thin line of displeasure against the doctor's skin.

John's neat fingernails make a featherlight pass over his scalp. "Yeah, yeah I know, you're three parts posh wanker and seven parts bloody superhero, but it doesn't matter how strong you are. Or think you are. We shouldn't talk about this right now."

Since Sherlock already knows the entire gist of the topic at hand, he can't help but allow the dread flooding his mind to seep through into his eyes.

"What, what is it? Tell me. I'm making it worse, Christ, how am I doing that? You're safe, he's dead, what do you need to know? Please, Sherlock."

"You didn't fail me," Sherlock manages to husk.

The pain searing his vocal cords forces his eyes shut, but not before he watches John understand, deep regret mingled with another layer of disgust marring the stoic set of his mouth.

"You, um. You heard me say that? Last night?"

Nodding, Sherlock keep his mouth resolutely pressed to John's deft, deadly little wrist.

"For the love of fuck." John blows a breath out and grips Sherlock's hair infinitesimally tighter. "I am so sorry. That can't have been...buggering hell, I'm sorry."

The sleuth shakes his head urgently.

"Yes, I am, and yes, I did, and you'd be well within rights to toss me out on my arse."

"No," Sherlock hisses pleadingly, but John's face only darkens in revulsion.

"Why the fuck not? I swore to protect you, I gave you my word, and here you are lying in hospital, a fucking skeleton pumped full of painkillers and industrial strength antibiotics, just come out of a coma, and it's my fault. How can you look at me after what happened to you?" The tears finally spill, but John doesn't seem to notice. "I'd have cut my own heart out and handed it to him before I let this happen. This...this is, I'm sorry, I'm not meant to upset you, I'm sorry, but you died on that table and it killed me and I don't know if you remember everything I said before you woke up, but I don't deserve you any longer. Or I never did. How will you live with that kind of knowledge? He hurt you and I didn't stop him. I want to watch you get better, nag at your doctor and help with your physical therapy, make a nuisance of myself keeping the nurses on their toes, all that rot, but you have your brother here and it's completely up to you, you have to believe that. Everything's changed now. I can have my things packed and out of Baker Street within an hour."

"Do you want to leave me?" Sherlock scrapes out. The thought opens a hollow in his belly. "After what happened? Is this an excuse?"

"God, no. But you died."

"Everybody dies."

"Not on my watch, they don't."

"I always do," Sherlock rasps. "In all the strings. But I always come back to you. I think."
"Strings?"

"Our other lives. There's a limitless number of them. On strings, and I die, that's the story. I didn't know how it ended before, but now I'm back."

"You're not making a scrap of sense." The torment in John's eyes snaps instantly into soldierly concern. "But Christ knows that's to be expected. I'm shocked you're still conscious. Only you, Sherlock Holmes. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"I don't care."

"Well, I fucking do, and I'm in charge at present. Answer me."

"Three."

"Well done, you. What day is it?"

"The day I woke up."

"Fair enough. Who's the chief of the Metropolitan Police?"

"An idiot."

"Sodding hell, Sherlock, are you always going to be this stubborn? I'd say you were the walking wounded, but you haven't even made it that far yet. Thanks to me."

Sherlock releases John's wrist to run a finger weakly along one of the tear tracks, his heart splintering with the regret he feels that John should be subjected to this degree of guilt.

"It was worth a wound," he says.

"Sherlock," the doctor chokes.

"John. It was worth many wounds."

"Shh, love. Be quiet for me."

"I don't want to. Don't leave me. You won't, will you? Please don't go."

John leans down and sets his lips over the fever sheen on Sherlock's brow, murmuring under his breath: perfect, lovely, brilliant, shh, you're all right, I'm here, you're mad, do you know that, beautiful amazing lunatic, you're cracking mad, I've got you, everything will be all right now, you precious creature, you perfect unearthly thing", until Sherlock can breathe again, and the heart monitor's chaos slows to a martial beat.

"You said that when the Russian threw you into the dry dock," Sherlock insists. He pushes John away just enough to look up at him. "Remember? Do you remember that day? When you came home, and you asked if I wanted to tell you something, and I couldn't? You said it was worth it. The bruise. Was I worth it? Even after Jim trapped you like an animal? Because if it's about that, you can go, of course you can, but I don't care that I died. I meant to. It was all for you in the end."

"Stop talking, sweetheart. Shhh. No, Christ, don't cry, you don't have that kind of energy to spare. Please don't. No, no, no. I'm not doing you any favours lately, am I?"

"You saved my life."
"Be still now."

"That day at the dry dock, you weren't breathing, weren't moving, and you understood, and I still couldn't tell you, but you stayed anyway, and I've never been worth it, not to anyone else, only to you." Gasping again, Sherlock makes the jagged words come out in the best string he can muster, like pulling a length of barbed wire from his chest. "No, shut up, I need to say it. Then you wouldn't let me tell you, not in Jim's white room, but I did, I did all along. Without telling you. In all the strings, I do. I do in the laboratory in Prague in nineteen-ten, I do in the Amazon in the sixteenth century when we're mapping the rivers, I do in Istanbul trading spices for guns. I do in London in the rain and fog. I do. I always do. Sometimes I never tell you, but I always do."

"Sherlock, I'm begging you, *stop*, you're hurting your--"

"I love you." Sherlock has his good hand slung around John's nape, and he watches his friend's eyes go wide. "Sometimes I never say it. That's...I don't like to think about that. It was almost too late again this time, it's always almost too late, I think, when I do say it. In this world, I fell in love with you the day you tackled Abernetty, and it only gets worse every hour. Please. I've fucked this up in infinite permutations, but I still love you. And you let me. I don't know why, but you let me."

Soft lips meet Sherlock's parched ones, the doctor chasing after the strained, sweet sound he just made in response to his friend's confession. While it is a desperate kiss in its fashion, it is also a kiss of quiet permanence and reassurance, like a marble pair of lovers twined together in the middle of a moonlit pool. And so it lingers, brightening and fading the way such statues do in the dawn and the twilight. And when it is over, John slanting to the side to brush his mouth over the borders of Sherlock's prayerfully, something of this kiss paradoxically remains in existence. As if it were always about to happen even while it is always ending.

"Of course I let you. I love you," John whispers fiercely. He runs a thumb under Sherlock's damp eye.

"Then you understand?"

"Hell, no. I don't understand any of the rest, you great git, and we've never been to the Amazon. You've been dreaming the nights away while I waited for you. I couldn't breathe while you were gone, love, and I don't understand."

"I wasn't dreaming. I was locked in the palace, watching you in the painting."

John shakes his head. "Your subconscious is, um, without precedent. But I knew that. Never mind. Speaking of your subconscious, I think you should go back to sleep now. Can you do that for me?"

Sherlock thinks about waking up here without John again and shivers.

"Hey, hey." John's hands frame his face with grave delicacy. "Enough. He's dead now. Do you hear me? It's over."

"And we lived."

"God, yes. We shouldn't have, and I'm gutted you're in this state. For the record."

"But we lived."

"Correct. We did."

"Then don't leave. Promise me."
"Yep, not leaving would make more sense, wouldn't it?"

Sherlock grins his blinding-est, maddest, happiest, brightest grin. John, chuckling ruefully, kisses it off his face again, and the heart monitor slows again to a warm, well-loved rhythm, and the men and women going steadily about the business of saving lives at the nurses' station never have so much as an inkling that anything was ever amiss.

Sherlock is thirty-five when he is taught another valuable lesson about the potential threats posed by men of a seafaring nature.

He and John had been investigating the murder of a notorious scumbag by the name of "Black" Peter Carey. The victim was a wife-beating, tobacco-spitting, dog-kicking, whiskey-swilling thug by all accounts, and ought to have been dead nine or ten times over, considering the amount of drugs he had smuggled and the number of killers he had miffed. Sherlock wouldn't ordinarily care about the untimely death of a two-bit heroin pusher who doubled as a longshoreman and signed on for the occasional voyage when his taste for Thai teenagers had gone too long unsated. But this two-bit heroin pusher happened to have been speared through the wall of a dockside warehouse with a fiendishly sharpened javelin.

So Sherlock had cared in a borderline gleeful fashion. Since drugs were involved, he readily enlisted Shinwell Johnson. With his dealer's assistance and a few neat deductions to do with the javelin and a missing tin box full of diamond-pure opiates belonging to Carey, Sherlock soon identified the culprit as one Patrick Cairns: roughneck, college javelin thrower, occasional seaman, and raving heroin addict with delusions of being a javelin-wielding bringer of justice.

Which is how Sherlock comes to be seated in a grimy warehouse on the outskirts of London's Royal Docks, not far from where the Olympic Rings made their frightfully gaudy appearance, dressed in torn jeans and a baggy hooded coat with too many pockets. He is having a shouting match with Shinwell while John fusses over the gash across the sleuth's palm. Patrick Cairns is on the wet concrete, interjecting delirious remarks at random.

It's smashing good fun, for the most part. The air is seasoned with river water, industrial oil, adrenaline, and blood.

"I never said it was a drug deal!" Sherlock roars. He shifts on the uncomfortable metal folding chair and John hisses in annoyance. "We were meant to lure him here with the promise of a job, one in proximity to a veritable candy store of addictive substances, not break the law by trying to enter into an illegal transaction with him, and what the bloody hell is this text you sent?" Sherlock brandishes Cairns's mobile. "All caps, no less. Which is offensive enough. 'SWEET AS CANDY UNCU T ARIES AT DIS COUNT TO FRIENDS OF PETER CAREY. NO BAD BUNDLE HERE WOT MEET GEORGE V DOCKS.' With the date and time. What the fuck, Shinwell?"

Shinwell Johnson is clad in baby blue track pants with snaps all along the sides, as if he wants to be able to rip them off and reveal all his buttery-thighed glory at any moment. The look is completed by a pastel blue and yellow plaid cotton driving cap, and a yellow t-shirt the size of a tent printed with the image of a pug in a hoodie and the words PUG LIFE. As accustomed as he is to Shinwell, Sherlock is grudgingly impressed by this ensemble. And the pale yellow shirt is greatly improved by the bloody handprints Sherlock accidentally smeared all over it during their
four-way struggle with the murder suspect.

Men who are off their tits on heroin can occasionally be surprisingly elusive. Particularly when armed with knives.

"What even is a bad bundle?" John mutters.

"Dirty dope, man," Cairns slurs from the floor. John cast the decisive vote by tapping him on the head with the butt of his gun, and now the deranged hoodlum is tied hand and foot with the Yard en route. "The nightmare train with the broken brake line."

"Well, chuffed we cleared that up, then."

"Shut up. This text," Sherlock insists, "is an unmitigated disaster."

"Stop gesturing, you're bleeding everywhere," John snaps.

Shinwell, all three hundred or so pounds of him, bristles in indignation. "No disrespect, Mr. Holmes, and begging forgiveness of the doctor's sensibilities where the delicate subject of substance abuse is concerned, knowing as you both do my reluctance to act as bag man to any save the most verifiably grotty of our teeming population, the fact is, you never said it weren't a drug deal, neither, in the ungrammatical vernacular of these very docks. And mathematics being what they are, while I humbly ask pardon for any enterprise of yours I may or may not have scuppered, the impossibility of proving a negative being what it is and always has been, since it was not made clear this was not a drug deal, I hereby with due deference return the what the fuck to your court. What the fuck, Mr. Holmes."

Sherlock is in the act of rolling his eyes when the line down his palm explodes in fire. John has produced an alcohol wipe from some diligently stocked pocket. Sherlock hisses like a spooked cat.

"Sorry," John says. He doesn't sound sorry. "Honestly, Shinwell, this could only truly go south if you in fact brought the...what did you call it?"

"Aries," Cairns mumbles. "Ballot, big H, birdie powder, shit makes you fly, makes you dream in stereo with all the triangles. No more flat lines, mate. Triangles. Every angle at once."

"Dear god," Sherlock observes.

Shinwell produces a toothpick, sniffs it, holds it to the glow of the bare bulb, and determines it is clean enough for use. "Like I said, Mr. Holmes, never implying that your memory is anything short of blinding, the gentleman before you--and in this case I use the term ironically--is a natty example of the species of entirely damp squib to whom I sell. Is it any wonder we suffered a regrettable breakdown in our interpersonal communications? The circumstance is, admittedly, hard cheese, but--"

"I'll try this one more time, and then you're on your lonesome. Did you," John demands as he continues to dab at the laceration, "bring uncut heroin you can't explain when the police arrive to this rendezvous, or did you not?"
Two hours later, after Shinwell vanished in a patchouli and musk cloud of Power cologne by 50 Cent and Sherlock and John delivered Cairns along with their statements, John unlocks the door to 221B.

"That was ridiculous," John sighs. He shrugs off his coat and clenches his left hand a couple of times, as he often does when escapades turn violent.


"Yes, I know."

"But a javelin."

"Yes, it was knees up, particularly the bit where you tried to go hand to hand in a knife fight. I did have a gun, you realize."

"He was aiming for Shinwell," Sherlock protests, dropping the pocket-infested coat to the floor in distaste. "Where would the Courvoisier market be without Shinwell? Countless jobs would be lost. The entire brandy economy would collapse. The nation would lose significant revenue. Children would go hungry. And it would be on my head."

John fights valiantly. But seconds later, he is giggling, and then they are both giggling, swaying a little in unsteady harmony, and then the moment subsides as it always does and John steers Sherlock to the kitchen table, pulling out a chair.

"I'm getting the antibiotic ointment and the plasters."

"John, I'm fine."

"Yep, I guarantee it."

Sherlock slouches back in the chair, suddenly knackered. It was a good case, even if it ended too quickly and was simple to solve. Bradstreet was pleased with him. She tousled his hair and called him a manky tosser, but the detective doesn't mind that so much anymore. She's only taking the piss, as John calls it. There was a javelin, and a midnight warehouse summons Shinwell nearly buggered, but it worked out in the end, and the scrap left a pleasant fight-or-flight buzz in his bones like the perfect cup of coffee, and John may not care about the javelin while Sherlock is bleeding, but when he thinks about it in light of the blog he started about their shared cases, he'll be pleased. Spicy details like javelins make for more hits, although he already has a shocking number of subscribers. All Sherlock wants now is a cuppa and a decadent lie-in, but he's too tired to move.

John returns with supplies and fills the kettle, slings it on the hob, and pulls down the mugs.

Sherlock finds himself smiling a helpless, private smile, and John catches the expression as he turns.

The doctor whistles, rounding the table. "What's got into you, then? You look like I just hung the moon."

"You did," Sherlock returns simply.

John makes fond clicking sounds as he turns Sherlock's left hand over to examine it in the better light. The fresh red line runs through a puckered scar that aches when the barometer shifts, still hampers Sherlock's playing of Locatelli's *Il labirinto armonico* in D major, and makes any sort of prolonged physical labor like rowing or rope climbing--which he does have to accomplish
occasionally, one never knows what sort of messes they're going to land themselves in--excruciating. John says it will get better if he does his exercises and stretches more often and stops being an utter prat about them, but Sherlock knows it will only improve in increments from now on. Sometimes he misses the dexterity with which he could wield a tennis racket or fire a bow and arrow, before.

More often, it simply reminds him that John loves him, so he lets his hand curl inward, cradling the ache like a precious thing.

"You've come over all dazed," John notes, pursing his lips. "Adrenaline crash. Should I be worried? Tell the truth, now."

Sherlock still takes drugs from time to time. He tries not to. And he mostly succeeds. But sometimes, he can still sense the mould and the mice coming for him, and John cannot stop them. They argue about it, occasionally viciously.

John stays nevertheless.

"Yes." Sherlock clears his throat as his friend finishes dabbing the stripe of ointment, starts applying soft bandaging and wrapping it in tape so Sherlock can still move his hand when he needs to. "But not about...that."

"About what, then?" John's arched brows create familiar tired ripples.

Sherlock shakes his head in frustration. "I'm...I wanted a cup of tea, just now, and you put the kettle on."

"Um, yeah. I did. Well spotted."

"Right. But I didn't ask you, you did it without my saying anything."

"And?"

"You do that all the time."

"Well, what can I tell you? You want tea all the time."

"But I don't say anything."

"Granted, our tea-based transactions are largely nonverbal."

"But why do you?"

"I'm not holding out for a 'ta,' if that's what you're on about, I know half the time you don't even notice tea is in front of you until you've finished it."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"OK. What did you mean?" John inquires with infinite patience.

"Something about your doing that...I don't know." Sherlock shuts his eyes, a sudden wave of fear gripping him. "Do I do that? For you?"

"Do what?"

"Put the kettle on for you without your asking?"
This has nothing to do with kettles, Sherlock knows all too well.

Am I enough?

Am I too much?

Was it worth it? All that suffering?

No. It's much simpler than that.

Am I worth it?

The doctor stops what he's doing to rest his thumbs in the hollows of Sherlock's long neck. It takes nearly twenty seconds, but eventually, Sherlock draws a breath and opens his eyes to stare directly back into John's.

"No, you don't," John says softly. "You hang the moon. Three hundred and sixty-five nights a year. All right?"

Sherlock bites his lip to keep his mouth from doing something tragic. Something John would misinterpret. His eyes prickle, but that makes no sense. John only smiles, rubbing circles at the back of Sherlock's hairline. Later, there will probably be some kind of sex, John biting at Sherlock's stark collarbone while Sherlock palms his length, or John's tongue in his mouth and cock sliding against Sherlock's belly until both are sweaty and satisfied. There often is, after cases. Not always. Not when Sherlock doesn't want to, or John is spent. But there will also be two toothbrushes in the little ceramic cup, and Sherlock's dirty socks in a tangle with his friend's in the hamper, and arguments over whose turn it is to clean out the microwave (which no longer has a piece of John's gun in it, even when they are asleep). There will be an arm flung possessively around his waist as he sleeps. There will be all the rest of it. Which would already be enough, on any of the strings Sherlock is still convinced exist.

A thousand and a thousand times over.

"All right," Sherlock answers.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

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