In the Deep, Where Dark Things Sleep

by HardlyFair

Summary

The closer time crawls to November, the more water horses the Scorpio Sea spits out. The colder Thisby becomes.
Sherlock Holmes is an islander - completely surrounded by the water. John Watson, he knows, comes from the mainland and lives for the Races. On the first of November, Sherlock will race. The man holding steady by his side is someone he never expects.

- A Scorpio Races AU (Maggie Stiefvater), but no knowledge of the book needed. Now complete. -

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
“My brother’s gone to the mainland.”

The man behind the desk eyes Sherlock, his quill paused in the air, dripping black, black ink onto cheap parchment.

“Has he, now?”

“You know he has, Anderson. You’ve worked here all your life. You know when the locals leave, and you know where they go when they do.”

The notary’s stubbled cheeks twitch. The messily smeared ink over his collar and neck says Donovan’s in the other room, and Sherlock had burst in at a very inconvenient time. He doesn’t care.

“I don’t know where they’ve gone once they’re on the mainland,” Anderson growls.

“You could find out. Just how I can find out that Miss Donovan’s in the other room, just like I found out that your wife--”

“I could find out where he’s gone, Mister Holmes,” Anderson cuts him off, sneers and leans forward. His breath is sour, has always been sour. “With the right incentive.”

Sherlock scowls. “Money.”

“Isn’t it always?”

-/

“You can’t expect him to find Mycroft for you, dear. If you can’t, no one can.”

The kind-faced old woman pats him on the upper arm as Sherlock lifts a wooden crate for her onto the edge of the stall door. The horse within snorts. Mrs Hudson titters and the greying bay mare snorts again.

“He has the resources. He said he wanted money in exchange for finding my idiotic brother. I can get money.” Sherlock reaches into the crate, withdrawing the small flakes of hay.

Pieces of it fall onto the stone flooring. He’ll need to run back to the other end of the stable for more. This weak Thisby grass has stuffed but not fed the mare.

“You get all your money from your brother, love, and he hasn’t been sending anything lately - that’s why you’re all worked up over him,” Sherlock opens his mouth to argue, but Mrs Hudson goes on, “And the people on Thisby, well, we aren’t the most wealthy…”

“There are some wealthy people. You are wealthy.”

Mrs Hudson frowns. The low light catches on her thin lips. She looks down, “I paint teapots for the tourists, it hardly counts. I’d help, Sherlock, but I don’t have the kind of money Mister Anderson wants. The rich people are all involved with the Races.”
The barn cat, a scruffy black thing that Mrs Hudson calls Musgrave, winds itself around Sherlock’s legs. He doesn’t pay attention to the cat, even when she butts her head against his ankles.

While digging into the crate for some loose hay, Sherlock nonchalantly says, “So I’ll work at the Stockyard.”

“Sherlock Holmes, don’t you even think of it!”

Surprised beyond belief, Sherlock snaps his head to Mrs Hudson. Her eyes are teary. He hasn’t looked at her, not really, all morning.

Flour on her dress. Trying to talk to the baker in the next town over again, Tholla, the one beyond Skarmouth - what’s his name? - despite the fact he's married to someone on the mainland, oh, except Sherlock's the only one who knows that, and actually it’s two wives…

“The Stockyard doesn't hire just anyone. They’ve that rider, oh, what's he called? Well, that young man’s won five years in a row, now, despite getting nearly trampled last year, and with the prize so big, the Yard can afford to hire whoever they want. And they don't have just ordinary horses, either,” warns Mrs Hudson. The woman reaches into the stall to pat Josephine’s soft nose. “They aren’t like old Josey, here.”

Sherlock straightens his back, and turns away from her. He throws another flake of hay into Josephine’s stall. He moves down to the next one.

Redbeard, the tall stallion within, does not make a sound as he tosses flakes of hay into it. He merely rocks in place. Asleep, then, Sherlock thinks with a touch of fondness.

Redbeard has never been a racer.

No ordinary horse has ever been.

-/-

Sherlock first thought of the Races when he was ten. It had never been a possibility before then, and it never would, afterwards.

With both parents drowned after several capaill uisce tore down the ferry they were on board, Sherlock was put off of ever being near the water horses.

His parents were idiots.

Everyone knows not to be on the frigid waters in October. But on the tiny, craggy island of Thisby, the cold ocean is hard to ignore.

Mycroft had further discouraged Sherlock in the most peculiar of ways.

He took Sherlock to the shore.

On the first of November, someone will die.

Always.

It won't matter how many flowers and tassels one drapes over their steed’s bridle, how hard one tries to hide their ride from the call of the sea; they will die. Charms will not save the riders. Mystical
leather polish on a saddle will not, either. Nothing will. Nothing ever will.

Horses clacked their teeth at one another by the starting line. Their ears were all pressed forward, eager, long lines against the streamlined head. It was a shivering day - where the wind blew off hats and threw the scent of the sea towards the cliffs. Five minutes, eighteen furlongs, and the Races would be over.

The riders stayed as far away from each other’s mounts as they could without being far from the starting line. Their brightly colored armbands, cloth tied on their upper arms and draped between blankets and saddles to allow the spectators to see their bets better, stood out among the whites, browns, beiges, blacks and whites of the water horses.

Far below, the Races began, and beating hooves tore up the always-changing sand. They ran the horses on the beach, a pale line between the churning sea and the chalk cliffs.

The huge water horses veered towards the sea while they ran, as they always did. Blunt fangs glistened beneath the sea foam frothing around their mouths.

A blonde mare, huge ears pinned back, lunged at the rider of her neighbor, snapping at his arm, then jerking her head.

The sea pounded and the the man screamed as everything below his elbow was ripped from his body.

While running, the mare heaved him from his mount and fell him in the turbulent surf.

For one moment, the world slowed. The ocean's thrusts, so far below, no longer sluggishly dumped entire foul-smelling kelp forests onto the shore, the fulmars did not flex their wings and did not cry overhead, and the island held its breath.

The injured rider's own uisce shrieked, breaking the ubiquitous spell that had fallen and shaking the world into action once more - the horses ran, the birds flew, the gamblers shook their fist. It swung back around to rip apart and devour its fallen rider, the ocean spraying at the bony tendons in its prancing legs.

The tourists in the audience atop the cliff gasped. The locals didn't seem to react.

Sherlock looked to Mycroft.

“This is what happens, brother mine,” Mycroft had said, a line between his brows, eyes fixed on the Races far below. “The Races will be the end of Thisby.”

“The Races are all Thisby has,” Sherlock had pointed out, looking back down at the carnage on the beach far below the cliff. “How could it be the end?”

More water horses, the colors of all the pebbles on the seashore, had slowed in their running and were ripping at one another around the dead man, bleeding out into the waves, creating cries from the younger audience as they tore at him. (What did these visitors expect?) Others raced on, fighting as they went, but they were few in number.

Their riders were all frantically trying to get them back on track. It was no use. The horses were lost to the madness of the sea. It was a bad year.

An ivory stallion adorned in flared, pale blue petals began to jerk its elongated head, snapping with crystal teeth at its rider's leg, turning in a circle like a mutt trying to catch its tail.
“That’s exactly it, Sherlock,” Mycroft had sighed, “The Races are all Thisby has.”

Among the chaos, one iron red stallion charged into the ocean, its mane shifting until it shimmered as if made of pearl, head already lengthening. The reddened sea swallowed it up, bubbles bursting white at the top of the churning water.

All with a rider still tethered to its back.

-/-

Mycro left for the mainland six years ago, when Sherlock was twenty four. Mycroft was thirty one.

He always paid Sherlock’s rent and Redbeard’s board to Mrs Hudson. It came in the monthly post.

Four months ago, the payments stopped.

Two weeks ago, Sherlock Holmes began to worry.

It was gradual. And worsening. He fumbled with the postcards and letters Mycroft had since been sending to him. All speaking of mainland government affairs.

He searched for a code, something that might explain why Mycroft had stopped writing. There was nothing.

He remembers the first letter he sent to Mycroft, addressed to a government building on the mainland.

*Why did you leave?*

*SH*

And he remembers the answer he got back two months later. It meant Mycroft had hesitated to put pen to paper, and missed not one, but two monthly deadlines.

*I can’t stay. It’s been driving me mad.*

*MH*

Sherlock wrote back;

*What has?*

*SH*

It seemed stupid to spend a ridiculous amount of money just to send a piece of parchment with two words and a feeble form of a signature on it. But that was the Holmes brothers, that was them all over.

His response came on time the next month, with a few month’s rent along with it. Mycroft was paying Sherlock’s rent forward, like he expected to be gone a very long time somewhere in the future. This should’ve been the first clue. But Sherlock was upset, and, though he wouldn't admit it,
betrayed that Mycroft had left him.

Thisby has.

The ordinary people and the docks and the sea and the wind and the fish. The fish, Sherlock.

And the damn horses.

MH

Lestrade, the DI of the very small police force on the island, told him there was nothing to worry about when the letters stopped and Sherlock went to him.

“People who go to the mainland don't often contact their family…” The greying man said, dusting off his waistcoat. He then reached up to scratch at his cheek. “We get missing persons reports from the family members all the time. In reality, they just go to the mainland and fall out of contact. It happens all the time. Nothing to be worried about; I'm sure your brother is fine.”

“You’re only saying that because your cheating wife ran off there to be married to the Skarmouth gym teacher and you still hold out hope she’ll return…”

Lestrade didn't speak to him for a week.

-/-

It is October.

And the Thisby men are beginning to spend their days by the shore, watching the waves for the crests that appear before a capall uisce will rise, strutting from the ocean with seaweed as its coat.

It is October.

And Sherlock spends his days on the grassy cliffs. He watches the beaches from sunup until sunset, breathes the salty air, and languishes in the overhead sun. But it's worth it, to sit beside the scant trees that harbor seabirds and to scan the ocean. When the whitecaps beak and roll over, crashing back into the blue mass of the endless plains of water, there may be the twitch of an ear, the spot of a nose, the beginning of a shoulder. But the parts are always gone by the time the waves settle.

Tourists begin to spill into Thisby. Their ferries will arrive and they will bustle away from the ocean as quickly as their fat legs could carry them to their inn. Their golden pocket watches will undeniably rust here, under the influence of the magic of the sea.

Sherlock doesn’t know why they bother bringing them in the pockets of their waistcoats.

Gold chains hang from them, and diamonds shine as bright as the sun on water on their wrists. It is always easy to find a tourist.

For one, they come in like the water horses - in October. The closer time crawls to November, the more tourists arrive, seeking to spectate and, some, even, to race.

For another, they are irregulars, and everyone knows of everyone on Thisby.
Sherlock knows more. He can see things others can’t, can tell people’s life stories. The saddest thing in the world is an obvious fact, missed and ignored by the masses. He can tell what people ate for breakfast, their pets, left alone on the mainland, and all of it is useless, because nothing extraordinary happens on Thisby.

Lestrade had once offered him a job, after Sherlock had had Mrs Hudson’s drug dealing husband executed out on the continent. The job Lestrade offered was to find out who’d been stealing money from the gift shop in town. It was too easy - it was the wife of the owner, who was promptly divorced. Sherlock doesn’t know whether or not she still lives on the island. Doesn’t care.

And nothing else happens on Thisby.

Nothing besides the Races.

(And the November cakes that make the whole island smell of sweet honey glaze for the month of October. Sherlock finds those particularly interesting.)

-M-

Mrs Hudson’s house (and subsequently, Sherlock’s, for the next year, when Mycroft’s forward payments catch up with Sherlock) is very far away from town. It’s on the windward side of the island, and strong breezes always rip through the screen doors when they come through.

When people ask each other where on Thisby they’re from, most say oh, round the main road, just past Skarmouth, or the other side of the island - the hard side, or a stone’s throw from Tholla.

Four thousand people, all crammed onto a rocky crag jutting from the sea, and you’d think someone would be clever enough to set up an address system, like how it is on the mainland.

Sherlock sometimes gets to Skarmouth, the nearest town on the island, by taking the rusting, very old Ford out along the dirt road that leads through miles and miles of sparsely grassy, cracked earth.

More often, he’ll ride Redbeard. It's always good to feel his stallion under him. He only takes the Ford when he’ll need the room in the backseat for something. And then he has to chase out the barn cat Musgrave, who makes it her business to get black fur all over the seats, or scratch gauges into them when she's bored.

He passes Mrs Turner’s, their closest neighbor, sheep farms, the low stone wall, topped with frail loops of barbed wire, is all that will protect the eternally petrified flocks. Her border collies bark at anyone who comes near, any car that shudders past. Once they recognize the car, they yip and whine for Sherlock to come out and feed them leftover tidbits. Today, however, he's busy.

The Ford rambles past houses that look like they’ve grown out of rock, colourless possessions spilling out backdoors and into shoddy fenced-in gardens.

Sometimes the car doesn't start right, and Sherlock has to delve into the supplies kept in the stable loft to find the right size wrench to bang on the engine with until it'll start up properly. He could figure out how the horrid machine actually worked, if he was motivated enough. He's not.

Then he drives, cheap gas gurgling and popping and sputtering.
Then there's the town, near the cliffs by the sea. Far enough away so that chunks of rock that litter the sand far below won't take any buildings with them.

It gets warm the summer, but now it's starting to cool down. It's still not very cold. That will change as the *capaill uisce* come ashore. They bring dark magic with them, the kind of magic that can change an entire island.

After half an afternoon spent bent over the hood of the Ford, Sherlock has grease striped over his forehead and cheeks. He's not happy about it.

He picks up the shopping from the locally owned shop. Of course it's locally owned, everything is locally owned because no one in their right minds will willingly move to Thisby, where they're poor and where they have carnivorous horses that maim and kill and they have locals that will willingly ride them. The only inhabitants here are people born here. That's it.

(That's not it. There are some mainlanders that have moved here, some return annually just to participate in the Races. Sherlock ignores them, because they're all boring. Of course they're boring. They moved *here*. They wanted adventure and life teetering on the edge of death, and they get it, when they come here.)

It's dark outside when Sherlock shoves the paper bags into the backseat of the Ford, trying to arrange everything on the floor so nothing will fall over.

Damn Mrs Hudson, and damn her love for oranges. Those are *expensive* to get on Thisby. Even more so this time of year, when all the rich tourists are around and about and local shops rack everything up high. It's not Sherlock's money, but he's trying to be conscientious about it all the same.

It's dark tonight. The shine of streetlamps reflect off the bakery windows, hit his eyes. The wind breathes softly over his shoulders, throwing discarded pieces of paper across the stone street. As he slides into the front seat and reaches for the key still in the ignition, he hears the eerie moans of a *capaill uisce* on the air.

The hair on the back of his neck sticks up.

It's cold, but a sweat appears on his brow, beneath his curly fringe. He dares not move.

Men yell. Men yell, down on the beach, their voices almost eroded by the wind.

Sherlock swallows his rising panic. But he can feel the crumpled edges curling around the corners of his eyes, like a fog that won't settle.

The cliffs will protect them, but there are ways down and up them. Ways stable enough for a water horse to clamber onto Thisby’s flat and dunes top. It happens in October.

Sherlock’s head runs through all possible routes in approximately four and a half seconds. The nearest one is just on the other side of the buildings hanging onto the cliff behind him.

Another eerie call, this time louder. More enraged.

Hungrier.

More men shout and scream. Tourists ambling around the streets (stupidly, stupidly, they *know* not to be out after sunset, that’s when the *capaill uisce* could wander into town unseen) begin to quicken their pace, slip indoors, and Sherlock is stuck, his hands frozen to the steering wheel.
Every year, as far back as time went, the horses had pulled themselves from the sea. And every year, the people of Thisby had gone after them. It's in human nature to be curious. Many scholars have commented on it, studied, hypothesized, theorized. Why is so much time devoted, by humans, for the acquisition of knowledge? Especially when the people of the island and tourists already know exactly what these beasts are capable of? Sherlock, personally, finds it appalling.

So he isn't sure why he climbs out of the car, slams the door, and is briskly making his way through town towards the pull of the water. His hands in his coat pockets, shoulders hunched up against the bite of the wind that tosses his curls, Sherlock walks.

“Sherlock!”

He stops. Doesn't turn.

“Sherlock, where are you going?”

Ah. That’ll be Miss Molly Hooper. Right in time to ruin his recklessness.

Sherlock turns round, purposely letting his face fall to a neutral expression upon seeing her. If he shows even the slightest emotion, she gets far too excited for his liking.

Her brown hair is tied back, and her black apron hanging above her dark dress is stained with white and brown. Making November cakes, then. She's looking at him, scrutinizing. Her face is illuminated by the streetlamps and the light pouring from inside the Hooper Bakery, just to their side.

“Where are you going?” She repeats, as though she is in charge of whatever he does. She wipes her hands on her apron. “It's dark out-- it’s October -- where are you going?”

“Do stop repeating yourself, Molly. I'm merely headed to the beaches.”

She widens her eyes, blinks. Her mouth pops open in surprise. She glances left, right, as though someone will overhear them, will know she's talking to a man that will soon be dead.

“You can't go down there, Sherlock. The horses are coming up. Don't you hear that? There's… there's a water horse down there. They're trying to get it.”

Sherlock knits his brows together. “Who is?”

“The men from the Stockyard!” Molly exclaims, then bites down so sharply her teeth audibly clack together. She looks frustrated for a moment, then focuses back on Sherlock, who does not cower. “You know as well as I do, they’re always getting the first water horses.”

“Because everyone else wants to see how violent they'll be this year, and no one wants to test it out first for themselves, I know, Miss Hooper.”

“They're always violent.”

“They're the capaill uisce, of course they're always violent.”

-/-
Sherlock returns home, and does not go to the beach.

That night, he dreams of Redbeard under him, the sand flying behind them. He licks his teeth and tastes salt. Water horses snap at him from the sea, confined to only the reaches of the waves.

They call to him, like he is one of them.
“Heading out, Mrs Hudson!” Sherlock calls through the open door, his ear cocked for a reply.

He waits a moment. There’s the scramble and a clatter. She must have dropped her package of hair curlers.

“Pick up some oranges while you’re out! There's coins on the counter! I’ll make a meringue pie!”

Ugh. That means he has to go inside. And he's already got his shoes on, and Mrs Hudson loathes when he goes inside with his shoes on. He wipes them off on the doormat and streaks downstairs, to the cellar, and snags the money off the counter, sliding the coins into his pocket with the jingle of change.

Sherlock does not get the Ford out from under the tarp. He wades through the tall, dry grasses that sway in the wind towards the small barn. The barn cat, the ugly thing, follows at his heels. He begins to wonder if the thing has fleas.

Redbeard is restless in his stall. He hasn't been ridden in so long. He’s knocking his velvety nose up against the stall door when Sherlock comes in. Sherlock unlatches it and Redbeard knocks it open with the broad of his chest. His ordinary hooves clap on the stone, and Musgrave is nearly crushed. She hisses, and Sherlock frowns at her. “Shush up,” He says, and she sits.

Collecting the saddle from its peg on the opposite wall, Sherlock holds it over one forearm, side tight to his chest, while he clicks the leadrope into place on Redbeard’s harness.

The windy air sings around them, carrying the salty smell of fish from the docks way down past Skarmouth. Sherlock’s heart is beating in his chest while he leads the stallion out of the stables. In the grass, Redbeard leans his head down to tear at it, Musgrave padding over to wind around his legs. The stallion munches noisily as Sherlock throws the saddle blanket over his back.

He can ride bareback - he loves it, powerful muscles beneath him, flexing and mirroring his own exhilaration - but a trip to the town requires a saddle, it's long, and Sherlock doesn't want Redbeard’s back to ache.

Next comes the smooth leather, and Sherlock secures the straps under Redbeard’s belly, patting his unbranded flank to make the horse cooperate. He exhales as the strap tightens, and twists it, fixing it in place.

Sherlock doesn't have to worry about Redbeard trotting off when he returns to the damp mildew of the stables to retrieve the reins and bit. There's a little hardened grass pasted to the metal bit with old spit from Redbeard.

“Have you been eating with this in?” Sherlock accuses as he steps in front of the stallion. Naturally, Redbeard doesn't answer, his ears only prick forward at the sound of Sherlock’s voice, which startles the flighty barn cat.

“Bastard,” Sherlock mutters, and Redbeard snorts in the grass, also making Musgrave flinch.

The Thisby grass is so dry, Redbeard couldn't possibly find it good. He has hay, Sherlock has no clue as to why he insists on eating this stuff. But even the bales are composed of weak Thisby grasses. It's not good food, it's not the sort of food the horses at the Stockyard eat.
Sherlock bends to pick up the leadrope and drags Redbeard’s head up. He fits the bit into his mouth with little resistance, just the token amount he expects from him, and fixes the rest of the bridle in place over top of Redbeard’s harness. He unclips the lead rope and tosses it onto the ground. It’ll be dark when he comes back, and it’ll be hard to find, but Sherlock doesn’t care.

This is one of the times (all of the time, he always thinks this) that Sherlock is immeasurably grateful that Redbeard is not one of the maneaters that rise from the sea each year.

Sherlock can see himself in Redbeard’s eyes. He can see behind them, as if the horse’s mind is just as his is.

If he ever got close enough to a *capall uisce* to see into its eyes, he knows what he would see behind them.

Square pupils. He would see, reflected in them, torment and intelligence.

He would see a predator, looking back at him.

Not to mention the teeth that would be pushed up against his chest, as Redbeard’s nose is now. Sherlock smiles to himself, and runs a fond hand through the copper horse’s black tuft of hair between his ears. The rest of his mane and tail is rust red, like his coat, but there's little wisps of black up here.

The ride into town is nice. Just. Nice. The border collie's at Mrs Turner's bark and whine at him. The open plains and few hills offer nowhere to hide. At this time of the year, so early in October, a water horse would not be found this far inland.

Would it?

Sometimes, around this time of year, Sherlock will wake in the night, and every creak of the shutters will alarm him, make him find the pistol, nicked off Lestrade when he was being exceptionally boring, tucked in his dresser.

Nothing but poison berries, silver, iron knives and bells, and flower petals ever did any good against a water horse. Even those barely do any good; last year, a horse covered in shining bells and flowers knitted into its mane dragged a man kicking and screaming into the ocean.

But the pistol is a comfort, heavy and potent in his hands.

He’ll sit in the kitchen table, down in the cellar, with a candle lit for company, and try to imagine there isn't a growling horse in the corner, frothing at the mouth for his flesh and blood.

Sherlock digs his heels into Redbeard’s side, and he begins to lengthen his steps, streaking along the dirt roads.

Redbeard is panting heavily through his nose by the time Sherlock trots into town, passing first by the tall glass buildings that are owned by the Stockyard and serve as hotels for the wealthy tourists. The Skarmouth Inn. Nicest place to sleep, be, stay, or exist on the island, Sherlock hears. A man is sweeping the stone steps as Sherlock passes.

Next is the tourist shop, Murray & Sons (which is funny, because Bill Murray has no sons). They sell Mrs Hudson’s teapots there.

The roads here are made of cobblestone instead of dirt and are more like paths than anything else. The town curves into something small, and tight-knit. Clothing stores, shopping, and the Hooper
Bakery. The mill is somewhere near the north side of the island, just past the Stockyard, the place where they keep the most dangerous of animals.

He pulls into a stop just outside the bakery, where Hooper is always happy to supply him with water for his ride. He takes a moment to breathe, himself, and gently pats Redbeard’s neck, starting to remove his feet from the stirrups.

Someone shrieks.

Redbeard flinches violently and startles, his ears swiveling wildly. Sherlock leans forward and murmurs soothing words into them.

“A water horse!”

Sherlock sits straight up. No, no there isn't one here, who yelled, danger, where is it-- He snaps his head around, inhales, but there is no smell of salt and vinegar or brine, no red tide, and there is no sound of galloping.

No painful or unearthly screams.

A young tourist is pointing right at Redbeard. Other tourists are staring, backing away. Hooper, just emerging from the bakery with a metal pail to refill the trough outside her shop, doesn't even look concerned. She only glances up at Sherlock.

The stallion jerks its head, as if affronted, pulling on the reins in Sherlock’s iron grip.

Sherlock frowns.

The tourist (American, approximately seventeen, though tall - lives with his stepmother and father, came here with the latter-- paranoid) shivers as Sherlock stares at him. This claim makes no sense. Redbeard isn't even a large horse, his ears aren't elongated, his pelt is clearly dry, his ribs aren't showing (not by a long shot).

Sherlock raises his chin, and speaks loudly.

“This is not a capall. A capall would've torn you apart by now. Look at his eyes,” Sherlock pulls on one side of the reins, pulling Redbeard’s head that way. It puts his round cheek on display, his strong profile.

“Look in them. Not like the capaill. ”

Redbeard does not hunger.

-/-

Sherlock needs money.

He needs money.

He needs money to pay Anderson to track down Mycroft. He needs money to charter the ferry that will take him to the mainland, because he could do the first to-do item, finding Mycroft, by himself,
but he needs a place to start.

He just needs money for the boat.

Even if he took every odd job in the town, every steady one, and every part time one, he wouldn't make enough money to do even one of those things. Not in five years.

And he doesn't have that time. In less than a year, his paid rent will be up.

Mrs Hudson will have to turn him out - she's family, but even she cannot afford to keep another mouth around for so long while getting nothing in return. Sherlock would not ask that of her. She has her debts - like nearly everyone on the island, she borrowed from the Stockyard to buy her property.

The house will be seized if she fails to make her payments.

Sherlock will have to sell Redbeard, and his mainland-imported violin, and everything he owns. He’ll have to work at the mill. The mill has worker housing. But he doesn’t want a life at the mill.

There is. Only one thing on Thisby that would get him that kind of money.

The thing he has sworn to forego, sworn never to even attend.

And now, he must be a participant if he is to find his brother and get off this bloody island.

The Races.

To race is a death wish.

To clamber onto the back of a capall, to run alongside dozens more of them.

Riders will cut at each other's horses. And at each other. It's a foul, technically, grounds for disqualification, but when the cut man usually falls and dies and is a red smear on the sand, who is going to know?

People on Thisby don't like Sherlock. He thinks he may get more cut up them all of them. They say he pries.

He wouldn't be surprised if the capaill had an innate hatred of him, too.

To not race is a death wish.

He cannot wait here, hoping for Mycroft to reappear out of nowhere. He could live homeless in the sea caves on the leeward side of the island. But come November and October, and he will be ripped apart by incoming capaill.

If he had to leave Mrs Hudson's house, Redbeard would be the first thing he'd have to sell. He will not. He'd rather die.

And, besides. To wait and linger; it is not in his blood.

-/-
Over a dinner of roast duck, dining at the kitchen table in the cellar, Sherlock is silent.

Usually, he doesn't indulge Mrs Hudson like this. She likes to pester and insist, though. The meringue pie afterwards is delicious. Mrs Hudson really knows how to stretch just one orange. A lifetime of living on Thisby will give you that skill.

Sherlock flattens a piece of the crust under his fork, his tongue tied, and there is a sickly sweet taste in the back of his mouth.

“I'm going to race this year.”

The sound of Mrs Hudson’s fork clinking against her plate stops. Sherlock risks a glance up. The woman is staring at him, wide eyed, her hands frozen.

Time slows. Mrs Hudson drops her fork, and it clatters to the wooden floor, and Sherlock shoves back his chair, standing and going to collect it from the ground. He whips around to drop it into the sink. Metal clings and pings against aluminum.

“Oh, Sherlock…”

“It's the only way,” Sherlock rushes, closing the distance between the sink and her chair in only a stride in the cramped space, “I need the prize money to get Anderston to find Mycroft, and get to-- get to the mainland, and, and to pay off the rest of your debt from the Stockyard--” He lays an hesitant, gentle hand on her shoulder.

“You know you don't have to do this, Sherlock. I wouldn't turn you out.”

Oh, there's that voice. The little wobble in it. Sherlock’s upset her. She places her wrinkled hand on his. His throat tightens inexplicably. Must be the uncomfortable warmth of the room.

Taking a very gentle tone, Sherlock says, quietly, “I do, I have... I want… I need to do it.”

“I don't want you to get hurt. Those things-- they're so nasty, and there's dozens of them in the Races, so close together…”

“I won't get hurt. I promise.”

Mrs Hudson locks her teary eyes with his.

“You can't promise me that.”

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She's right. He can't promise he won't get hurt.

When dealing with the capaill, one must always be alert.

A back cannot be turned, a guard cannot be relaxed, even for a second. If it is, there will be teeth in a neck and blood running down a chest.

To participate in the Races, one must signup at the Hawkins Tavern by the night of the Scorpio Festival, two weeks before the first of November, and one must name their mount by the same date.
The cementing of the riders is done at the rider's parade at the festival. The giving of blood. There's no backing out after that, it's seen as cowardice, and the inhabitants of Thisby have never taken well to that.

Sherlock doesn't not have one. He doesn't have a water horse, he doesn't have anything to race.

How is this going to work? How will he even get one? Never mind winning, what he has to do to get the money, because there's barely anything in second place, how's he going to afford a capall to race with? He has savings, but nothing enough to buy one of those overpriced mounts.

He could capture one.

He could wait on the beach at night, with a harness of bells and mind of wit.

What's cleverness going to do, when he's facing the devil, in the form of a man eating horse, twice as tall and large as a Clydesdale, or any island pony?

The men from the Stockyard work in teams of four to ten to capture their rides, fresh and dripping from the sea and crazed from being in the water. Sherlock is just one man.

Yes, he's far more clever than anyone else on the island, now that his brother's gone, but he's still only one man.

He could devise a flawless plan in seconds, but he lacks the strength to capture anything as big and powerful and hungry as the capaill.

Redbeard obediently allows Sherlock to fix the bridle and bit into place over his head and in his mouth. Sherlock keeps waiting for something bad to happen to the stallion, because he's too fond of him.

The Ford is out of gas, somewhere a mile down the road. He should've checked it before driving into town. Idiot.

Sherlock fits the saddle in place, and shoves his left foot in the stirrup, pushes up, and swings a leg over the rise. Skarmouth is much too far away for his liking. But Redbeard really should be more fit - he's skinny, but not overly so.

The ride is quiet, and the evening sky is overcast, clouds hanging grey and withholding high above. The ocean must be a mess tonight; the wind won’t leave Sherlock’s hair or Redbeard’s mane alone. It’s a live, starving thing, making shutters flap and slap against house walls, and throwing leaves and twigs across the road.

He’ll get the Ford back. And then. The beach.

It isn’t yet the time for training to begin on the sand. It isn’t the time for a nose to be sheared off in a moment of distraction whilst training on the beach.

It’s early October, and it is the time for capturing the capaill.

The closer to November it becomes, the more water horses the sea spits out, and the more antsy and restless the existing stock of water horses, captured in years gone by, become. The colder the sea is, preparing for winter in its own twisted way, the more the magic calls beneath the horse’s shimmering pelts.

Sherlock cannot hold down one of those creatures. He cannot. It’s not a matter of whether or not
he’ll be trying hard enough. Those things are predators, they call to each other beneath the water and sound like whale songs, gentle and soothing.

On shore, they sound like kittens screaming, or babies crying.

Besides during the Races, Sherlock has never seen a *capall uisce* up close. One will occasionally become loose from the holds of the Stockyard, which makes its money by selling sport horses to the mainland, or one will climb from the sea in the middle of May or June, but never for long.

The summer horses emerge in daylight hours, then bubble and foam and slip back under the waves.

It is the horses that linger around the autumn Scorpio sea that are dangerous.

No, that’s not right.

All of the horses from the sea are dangerous, deadly. Their heads cocked back, raptor-like, ready to strike. They’re alive, always, and always ready and poised for hunting, for finding their next meal.

When Sherlock was young, when he was driven to the small school in Skarmouth, the car would swerve to avoid a carcass, draped over the low stone walls on either sides of the road. The evidence of a water horse meeting an island pony, still bleeding out on the packed earth.

Sheep show up slaughtered, and barn cats, too. Smears of red on the ground, inconsequential and common, like the blood on the sand the day after the Races, high up on the shore where the ocean has yet to reach and lap away.

Redbeard ambles along, and Sherlock, on his tired back, scans the horizon for anything.

Ten minutes later, they clear off the cracked dirt road to make way for a shiny red, newly modeled car ripping by. It throws up dust behind it. Sherlock pulls on the reins to halt Redbeard, who tucks his chin against his long red neck and snorts unhappily. Sherlock pats his neck, turning the stallion to watch the car whiz on. He wonders what someone with that kind of money (evident, wealthy - the model’s new from the mainland, whoever owns that is rich enough to have it shipped in - new tires, no dents) is doing on this side of the island.

Redbeard’s wispy tail flicks against Sherlock’s clothed calf, and Sherlock takes the hint, facing forward and forcing his heels back into Redbeard’s side to make him trot on.

Skarmouth already smells of November cakes when Sherlock ties the end of Redbeard’s reins to the post in front of the Hooper Bakery. The stallion dips his head to drink the stale water in the trough just under the post.

Sherlock pats his neck, belatedly noticing the mud caked into the short copper fur. He’ll need a rough brush when they get back. For now, however, Sherlock needs gas for the Ford and to check what’s going on down at the beaches. The latter now and the former afterwards.

He takes in the town of Skarmouth with an ease he’s never known in the crowd. Moments before walking into a dangerous situation always seem calm - like this - so this must be one of them. Which, by that logic, means he’s walking into a dangerous situation.

Tourists with fat wallets in their pockets (careful with those, visitors, there are less noble ways that the residents of Thisby can make money) walk around, laughing with wives or husbands or children. Men in prim waistcoats ignore the smaller shops for minuscule iron parts, or those that sell charms to tie into a water horse’s mane.
They have no need for these shops. Thisby does. Riders do.

Sherlock will.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and walks, shoes clapping on the cobblestone pathways. It’s insubstantial, doesn’t matter, he is lost to the tourists.

On the corner, the flower shop’s bouquets are not for decoration or for gifting to a sweetheart. They are to ward a home from the *capaill* that roam the island in October. And those silver bells strung on twine above that doorway - to keep the water horses away. They don’t often come into Skarmouth. But it’s not impossible.

Shops crowd close to each other, ivy crawling up their stone sides. A myriad of bicycles are leaning against stone walls, and more cars than Sherlock knew existed are parked along the streets, streetlights caught in their windshields. Streetlamps make brilliant halos against the paling stars; paper lights crawl along wires tied to telephone poles.

One could drive a car down the sandy slopes of the cliffs in some spots of the island. It’s easy for the horses to come up and putter around like dead among the living.

Sherlock spends a very brief moment standing on the cliff, the last faded light sliding behind the endless plane of the sea. By his side, a conifer is leaning over the edge, almost parallel with the ground, its exposed roots clinging to the rock. Sherlock must move, or he will lose his courage.

Courage. What courage has he ever had?

He stumbles and trips down the sandy dunes, angled back to not fall flat on his arse, his arms out to keep his balance, until he can make the awkward jump at the end that brings him sea level.

There are men around, chatting with one another. Locals, people born of Thisby.

They are waiting for water horses. It’s so early in October, though, will there be any?

Sherlock settles on the pebbles beneath the overhang of the chalk cliffs, and watches the people from a gravel hill, safe from the tide’s reach. Least until the very early, very dark hours of the morning, where the water will reach above his head, up to the portion of the cliff that's lighter to mark how high the water will rise.

And Sherlock doesn't plan to be out that long. He can only cheat death so much.

A man who’s cheating on his wife with the man walking next to him - a dangerous game - laughs, and says something about it being too early. Both of them leave the beach the way Sherlock came down, stumbling on the grassy dunes.

The evening wanes into night. Redbeard will be fine in Miss Hooper’s care.

Sandpipers pick at the receding waves in the blue wash.

Men come and go, watching the Scorpio sea before heading back up after a quarter of an hour or so.

In a week, the beaches will be flooded with commotion. People will be selling fresh water horses or their catches from years past. Stray dogs will run between the crowds, tempting fate. Men will lose fingers, noses, hands, and pride.
Past dusk, the tide has crept up to reach Sherlock’s booted toes. He lets them get wet. The water does not creep any further. It’s caught in the middle of high tide and the usual tide, a strange thing that happens on Thisby at this time of day. He watches the ocean for the slice of a body through the water.

They say that *capaill* caught at night are stronger than those in the day. They say that ones caught in a storm are flighty, but fast.

There is something enchanting about the sea at night.

The black waves, the *shhhhh, shhhhh* of the water lapping at the shore. The careful sounds of birds roosting in the cliffs above, soft shutters of wings against chips of chalk and feather.

The waxing moon glints off something in the water.

Sherlock freezes. He holds his breath.

A nose breaches from the foam of a cresting wave, breaking the surface before submerging again.

The seabirds above do not make any noise.

The nose emerges again, and this time, a head follows. Nostrils flare wide in a battle for air, red, and then the rest of the face. A neck, and a wet mane pasted to the side of it.

Sherlock needs to leave.

There comes a ascending wail, the sound of a scream underwater, a whale song, a baby crying. It’s meant to carry for miles.

Sherlock grapples at the pebbles beneath him, and gets his footing, eyes never leaving the water.

He presses his back to the cliff wall, and slowly, slowly, wades across the now knee-high water between his little hill of gravel and the dunes.

This is a dangerous place to be.

Moonlight sparkles in the *capall’s* eye. Wet. There is a flash of blunt teeth as it screams, the sound piquing. It’s seen him.

It goes under the black.

Sherlock, snapped from his daze, struggles through the water and the sand to the dunes. He needs to get out. He’ll be a midnight snack for a water horse. An easy meal, easy prey, something caught in the tide and being dragged out by it, a fragment of a shell torn by the water.

Especially easy to catch in its natural habitat, the tumultuous sea in the dark.

He makes it to the sand, and digs his hands in for purchase, the sand shifting under his fingers, and he struggles up the hill.

A splash below him, the sound a body makes when hitting water. A loud wail.

Sherlock makes it up the cliffs, where he collapses to his knees, panting and soaked up to the knee. There is sweat along his forehead, and his curls are frizzy with brine thrown at him by the wind. Shaking.
When he’s caught his breath, he circles back round to a steeper part of the cliffs, a part where he can overlook the place where the beach is when the tide goes down without fear of a horse climbing up after him. This is where people sit to watch the Races; this is where the starting line is drawn in sand.

Sherlock’s heart beats more quickly than it has ever before. It is the only sound, the only feeling in the world. The salt and the wind assault him at this vantage point.

Far below, the water laps at the cliffs, already having overtaken his gravel hill.

The waves are unbroken.

It’s as if nothing were ever down there.
Trouble

Chapter Notes

featuring Sherlock's terrible comebacks. And John Watson saving the day. There will be a lot of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I was starting to worry about you!”

“Mrs Hudson, you always worry about me.”

“Only because you always run off.”

Sherlock smiles fondly, shutting the door to the rusty old Ford. After his brush with the water horse, he’d picked up petrol for the car, and collected Redbeard, who’d trotted alongside the car with the reins mashed in the window on the way back to Mrs Hudson’s house.

With the Ford parked, Sherlock pulls on Redbeard’s reins, leading him into the stable. Mrs Hudson retreats inside, tutting. There’s something nervous about her demeanor.

He untacks the stallion, and shuts the stall door. Redbeard nickers softly, worn out. Sherlock throws in a few flakes of dry Thisby hay into the stall, and, when Josephine next door snorts in jealousy, he throws a few into hers, as well.

He brushes off his hands on his ruined, wet trousers, and walks inside.

He heads to his room to change, and remove his waistcoat. And then it's down to the cellar kitchen, where Mrs Hudson is washing a trio of mugs.

Sherlock narrows his eyes.

“You had Mrs Turner over.”

“For tea, yes. I always do! It’s that time of the week, you know...”

“Someone else was here.”

Mrs Hudson keeps drying her mug. The third one in a set; the other two are upside down on the counter, already cleaned.

She’s so used to him picking up on everything that she doesn’t say anything. Which means that Sherlock’s right.

He thinks of the bright, cherry red car coming down the road out of Skarmouth while he was headed into town.

He furrows his brow. “It wasn't Father Stamford.”

“Oh, no, dear. Jim rode up in Father’s car. Such a nice new thing, don't you think? Father had it shipped up from the mainland this past summer.”
She’s avoiding the subject. She’s avoiding it, and she’s just mentioned James Moriarty. Sherlock feels something sour curdle low in his gut.

“Why was Moriarty here?”

What could the rich owner of the Stockyard want with two old ladies chatting about bridge and drinking tea?

“We were just chatting.”

“People don’t just chat with James Moriarty. Why was he here?”

Mrs Hudson sets the mug down. She turns on him, lips pursed together, “Sherlock Holmes, you’re always sticking your nose in other people’s business.”

Oh, that's why.

“He was here about the house, wasn't he? About the mortgage.”

“Sherlock--”

“I’m right. He's not afraid to take back the house once--”

“Sherlock--”

“--Once the forward payments Mycroft made to you run out next year, and you don't make enough on your teapots to make your own payments, so he’s going to take the house unless you find a way of making more money--”

“Oh, please.” Mrs Hudson scoffs, and picks up the skirts of her dress as she stomps up the stairs.

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Sherlock rides the next misty morning, just for the thrill of Redbeard beneath him and the unending cold wind blasting in his face. He wishes that he’d always found a ride so mind-clearing. Maybe then, he wouldn’t have turned to other methods, those found in the tip of a needle.

There's a fork in the road, and Sherlock stalls. One side, the less worn side, heads off to Tholla, a cliffside town on the far south side of Thisby, and the other is Skarmouth, forwards. Both are covered in a fine fog that lies low to the ground.

Redbeard pants, and stamps his foot. He doesn't like how Sherlock has stopped. His ears swivel wildly.

Sherlock pulls him to the right, to the south, and to the fog.

The weak Thisby grass grows thick on and on the side of the road, which makes it really more of a path than anything else. It brushes up to Redbeard’s knobby knees.

The grass is bent on the road, where very few cars have run over, but directly beside it, it grows thick. Southern Thisby is like one giant field.
It and the dense white mist makes it hard to see the corpse strewn out in the road.

The smell hits Sherlock first, something left out to rot in the damp and the cold.

It’s a bloody smear on the beaten path, entrails and insides dragged all the way across the road, littering it with chunks of meat and thick streaks of crimson red.

Redbeard pulls into a stop. Sherlock looks down at it. He removes a small torch from the saddlebag behind him. Redbeard shifts uneasily as he flicks it on. The light does not go far in the thick white. There is a patch of matted dark wool, and half a head a few feet away, crushed. Lethargic insects buzz around where the bottom of the jaw would’ve been.

There’s the wet gleam of an eyeball down by the edge of the path.

Something clucks in the fog.

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Sherlock has savings. Meager, meager savings. Not enough to go to the mainland. Not enough for Anderson. Not enough to buy a water horse to race.

Not enough to pay off the house.

He’s infuriated by Moriarty. Infuriated the man would take the priest’s car up to Mrs Hudson’s home and sit down in the cellar with her and Mrs Turner. Infuriated by the nerve. If he thinks back to the event, he’s sure he caught some of the man’s lingering cologne in the air.

He has enough money to enter the Races. The fee is fifty, to be paid when he signs up at the Hawkins Tavern.

For a week, he checks between the couch cushions and beneath floorboards, in the tin where he keeps his coins.

He even does Miss Hooper’s errands for her, with a little coaxing.

“You want to go to the mill for me?” She asks him when he shows up at the bakery. She’s just put a metal pan of cinnamon twists into the oven, and replaced the few stale rolls in the window with a bundle of fresh ones.

“Yes,” Sherlock bites out. Ugh. Now is not the time to be coarse. He needs to be polite if he’s going to come out well in the conversation. “I’d, um,” He throws the stutter in there for good measure, “I’d like to work for you. For a short while. Just until the Scorpio Festival.”

“The Races festival? What’s happening when the Races come around?” Hooper asks. She takes the basket of stale rolls into the back. Sherlock follows, like he usually does when talking to her. The whole place smells tantalizingly of honey.

“I’m racing this year.”

She whirls on him, her mouth popped open in an o.

There are three seconds of silence, and then--
“Why on earth would you do that? You’ll get yourself killed!” Something clatters in the front room (it must be Archie, surprised at hearing Molly shout). “There- there are people who love you, Sherlock, you can’t, can’t just--”

“There are only a few deaths a year.” Sherlock shrugs, failing to see her point.

“That’s, that's not what I mean! You can get yourself hurt, you can be drowned or have your arm torn off-- Why are you like this? Why are you doing this?”

“Just. Miss Hooper. May I work for you?”

“It’s Molly. Are you trying to buy a water horse?”

“Yes.”

“Then no.”

“No? Why not?”

“You can’t race one of those things.”

“It’s a race for water horses, I'm going to need to procure a water horse.” He tries not to think about the dead sheep in the road.

“It'll eat you.”

“That risk is there for everyone on Thisby.”

Molly shakes her head. There’s flour on her floral dress, over her hips, where she must’ve put her hands when she got annoyed at her apprentice, a small boy named Archie, who is now peering out at them from the back corner of the shop.

Sherlock bites his tongue to keep from groaning in frustration. Then, he adds, quietly, eyes purposefully downcast, “Please.”

His mum did always say that being polite was the key to everything and anything a person could want. Mycroft liked to scoff at that.

And so Sherlock takes Redbeard to the mill with the pony cart hooked up to him the following morning, dragging along the cobblestone Skarmouth roads and into the north.

Each morning, at sunrise, for the week, he does this.

Each morning, at sunrise, they pass the Stockyard.

Not directly, but it's there. A great set of barns and stables not too far from the road, fencing that keeps in ordinary sport horses that get auctioned off to the mainlanders in the weeks leading up to the Races surrounding the property. The stone walls by the road mark the beginning of Moriarty’s property. Thisby is divided by things that Moriarty has a hand in, and things he does not.

The white of the fence posts, red of the stables, and green of the healthy grass is a very pleasing color scheme.

Each morning, at sunrise, Sherlock sees a single man. Short, choppy light hair. The man limps from fence to fence, turning in or out the sport horses and island ponies. Yearlings or stallions or broodmares.
Each morning, past sunrise, when Sherlock is riding back from the mill and headed towards Skarmouth once more, he sees the man.

He’s no longer alone, at this time of day. There are a few more men working in the stables or grooming the horses, waiting for mainland buyers to arrive for appointments to judge the newly born island ponies.

But what sets him apart is the giant, black horse that he rides.

A *capall uisce*, its neck cocked back and mouth open, teeth parted when it stands, or head tipped forwards when it’s ripping through the trail that leads more northward, away from Sherlock. It’s never close enough for Sherlock to look at properly. Neither is the man.

Redbeard sways uneasily when Sherlock stops and stares, compelled by the water horse’s magic to get away from it. Sherlock knows, he feels it, too. The lust that the black horse has for the sea.

It’s striking white mane and tail are bare, not braided with iron rivets weaved in. No bells jangle on its harness or bridle or saddle. There is nothing standing between the rider and the magic of the water horse, and nothing between the water horse and the magic of the sea.

The ordinary stallion below Sherlock is tiny compared to any water horse. Sherlock feels like he could stack Redbeard on top of Redbeard and still be unable to look the black horse in the predatory eye.

The first time Sherlock saw the rider atop the black horse, he didn't. It was raining, and there was a tarp over the pony cart.

He only saw the water horse and cowered, yanking on the wet reins and nearly tipping over the pony cart filled with grain bags trailing behind Redbeard.

Then the rider’s light hair caught the weak light of the grey sun, and Sherlock didn't relax.

The water horse tipped its head back, and screamed to the clouds.

The rider pulled on its mane, leaning forward, his lips near the horse’s ear, fingers drawing runes and patterns on the horse’s shoulder. The horse’s screech cut off.

The rider had tamed the sea.

And the sea was spitting water from the sky, resenting him for it.

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For a week, the island grows colder. The air begins to sizzle with magic, until it has sewn itself around everyone’s bones, like red string pulling on puppet limbs. It coaxes femurs into making people walk, holds skulls tight and squeezes them until people are nothing but a mindless sack of saltwater. The sea relinquishes more water horses to the island.

A man down on the beach is torn apart by a *capall* mare. Not eaten, just killed.

“The horses are up, don’t you know.” Anderson sneers at him when Sherlock goes into the notary’s office to check and see if the monthly post has dredged up anything for him.
“What a brilliant deduction.” Sherlock responds, in a monotone voice. He has no mail. Once, he suspected Anderson was just taking Mycroft’s letters from him, taking the money and hiding it, so Sherlock broke into the office, discovered Anderson wasn’t, and was arrested for his troubles. Lestrade let him go with a warning.

“What wouldn’t it be a shame if one came inland?”

“They always come inland. You know this. Don’t be a moron. Oh, wait,” Sherlock smiles tightly as he reaches for the door handle, a smile that does not reach his eyes in the least. “You already are one.”

Anderson scowls. His eyes are dark, and his mouth is a downwards curve beneath the brown beard. “I’d watch myself, if I were you.”

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Sherlock has some money. Not enough. Not enough to buy a water horse. Not one of those.

But he has enough to be a glutton and purchase a November cake on his way to the beaches through Skarmouth. The bakery is mostly empty. There’s a pair of tourists sitting at the round table by the door, a map of Thisby between them. They’re talking quietly and pointing out locations they’d like to visit. Sherlock resists a roll of his eyes, because everything they’re thinking of doing is boring and stupid. The only exciting thing on Thisby are the Races.

Archie hands him the paper bag, because Sherlock buys the cakes from him, for Molly will just give them to him. Molly is somewhere in the back room, and Archie stares at Sherlock with wide eyes. “Are you really going to ride in the Races?”

“Yes.”

“Can I watch?”

Sherlock pauses to parse this, handing over the two coins. “Sure. But Molly’s got to agree.” Archie’s father, formerly a fisherman, had been swallowed by the sea, and his mother had gone to the mainland. Sherlock had deduced that when he first met the little boy. Molly was as good as he could get.

“She’s never let me watch the Races before.” Archie says, a touch of sadness in his voice. Ah, then, Molly is being a good guardian.

“There’s good reason for it.”

“Are you going to the beach today?”

“Yes. But don’t tell Molly.”

Archie nods, in that overly enthusiastic way that boys his age have. Sherlock smiles in return.

He exits the shop, the bell tinkles above his head, and Redbeard snorts at him from the post. He must feel betrayed Sherlock’s spent money but not bought anything for him.

Sherlock checks that his reins are fixed properly on the post above the trough, and pats the red
stallion’s shoulder. Redbeard stomps that hoof, as if Sherlock were an annoying fly.

Sherlock reaches up and pulls on his ear, and the stallion swings his head, hindered by the confines of the reins, to shove his nose against Sherlock’s chest, huffing warm breath out over Sherlock’s waistcoat.

Then Sherlock walks through the crowds of tourists in town. He sits on the cliffs for a bit, by a spot he will never admit to being his favorite. The leaning conifer by his side, he sits and eats the November cake, watching the people and horses below. The wind steals their voices, and makes it all seem less real. It's all shifting ground, like quicksand, no one on the beach stays still.

And then it’s down the dunes.

The beach is chaos.

Much more real than sitting high above it.

Over the last week, the sea has spit up more horses than all of summer combined. Some were caught. Some worked their way slightly inland and slaughtered sheep. Mrs Turner’s are still safe. Mrs Hudson’s house is far inland.

*Inland*, Sherlock thinks, *inland. I’m fine.*

He does not think of Anderson’s words.

In the sky, grey clouds are rolling over each other, mimicking the waves shunting onto shore. Sherlock hears whispers of a storm on the wind.

Sellers and buyers and owners are all down at the sand, which gets somehow in Sherlock's curly hair despite how he hasn't touched the stuff.

For some reason, Sherlock is reminded of how Musgrave sounds when she's hissing, because that is the noise the men’s jackets make as they shift and move in the crowd, shoulder to shoulder.

Water horses are close; so close he can smell them, that ugly scent. They jerk and pull on the long leadropes clipped to charmed halters, momentarily tied to the land, thin heads on long necks towering over the heights of the men.

The beach is a dangerous place to be.

No man with a horse stands within ten yards of the sea. For good reason. A capall could emerge from any time - but the more obvious threat is the ones that the already caught capaill possess. They could steal a man away and disappear beneath the tumbling waves.

Sherlock feels out of place. The men here shout and wear their caps and comfortable trousers and cheap, ugly-coloured waistcoats. Sherlock has flat-pressed black trousers (that won't stay pressed in the damp weather for long), and dress shoes on. He would've slicked his hair back, but with Thisby’s climate, it would be frizzy and untamed well before noon.

To try and look the part, he rolls his white sleeves up to his elbows, which reveals little pockmark scars in the crooks of his arm and makes him uncomfortable, and unbuttons the first button on his grey waistcoat as he makes his way close to the cliffs.

He can feel it not working. He feels like he's dressed too posh for a place like this. His limbs feel like seaweed, wobbly. He's going to lose his nerve. Still, his face does not waver, and he tries
desperately not to show his anxiety to the masses.

“Mind your damned feet!” Someone holding a roan horse yells at him. Sherlock startles, and looks down, to where he's scuffed the outline of a circle in the sand. When he tries to bend and redraw it, the man shouts, brisk, “Nevermind!” The roan horse tugs toward the break in the circle as Sherlock leaves.

Men press close, laugh and talk, and water horses rear far above anyone’s head several times over, screaming occasionally.

When this happens, there's a group-wide freeze, a fear that permeates the humid air.

Then everyone eases when it shuts up.

The capaill uisce, all so close, smell like salt and the sea and waste and fish.

Thisby is no stranger to bad smells - that the tide brings in, dead fish, sour brine. The smell of a sheep corpse long dead and baking in the summer sun wherever a stray capall has dragged it to.

But this is different - it's all fresh, like death itself has been dredged straight from the depths of the Scorpio sea.

“Sherlock Holmes, what's a boy like you doing out here?” Someone shouts at him. Someone else laughs with as much gusto as a sea lion. Sherlock hunches his shoulders up to his red ears, and he walks faster.

Men are hawking to riders about insurance and prices, and dogs are still careening around ankle-height, looking for loose meat someone dropped while feeding a water horse.

A blonding mare lifts her head and shrieks, a haunting scream that fills the air.

The keening cuts through the wind, through the sound of the surf and the bustle of activity. It's the wail of an ancient predator. It's one thousand miles away from any sound a normal horse would make, and Sherlock knows it's made because she's hungry.

And it's horrible.

Was this the last sound Sherlock’s parents heard?

Stray dogs whine and scuttle under the cliffs and underfoot. Bells rattle on her saddle and her breastplate as she shifts her weight, preparing to rear.

The man in the bowler hat, her handler, yanks down on her braided rope, and the mare’s song is abruptly cut off.

She snorts, nostrils flaring wide. He can see red in them, the tired sun catching on her wet eyes.

She’s restless, Sherlock notices, as he keeps close to the cliff sides where others shelter. She never stays still. Her opalescent hooves dance in the sand, her white and yellow mane flings from side to side when she shakes or tosses her head.

The square pupils in her frightful eyes track the movement of everyone on the beach. She drools sea foam, the same that washes onto the shore. He can almost hear her grinding her teeth. The island is her prison.

Sherlock knows something dangerous when he sees it. He crosses his arms, and leans back into the
chalk cliffs, ignoring the way it will get fragments into his dark hair.

The man in the bowler hat, the mark of a seller (there are many in the crowd, but this one is closest and this one has the blonde mare), is holding out the leadrope and crowing to passer-bys.

One man stops. Doctor Fletcher. Sherlock has always liked him, even if the doctor is indifferent to him. He's handsome, levelheaded, and generally calm with everyone, even those insane patients of his. Sherlock wanted to marry him when he was six.

“Ho, Doctor, what a pleasure to see you on this fine morning! Have a look at her, see…”

Fletcher looks at the mare. The mare is looking at something by everyone's feet, her mouth parted and her breath visible in the frigid October air. Sherlock’s skin prickles.

“This what Watson looked at?”

The name sounds vaguely familiar. But so does every name on Thisby.

The bowler hat’s face twists into something ugly, “Don’t know what you've heard from that Watson. His head’s half-full of saltwater. But he admitted she was fast - faster than that black stallion of his…”

The bowler hat is deflecting someone’s opinion from the mare, and heading right back into his sale’s pitch. Sherlock squints. His cheeks are red and raw from the wind hurling sand at them. He’s been out here all morning, trying the same lines. And, obviously, he’s been getting the same words spat back at him.

“What’s that Watson saying about my horse?” Ah, the bowler hat’s fed up, now.

“Watson says she’ll kill someone.”

“Well, Doctor, they’ll all kill someone! ‘S the mark of the capaill! Try her out, get on her back, she’s faster than the Thisby winds.”

Fletcher shakes his head, backing away and already disappearing into the crowds. “Not today, sorry.”

The bowler hat tries to lure in a few more men that are skeptically eyeing the rocking blonde mare, but fails when they all mention a Watson name.

At one point, the bowler hat yells at a young man, maybe eighteen, “Is that Watson here today? Hm? Yes? Tell him to see me, we’ll discuss her price and how dangerous she is, again!”

Then he mutters something about people of Thisby worshipping this Watson, and is back to his luring lines.

Sherlock finally lifts his weight away from the cliff walls and approaches him.

“Do you do fifths?” He asks.

The bowler hat turns to him. His large eyebrows sink down further over his dark eyes.

Then. He simply. Looks away.

The blonde mare’s head swings towards him. Her lips are curled back, mule-like.
Sherlock doesn't like the way she never unpins her ears from the back of her head.

“Not for you.”

Sherlock's clipped, natural response to that is, “Your oldest daughter is shagging your brother.”


Sherlock gets a stinging punch to his mouth, and it splits his lip.

He retreats, and sits atop the cliffs, next to the leaning conifer and its orange carpet of fallen pine needles (he thinks about the acid, acid, acid, that the needles release into the soil, but only the green ones, and the ones on the ground are orange, yellow, orange …)

He watches the activities from above instead.


The bowler hat is beginning to grow desperate.

Sherlock can see it from where he's gone back down to the cliff walls, once he's mustered up enough courage.

He could look for more bowler hats. The other grimy horse mongers, there are plenty of them, someone should be willing to do fifths with him. But there's a mean, stubborn thing in his gut. And he stays.

The mare rocks back and forth, a low growl on her breath.

“You, there!”

Sherlock looks up. The bowler hat, with his face like a troll, is pointing at him. He beckons Sherlock closer with a curling finger. How polite.

Sherlock approaches, sand and pebbles crunching under his shoes, slightly wary and with an aching lip. He avoids stepping on a small stray dog as he walks. It yipes and the blonde mare huffs out a hungry breath through her nose. It curls in the cold air, but is gone nearly immediately, the thickening wind sweeping it away, blowing the foul smell towards Sherlock.

“Sorry about that… misunderstanding, earlier,” The man says, and Sherlock can already guess what this is going to end as, “But it seems like no one wants to win the Races this year. Fifths, you said?”

Sherlock nods. Fifths will get him the blonde mare for free upfront, but four-fifths of the prize money will go to the bowler hat standing before him now. There's not much money anywhere but first place. Still, even a fifth of that could pay off Mrs Hudson’s house and get Sherlock to the mainland, several times over.

“She’s the fastest thing on the island at the moment,” The bowler hat says, stepping back so
Sherlock can look at her. A gold chain is worn around her nose, fed through her halter. Sherlock has to admit that she looks amazing, and absolutely giant. Sherlock doesn't like tipping his head back to look up at her, because it exposes her throat. The mare is eyeing a dog scurrying around the monger's feet. It's deeply disquieting.

...The stiffer a horse's leg is restricts how quickly it can transmit force to the ground and bounce back up again and also increases the chances of injury. Fast horses can bring their legs forward quickly in preparation for the next stride but that this is more difficult and therefore slower for large and long-legged horses...

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The bells on her breastplate rattle almost inaudibly. She is shuddering with power.

“Then you wouldn't mind taking a gamble on her.” Sherlock watches the mare, every twitch of her laid-back ears is a tell in the misty day.

“I'm not trying to come back and collect.” The bowler hat tugs on her leadrope when she jerks her head back, eyes wide and teeth bared.

“If she's the fastest thing on land, don't you trust her to win you more than she's worth?” Sherlock crosses his arms. He’s trying to sound business-like, like Mycroft.

“It's not her I don't trust.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

The bowler hat grins suddenly.

“Hop on,” The bowler hat says, “See how fast she is.”

They walk together until Sherlock can stand on a rock, slippery with algae that flourishes when the tide comes in, and is tall enough to reach the crest and horn of the saddle.

She’s still moving, rocking, and Sherlock realizes that's as still as she's going to get. The mare is eyeing the small scruffy dog with sand in its fur, sniffing at someone's rejected breakfast down by her hooves.

The bowler hat urges, “Go on, hop on.”

“Stop! Stop!”

Sherlock turns to find out who’s shouting, one foot in a stirrup and the other on the rock, and so does the bowler hat, and that's when it happens.

The mare’s neck flashes down, a blur of sharp white and yellow, so fast it's nearly impossible, and something shoves Sherlock from the boulder.

He gasps as his back hits the ground, hard, and something spatters across his face, warm and wet. His back aches as he watches the mare rear up, ripping at something mangy in her mouth. She comes back down, and Sherlock rolls out of the way of her hooves just in time as they slam into the sand, spraying grains - he's stuck on his back in shock, and realizing that it's blood on his face, and it's coming from above, not him.

Blood pools in the sand.

The mare tosses part of her victim at Sherlock, and the mangled flesh lands before him, matted with
fur and sand and blood. Something stringy comes from the joint, waving as if it were an anemone in the crevices in the rocks at low tide.

The lump is nearly unrecognizable. It’s a ruin. Sherlock is in danger of throwing up - he clasps a sore, sandy hand over his mouth to prevent this - blood drips down the side of his face.

It's the dog.

A short, blond man is grappling with the giant mare, pulling on her leadrope and her mane, shouting strange words at her amongst the rest of the plainly panicked yelling from other people. The bells rattle loudly, and it's the only sound in the world.

Someone screams - the mare has bitten off someone’s fingers in her hungry prancing. A young man’s fingers, Sherlock believes, but then he is being touched.

“Move, man, move!” Someone is reaching down, pulling at Sherlock’s frozen arm and forcing him to stand, guiding him backwards and away from the leaping horse and the shrill sound of the bells. Away from the cliffside and the kelp-covered rocks, back to the sea.

Sherlock can't look away from the dance between the short man and the blonde mare. There is blood on the white skin round her mouth. The gold chain that had held her to the earth and to the sand and to sanity has fallen to the beach.

The bells shriek.

Sherlock can barely breathe.

The short man is nearly pulled off his feet when the blonde mare tosses her head back, wailing like a dead man, and Sherlock can see both sets of teeth, hers and the man’s, are bared. But only one set is bloody and frothing.

People are growing closer, trying to help, and the mare’s hooves are pounding against the sand, prancing and charging and galloping without moving an inch.

“Give me space!” The blond man yells, his voice deep and throaty, “Back off! Now!” His eyes never leave the capall’s.

The commands make even Sherlock jerk back, still held up by a man, the one who pulled him from the ground, with the black hair and a grin on his face.

How can someone be grinning right now? A dog’s dead, a man’s lost his fingers, and another one is dancing with lightly-coloured death.

In the middle of a circle of men and riled horses, Sherlock is amazed by the man’s apparent calm. There is strength in the cords of muscle prominent in his bare arms, but he is not panicked.

It's a mistake, to be unafraid like this.

No. It's not fearlessness. It's respect, and it's knowledge - knowledge that this horse could rip anyone's throat wide open.

Sand flies from the horse’s hooves, and her mane shimmers like seaweed caught in the dull light, just for a moment, and then it's hair again. Her pelt gleams like glowing coral.

The dim sunlight catches on the man’s hair, elicits a memory of the clank, clank of the high wheels
of Redbeard’s pony cart when they bump over rough patches of gravel, and Sherlock is suddenly very, very stupid.

Away from the fight (and feels like he's betraying the man, like he's started the fight and left it for him to finish), Sherlock looks towards the crowd he's in, gathered to watch the fight. The fight that can only end badly.

“But he admitted she was fast - faster than that black stallion of his…” The sound of the bowler hat’s voice.

He cranes his neck and-- there.

Held by a thick man with dark, straight hair and unending patience in his gaze, is a giant black stallion with a striking white mane and tail.

It stands out among the dun and bay and roan coats scattered round the beach, still while the other capaill are steadily being pulled from the scuffle as they become too excited at the smell of blood and flesh, the sounds of a fight.

Somewhere else, two horses rear up to fight, their handlers desperately trying to pull them apart. Sherlock doesn't care.

He’s fixated on staring at the black stallion. Its long, gaunt face and haunting dark eyes stare right back. Sherlock feels a primal fear slide down his spine.

The stallion’s nostrils are long and thin, to keep the sea out. Its eyes are black and slick; like a fish’s. This is what he's been seeing when he carts Redbeard past the Stockyard each morning.

There is an overly loud oof! and Sherlock snaps back to the fight.

The short man - the black stallion’s rider - has the mare’s face pressed up against his chest, and Sherlock panics, expecting blood and carnage and organs to spill from the man's ribs. It's for naught, the rider hasn't been ripped open. The water horse's long neck is stooped low at an odd angle to do so, and her back hooves continually pound the sand, but her forelegs are still. She is huffing and puffing, her lips drawn back by the man’s stomach to show her teeth.

He holds her cheekbones, her skin slippery wet there, and his lips are moving. He's saying something. Sherlock doesn't know what.

“Someone give me iron. Something iron.” The man says. His raised voice is calmer now, less frantic than it had been when he'd been shouting for room.

He slowly lifts a hand away from one side of her face for his request to be filled.

The mare snorts and struggles, like the spell has been broken. The man winds his arm under her jaw and hugs her massive head tighter to his abdomen, a grim look upon his face. “Now, if you don't mind.”

His eyes are glued to hers.

Hers, that speak of a death at the bottom of the sea and corpses caught in rocks, and his, that speak of light blue skies and the land.

The crowd is quiet.
Then, the black-haired, freckled man who had since been holding Sherlock’s elbow (and Sherlock was sure this was the only thing keeping him standing), breaks away from him.

He digs into his ratty olive green waistcoat pocket and pulls out something that looks like a necklace, then steps forward to hand it off to the light-haired man.

He takes it and presses it against her cheekbone.

The effect is immediate.

The blonde mare stops prancing where she stands. Her lips slide back over her bloodied teeth. Her ears droop forward.

“Thought you didn't do charms, John.” Says the black-haired man, loudly. He's still smiling. He hasn't stopped. He must've known the short man was going to be expert at handling the deadly blonde mare.

‘John’ doesn't look away from the mare.

Except, when he does. He grips the top of the leather braided leadrope in one hand and uses the other to wind the iron necklace around the blonde’s halter.

This is the kind of magic Thisby holds, wound tight round local throats.

The sort that is folktale by day, but, in the dark, is as real as Sherlock Holmes or any man or woman on the island.

Sherlock can see the muscles in the man’s cheek jumping as he clenches his jaw, stalking towards Sherlock, leading the mare next to him (one rule of Thisby is to never turn your back on a capall, any local would rather jump from the cliffs and into the November sea than do so). He has one hand on the charmed halter and another on midsection of the leadrope.

John is limping. Faintly. Left leg. Something jumps in Sherlock's throat - he caused this fight, he did, somehow, he was distracted and the mare took advantage and snapped at the stray, and, with the taste of blood, was impossible to calm, she hurt John and it’s his fault.

Except.

This is an old limp. And John’s face, hard, is not registering new pain. There's nothing on his trousers, no blood, and neither is there any on his shoes.

And he's still walking towards Sherlock, hauling that blonde mare.

Sherlock is momentarily afraid and ashamed, both at once, but John’s eyes aren't on him.

They’re on the troll-faced, bowler-hatted man, quivering slightly next to him.

John stops before him. He stands like he's forgotten about the limp.

Sherlock can see his face now, heavy bags that speak of stress and sleepless nights are underneath pale, washed out blue eyes. The colour of tidepools on cloudy days. Like today.

There's a pause.

It's obvious the gathered men are only staying to see what will happen between the bowler hat and John.
And then John thrusts the leadrope towards the bowler hat, keeping his hold on her halter.

“I told you yesterday. Put her back. Let her go.”

The bowler hat abruptly stops quaking. He doesn't take the leadrope. “And I told you, Watson,” he spits the name like it’s something foul, “You don't have any right to go around talking about my horses like you ‘ave been! You walk around this island as if it exists only to have you on it!”

Sherlock stares at the blue-eyed man. Then glances at the bowler hat, then back to John. This is Watson?

The man who was apparently bad-mouthing the mare has just calmed her?

Of course! When the bowler hat said ‘faster than that black stallion of his’, he’d been talking about Watson, the rider from the Stockyard! The black stallion with the white mane and tail, the positively enormous one, just over there! Sherlock is an absolute --

“You wanted to talk about prices? What do you value your life at?”

“You--!”

“Throw her back.”

“How dare you --” The bowler hat begins, but John is shoving the leadrope into his chest now, no questions asked.

The bells quake, the mare’s haunches and chest are twitching. Her ears are pinned back again, and her breath is coming in faster.

The man since holding the great black capall uisce stallion stumbles forward, the massive horse wading in the crowds, which parts before it. Its powerful gaze urges the stragglers of the crowd to disperse, to go back to hawking food at the riders and buyers or haggling over insurance and prices, and to be more well spread over the tract of useable beach instead of condensed here. The dramatics are finished.

The black-haired man that helped Sherlock stand, mouth still grinning, walks to the stallion.

The beach smells of dead fish and hot blood. Sherlock wipes at his face, smearing the dog blood across his cheek, and the sand that has stuck to it into the crease of his lips. The salt burns the cut on his lower one. Bells jangle as the bowler hat yanks the blonde mare away, his face purple and angry.

When John Watson turns, and their eyes meet for a split second, Sherlock can see the lines in his face, carved out during a life by the ocean cliffs and the struggling Thisby grass and the Scorpio winds.

Those eyes dart down to Sherlock’s mouth, no doubt looking at the split, which has ripped open. They flicker back up.

“Are you all right?”

The wind is so strong, Sherlock thinks he imagines the words John Watson directs at him. John Watson frowns.

Desperate for him to get the look off his face, Sherlock nods vigorously. He's all right. There's blood on his face and his back aches and he's talking to this man, this man who’s calmed perhaps the
most dangerous beast on this island.

Then Watson’s face is gone as he nods, just once, turns away, and Sherlock is stuck staring at the back of his head as he makes his way towards the black stallion and the two other men, the grinner and the handler.

“All set?” The grinning one says.

John Watson nods, uninviting. “I saw what we came here for.”

Chapter End Notes

the lil horse leg science bit in the middle is from here!
“Five times,” Stamford whistles.  
Such a statement is too tantalizing to ignore.  
“Why?”  
“Some reckon it’s that black stallion. Fastest thing alive.”

The walk up the dunes is long. There's a scratchy feeling under his skin, like the dog blood has infected him with mites or fleas. He feels stares at his back, and his throat and eyes burn. 

Redbeard flattens his ears when he sees Sherlock. Sherlock’s heart splinters at the image. 

He knows he smells like blood and the capaill, like rider’s sweat and disappointed, fearful nerves. He knows there's sand in his hair, clothes, and all over his skin, rubbing him raw in all the wrong ways. He knows he smells like the enemy. 

The ride back to the house is longer. 

The sun dips behind the cliffs, behind the sea, and Sherlock shoves his heels into Redbeard’s side. The red stallion trots, and then canters. Sherlock leans down close to his free mane, hands knotted in the hair both for grip and to keep it from whipping at his face. 

When Redbeard picks up speed, the ride is smoother. 

Sherlock untacks and puts Redbeard away in the second of the two-stall barn. Josephine snorts, like always, but it's more forced this time - a ragged attempt at normality. 

Sherlock still smells like fish and sand and blood when he goes to bed.

-/-

He can’t ride one of those things. He can’t do it.

-/-

The butcher shop is the cleanest place on Thisby. 

And the Hawkins Tavern is the dirtiest. 

It’s filled with empty bar stools and tables during the day, and when the sun dips beneath the horizon, it fills with seedy people that stay long into the night.
The floorboards look old and washed out; too many people have been sick on them, and too many
times a mop has been scrubbed rigorously over them. It smells and feels disgusting, and the
atmosphere always presses unkindly onto irregulars heads. Sherlock never goes there.

Tonight, however, he does.

It is, after all, where he's to sign up for the Races.

His mum used to say that every man on the island was in love with Janine Hawkins - she was
beautiful, and she could make any man as drunk as a water horse on the November tide.

Sherlock’s never been swayed. It isn't really his area, this whole, *feelings*, business.

And he wouldn't fall in love with her, in any event. A game like the one Sherlock plays is nearly as
dangerous as the Races themselves. He will never fall in love. The people of Thisby seem to have
demented ideas of that concept, anyways.

It hasn't been a long time since Sherlock was in Skarmouth after dark. The ghost of his memory
plays tricks on him, of that night, merely a week ago, when he was soaked up to the knees and
covered in salt and brine and fear and fleeing a water horse.

He instinctively looks towards the sea. He can't see past all the shops, but he knows just beyond
them, in the dark, like this, the black sky will drop over the cliffs like a veil and will match the sea
colours. It will be impossible to tell them apart.

Skarmouth in the dark is entirely different than the one during the day, where weak light can reach
even the deepest of alleyway corners.

Night has washed the whole town in blue - the paper lanterns waver and clink in the wind. All of
the buildings press against each other, and, clinging to the cliffs, peer into the endless cobblestone
beneath them.

Bicycles are covering every wall Sherlock can see, the car's windshields on the side of the road
gleam under the streetlights, and there are many people out. There would be. Tonight’s the first night
the blackboard will be out in the tavern, the first night people will sign up for the Races.

He knows it has to be tonight, or he’ll lose his nerve. He may still.

Others have the same idea. The ones that sign up tonight will be like Sherlock, or they will be those
brave enough to flaunt their involvement with loud voices and mugs of beer.

Sherlock hasn't ever seen this many people about, except on nice days. And there are few of those
on Thisby. It’s a clear night, but the streetlamps on the walk distort the autumn sky and don’t let the
light of any stars through.

Redbeard, below him, doesn't like the atmosphere.

The sea calls to him. But as an island pony, his instinct is to steer away from it. How terrible for this
to be an island, and for him to be perpetually frightened.

Sherlock dismounts, and pulls Redbeard by the reins to the metal grate by the cliffs, as close as he
can get. Skarmouth has the smell of fish and strange smoke to it tonight, and Sherlock carefully peers
over the edge of the grate, put just around the cliffside towns to keep people from walking off the
edge of the island, to see if there are any boats down in the ocean to account for the scent. There's
nothing but black water and the reflection of the sliver of moon in the sky.
A pair of men with dark eyes linger by the streetlamps across the cobblestone street. Sherlock sniffs, shoving his hands into his coat pockets and hurrying towards the tavern.

"Ho, the beast’s come out of his castle!"

"Ho, pretty boy…!"

He doesn't have time to deal with idiots. But. The annoying names have the opposite affect on him that they're meant to have. They calm him, instead of unsettle him. Because they're such a staple of his life on Thisby. And what he's about to do is not.

For a moment, he worries for Redbeard, but the stallion is perfectly capable of biting a man’s hand should someone try and touch him. He couldn't bite it off, he's not bloodthirsty like the capaill, but he could do damage. The thought makes Sherlock smirk as he shoves into the tavern door and past the people spilling out onto the walk.

The tavern is a riot of noise and smells, and Sherlock feels overcrowded and exposed at once. He hunches his shoulders, looks up. Lights swing overhead, close to the low, exposed timber ceiling. Snippets of loud conversation whirl around the barrel-like tables and in the heavy, foggy air.

"Would really be more clever to sign up in the butcher's, wouldn't it?"

"--d'you mean?"

"It's where the riders get their meat, ain't it?"

"Sure," Answers a new voice, "But all this will be feeding the horses, won't it?" Barking laughter from three men.

Sherlock edges his way into the single line of people leading up to where Janine is writing down names on her blackboard with a neat line of chalk. Her script is elegant, and Sherlock knows she hasn't had one thing to drink all evening. He doesn't think she's ever touched the stuff to her red mouth.

There is a gap beneath the labels on the blackboard, before the names start. The board already has a dozen names and horses on it.

There are other names, below the gap, names Sherlock recognizes only vaguely.

*Joseph Bucher - Uylessus*

*Charles Augustus Magnussen - Mary*

*Jefferson Hope - Hydria*

Maybe this is a bad idea.

Scratch that, it *is* a bad idea. A very bad idea. But Sherlock’s in a room full of people who have the same idea. Perhaps it isn't terrible...

Maybe they won't even let him sign up. Like yesterday, at the beach, where the bowler hat with the low eyebrows and the blonde mare took one look at him, and denied him fifths.

At least he isn't dressed up this time. He’s in clothing as casual as everyone else. He feels as though he's trying too hard to look the part, like anyone who looks at him will be able to tell that he doesn't belong here.
And he doesn’t.

He truly, truly doesn’t.

Sherlock crosses his arms over his chest, and tilts his head up, defiantly trying to look not so out of place.

And that’s when Sherlock spots him.

The man from the beach.

John Watson.

Sans his giant black stallion, but they’re in a crowded tavern, and Sherlock doubts a water horse would be welcome here.

Watson’s up by the front of the long line, next up, after the beefy man who might be the butcher’s son, who is speaking to Janine with a drunk, lazy smile. A younger woman in a dress is pressed near to the butcher’s side.

Watson’s black coat collar is turned up against the back of his neck, hiding his musical hairline. He’s not looking at anyone, he’s staring at the ground, minding his own business. Everyone is being jostled or pushed by the crowd, but no one is jostling or pushing Watson.

His hair is windblown from the beach, and in the strong artificial light, Sherlock can see that his hair isn’t just blond, it’s grey, too. Equally light. There’s three-day stubble crawling over his cheeks, beneath his lips and nose, tapering out down his neck.

Sherlock is taking a moment to look at him, really look at him, to find the faults in his appearance and see his life, when a voice calls to him.

“Oh? Holmes! Sherlock Holmes, what’re you doing in a place like this?”

Sherlock turns. Behind him, not in line, is Father Stamford. Seeing him in a place like this is strange. Even stranger on a night like this, where men are actively taking the Lord’s name in vain and threatening death and gambling on rider’s lives. It’s the opposite of the sort of place where Stamford should be.

The clean white dog’s collar stands out among his dark robes. Sherlock doesn’t like the way Stamford’s called him out of place. He’d hoped it wasn’t that obvious. Evidently, he’s not that wonderful at disguising himself.

“Oh, Sherlock, don’t be looking at him like that.”
Sherlock's snaps his face back to Stamford, alarm flaring in his head more loudly than all the yelling in the tavern, than the jangle of the bells on the blonde mare’s breastplate, more potently than the stink of beer and stale sweat. Stamford pushes his glasses back up onto his face.

“I wasn't looking at anyone.”

Stamford chuckles a small, homely chuckle. “Don’t you know who that is?”

“John Watson. Isn’t it.” He's admitting to looking. Damn.

“Five time winner of the Scorpio Races, he is.”

Sherlock blinks. He looks back to Watson, who's idling by the varnished counter as Janine writes his name on the blackboard behind her. She writes *John H. Watson* under *Jockeys* and the name *Gladstone* under *Capaill Uisce*.

Someone who no doubt thinks they're hilarious has written *meat* in tiny block letters beneath *Jockeys*.

She puts his name right at the top, filling in the gap she was evidently saving for him.

Men crow out whoops and hollers in the tavern, excited by the champion’s participation.

Sherlock wonders what the *H.* stands for.

He wonders why he didn't pick up that Watson was a winner of the Races before.

It must be the limp. Watson limps, badly, as he walks towards the door, but he doesn't have a cane. It’s not as bad as it was at the beach. Sherlock’s mouth flattens into a line. Psychosomatic. Interesting. It lessened to near nothing when he was handling the blonde mare.

He looks sharp, like a man who could race, but his face is also soft around the corners. Like he wouldn't have the heart.

Perhaps that's what makes him a winner.

Perhaps Sherlock didn't realize because everyone on Thisby is so unendingly boring, he didn't think to look past the surface. *Mistake*.

Sherlock hums, so Stamford knows he heard him. He uncrosses his arms.

“Five times,” Stamford whistles.

Such a statement is too tantalizing to ignore.

“Why?”

“Some reckon it's that black stallion. Fastest thing alive.”

“And what do you think?” Sherlock asks Stamford, his eyes trailing Watson as he leaves. No one touches him. It's not like they ignore him, it's just as if Watson is not in the same place as them. The incoming group by the door swallows him up, and he’s gone.

“I think it's just him. He's got one foot in the ocean and one on the land. No one knows the water horses better than him. He's the one to beat.”
Stamford speaks with a touch of fondness, and something a little too knowledgeable.

“You know him.” Sherlock says.

“Everyone does,” Stamford smiles the warm thing that stretches his pudgy cheeks, “Everyone knows everyone on Thisby.”

“You know him.”

“Very old friend of mine.”

“Do you say that because you're a priest?”

“I say that because we’re very old friends.”

“But you’re not close.”

“With John? Ha, no, sorry, I’ve known him for a very long time, but I don’t think anyone’s close with that man.”

Sherlock is suddenly aware of the large space in front of him. He takes a few long steps forward. There’s only three men in front of him. He closes his eyes, sees the imprint of the lights suspended above him, and takes a deep breath and tries to ignore all the noise.

He steps up. Another step. Another. He fists the coins in his pocket. The clink of mugs being batted together. Someone’s fist slams into a table - lost an arm wrestling competition.

Father Stamford is back next to him.

“Why are you here, Father?” Sherlock asks, his voice a low rumble. It's strange a priest should be here. In the center where men sign up for the bloodiest, oldest sport in the world. With drunkards and evil men, and women who can get anyone drunk.

Stamford is looking at the blackboard with intent. He hums when Sherlock speaks, turning to look back to him.

“So that I know who to pray for.”

Sherlock’s next.

Janine folds her arms on the counter, looking at him, and then to Stamford.

“Hello, boys, what can I do for you? You sure picked a helluva night to come out…”

Sherlock is aware she thinks he's here for a drink. His face warms, and he tries to sound firm. “I’m here to sign up for the Races.”

“You sure you're up for that?”

It feels insane to be questioned where other men have not. Sherlock's ears burn. Why must everyone be questioning him tonight? There must be some conspiracy.

He nods.

Janine’s smile never falters, “It’s fifty, love.”
Sherlock hands over the coins, his savings. His stomach is an ocean of trouble. He shifts his feet on the worn floorboards.

Janine turns around, the shifts of her dress glaring white around her hips. At the space beneath Bill Murray, the last man in line and the owner of the tourist trap of a shop, who’d left just before Sherlock stepped up, she poises her chalk.

Janine writes Sherlock Holmes.

She pauses beneath the Capaill Uisce column. Then she looks over her shoulder at him, pinned up dark hair contrasting her shining white teeth while she smiles.

“What’s your ride’s name, Sherl?”

Sherlock blinks.

He thinks.

He asks, “A rule sheet.”

Janine quirks a cleverly plucked eyebrow.

“Please.”

“Sure.” She crouches, shuffling through papers under the counter, and Sherlock feels like everyone is looking at him while she is. Stamford is of little comfort.

Sherlock scans the sheet when she hands it over, front and back. “Keep it,” Janine notes, tapping her fingers lightly on the counter.

*Riders must declare their mounts at the end of the Scorpio festival rider’s parade. Swapping of mounts after that date is not permitted.*

Sherlock breathes. He thinks of Watson and his uncanny ability to calm and to tame sea.

“Name, Sherl?” Janine asks, and Sherlock thinks he hates that name she swirls round her tongue. He wants to wipe it from his hands.

Sherlock swallows. “Redbeard.”

-/-

He can’t ride a *capall*. The blonde mare has put him off too much.

No. It’s not her.

It’s everything. The way the water horses smell, the way they move, the way the bells tinkle on their halters and bridles, the way their long necks are always cocked back, ready to snap forward and strike like a cobra’s.

He remembers Mycroft’s letter.
‘And the damn horses.’

Sherlock needs… He doesn’t know. He can’t say he needs to get off this island, because he doesn’t, because Thisby is his home. Though, he’s sure the island wouldn’t care whether he lived or he died. He can’t tell whether he loves Thisby despite that, or because of it.

Mainlanders move here, and island-born people leave. It’s swapping one life for another.

Once, long ago, when Redbeard was a foal and Sherlock’s curly hair was matted and so long it had to be tied back, he stood with Mycroft, watching the young red foal bound around on new legs.

“Why do you think it is, brother dear, that Thisby has the water horses, and no one else does?”

“Because we love them,” Sherlock had answered, truthfully, honestly.

Sherlock knew, and knows, that he loves the water horses. He loves their unfathomable power, their magic ability, their tremendous, shuddering speed, but he loves it as he loves myths and pirates. As something far away, and detached from him. He loves Redbeard as he loves Thisby, held close to his heart and sheltered from the cricketing winds.

Redbeard could die.

They could race, and Sherlock could be snatched off the island pony, and Redbeard could be torn apart, and Sherlock could be a red smear on the sand. Food for the gulls.

Or, Sherlock could win the Races and buy Mrs Hudson twenty new homes from James Moriarty himself, get to the mainland and drag Mycroft back, and settle happily back at home, with plenty of oranges to eat and Redbeard adorned in a winning garland of green carnations and him in a bouquet of indigo and lilac.

Fanciful thinking. Both ways. How could he possibly hope to win?

How could he possibly hope to live, even to the day of the Races?

-/-

At Saint Columba’s, the massive church just outside Skarmouth, Sherlock sits in the front pews.

The church is very old, maybe the oldest building on the island. There are some stables at the Stockyard that are around as old, evidence that people of Thisby had kept the water horses and the island ponies as long as they had worshipped a god under the sun.

It’s a weekday, and there isn’t mass, but the church’s doors are open, as always. Coloured sunlight streams through the large stained glass window far above the altar before him. It’s a fair day outside.

He’s not a religious man. He doesn’t believe the answers are gifted from above, or that they can be found in a building.

He does, however, believe in a quiet place to think.
“I know. You don't have to do it.”

Redbeard munches noisily on the hay between his equine teeth. His ears merely flick towards the sound of Sherlock’s voice.

“You can't understand me, anyways,” Sherlock says, sitting on a firm bale of hay outside the two-stall stable. One of the walls is the outside wall of Mrs Hudson’s house. On the other side are two shoddily-built stalls, and a dangerous hay loft creaks above.

Josephine is old, but she loved to kick when she was younger. Redbeard is too poised to be kicking out the doors and the fence that winds completely around Mrs Hudson’s property. Sherlock can see the rickety, aged wood in the grey day, maybe twenty yards from the front door. The metal gate is round the back of the house, and the Ford is parked just outside it.

He hunches over, setting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands as he regards the red stallion, picking at the flake of hay Sherlock gave him, only moments ago. Musgrave has yet to make an appearance, as the barn cat often does. She might be ripping apart the seats in the Ford. Josephine is meandering slowly inside the fences. She doesn’t get out very often.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about. You don't know what any of this means.”

Sherlock fiddles with the rule sheet, wishing, like always, Redbeard could answer him.

“We have to train within one hundred and fifty yards of the shore. Or else we’ll get disqualified.”

Redbeard’s ears flick forwards again, and his neck lifts up, head turning into the dusk to listen to something. Then his tail flicks and he bends, and goes back to eating.

Sherlock doesn't even worry about whatever Redbeard thought he heard. He trusts the horse.

“That means the beaches.”
Tumbling Close

Chapter Summary

The ocean laps at Redbeard's knees, shhhh, shhhh… It's hypnotic, and it's no wonder Sherlock doesn't see the capall uisce until it's upon them.

Sherlock is at the beach.

With Redbeard.

The horse is nervous. It's obvious in every step he takes, every flick of his ear or twitch of a muscle. The capaill for sale or practicing here on the beach can look at him and can smell his fear.

They can smell Sherlock's, too, through the mist and the wind that's ripped it to bits, throwing all the men and horses on the beach into sharp detail.

Hell, Sherlock can smell his own damn fear. He repeats to himself, in time with the ocean waves, that he is not afraid. The emotion slowly suppresses down below his lungs.

It's rich and potent as he wades Redbeard into the sea, after a pointed but otherwise uneventful walk to where the waves lap at the shore. Redbeard quivers below him. He can see the buckles on every bridle, the tassels on every saddle, and the nervous shake of every palm. The air smells like red, raw meat.

They stand for a long time.

No one else is near or in the salt water, the reason why Sherlock is up to Redbeard's knees in the first place. No one else would dare. It is an impossible risk on a capall.

To stand with them in the sea is to wish for your own death, because the magic will take them, and they will take you.

The men on the beach are confused, Sherlock can feel their idiocy saturating the damp air.

There's a knot of fighting horses somewhere. It's a petty disagreement between two killer horses, but they're all sharp hooves and teeth.

He can also feel the attention of every capall on the beach. He'd like it better if they weren't paying any attention at all to him. Their ears pressed forward, serpentine necks arched, lips curled back.

Sherlock knows the blonde mare is somewhere among them when he hears her scream. His head pounds at the noise, the memory of the beach tumbling close. Redbeard's ears pin back, and Sherlock leans forward to pat his neck, soothing.

They don't share the same memory, but Redbeard can feel Sherlock's anxiety, as if it were seeping directly through the saddle.

He watches the ragged sea, because he knows the bargaining men on the beach will watch the
*capaill* with them. They will watch their every move - and hear it, too, the *capaill* on the beach are all littered and draped in bells, tassels, and flower petals.

Wind lifts Sherlock's dark fringe from his forehead, and it pulls all sound away from his ears, so the activities and the haggling behind him are nothing more than bird cries.

He squints against the glare of the sun on the water.

A flock of white gulls catch the air currents in wide wings and ride the wind along the edges of the cliffs.

The ocean laps at Redbeard’s knees, *shhhh, shhhh*…

It’s hypnotic, and it's no wonder Sherlock doesn’t see the *capall uisce* until it's upon them.

Because suddenly it's there, hauling itself out of the sea and shaking the Scorpio from its hooves and the froth from its mane, giant grey head shoving close as it breaks the surface of the water.

Sherlock can't breathe-- he yanks the reins back and Redbeard rears and squeals, forelegs kicking out and flailing to get away, but the high point throws Sherlock off, letting him topple into the ocean.

Which is exactly what the *capall* wanted.

Sherlock's back hits the shallow water, then the sand, a shock, and he's spitting salt and blinking it out of his eyes, scrabbling at the water and desperate to see.

Blunt teeth tear at the front collar of his shirt, barely scraping his chest, dragging him along the sandy bottom of the beach and deeper into the surf. He can only see the wet grey of a fresh *capall*. Sherlock’s hands fly forwards, trying to gouge at the water horse's thin nostrils, but they are closed against the water, prepared to go under.

Sherlock feels a strong pull, the shirt almost cutting into the back of his neck, and gasps, just as the *capall* submerges, and takes him with it.

The *capall* is screaming through its teeth underwater, but it sounds like an orchestra, all clashing symbols and high vocals from an opera, a sound that ricochets around Sherlock and winds around his head - the message is clear. *Come with me, to the bottom of the sea. Come with me.*

A siren song.

Abruptly, there is a set of hands on him - no, no, his shirt, and the glint - Sherlock sees, his eyes burning against the saltwater in his failing attempts to claw to the surface - the glint of a knife. He squeezes his eyes shut, and feels the tension on the other end of his collar release.

Sherlock's head breaks the surface of the water, and he gasps for air. He feels abruptly like a flounder - and then he's finding the sand beneath his ruined shoes, sinking when he tries to sit back, it's too deep, he’s waist deep in the Scorpio sea.

He wipes the sand and the seawater from his eyes, mouth wide open, and shoves his wretched hair back from where it hangs into his eyes to see his death before it hits him.

But just before him is not one massive body-- an electric shock shivers down his back and he jerks his head back. Two bodies.
The grey *capall*.

And the short man, John Watson, chest-deep in the water, with his hands pressed flush against the *capall’s* nostrils, smears of red up to his wrist. There is a glistening wet knife held between his bared teeth.

The *capall* is not flailing, it’s still. Still, but its eyes are wavering, looking around wildly, like the rest of its body is paralyzed, and it is trapped. Its ears are pinned back, and its whole body is drenched in the saltwater and shivering with power. John Watson is still, as well, but his exposed arms, dark jacket sleeves shoved past his elbows, are shaking as he pushes against the *capall’s* giant muzzle, shaking with the force it takes to keep the water horse still.

Watson jumped in after him.

Sherlock brings his hands up, and tries to move back.

“*Don’t*--!” Watson begins around the knife in his mouth, but it’s too late.

The *capall* surges out of Watson’s magic hold with an eldritch screech, spraying droplets of the ocean as it tries to bound toward Sherlock, but not before Watson can yank on its black mane and get the horse’s attention.

It snaps open its mouth and wails, and Watson stabs through its pinned ear. The wailing doesn't falter - the gouge didn't hurt at all. The blade wasn't iron.

Sherlock is sucking in breaths through his teeth, shallower and shallower, spraying salt on the forced exhale, and the *capall* is shaking more and more and more, water sliding down and off its grey dappled pelt as it creaks forward, groaning lowly and hungrily--

There's a flash of red in Watson’s hand, before he shoves his hand back up to the horse’s muzzle.

The horse snaps its neck back and screams, piercing and agonizing, and it jumps.

Its knees crumple as seaweed spills out its nose, and it dives, and disappears beneath the surface of the water. A second later, it reemerges, and rears, shrieking and somewhere, distantly, people are yelling.

It leaps, and a wayward hoof knocks into John Watson, and when it shoves down, the rider is under the water.

Sherlock’s chest heaves, he wants to spur himself into action, but he's frozen.

Did Watson just die for him?

*Is* he dead?

The *capall* is trying to wade deeper into the water, it's half-leaping, half-swimming, the water frothing white beneath it, and Sherlock moves.

He takes a deep breath, tries not to think of the dozens of *capaill* that could be swimming parallel to the breakers and hunting him, and goes under the tumbling surf.

He opens his eyes; they sting horribly, but he can see the blurry form of Watson, and his hands, still red, like the water hasn't done a thing to the blood (blood?) on them.

Sherlock's hands find John Watson's shirt collar, and then his jacket’s, and he pulls, bubbles
escaping from his mouth and nose.

Sherlock breaks the surface again, and his feet find the sand, and he pulls Watson up with him.

The man coughs, sputters, spraying Sherlock with more water than he knew was in the sea.

“Shore- *shore!*” Watson commands, eyes not even fully open, and something within Sherlock responds immediately to that tone.

Watson’s hands find Sherlock's wrists, and shove them off his collar. His eyes are dark, red-rimmed, and stormy. Sherlock swallows and chokes on salt as he tries his hardest to reach the land.

On the sand, Sherlock collapses onto his hands and knees, hacking and spitting saltwater with the yellow and white grains digging into his palms. His arms are shaking as they hold him up. Almost as weak-kneed is Watson, behind him, head up, already scanning for a threat while Sherlock’s weak breakfast threatens to make a reappearance.

Sherlock sinks down, and turns into his back. He's supported by his quivering elbows, and the sea is whispering *shhhhh, shhhhh* as it sucks and laps at his feet and calves, still in the water. The damp and the wind is already chilling him to the bone, and Sherlock coughs again.

Beyond him stretches the ocean, far over the horizon, and behind him are the shouts and bouts of yelling from the men, and the high, keening calls of the *capaill uisce*, excited by the sight and the sound and the smell of an attack.

Redbeard has retreated to the beach, Sherlock can hear him squealing in panic and frenzy - Sherlock needs to get to him, he can hear and feel the savage water horses nearby, hungry.

But he can’t move.

He feels like a gelid winter morning, staring at Watson, now crouched just before Sherlock, and panting, looking dangerously at him.

Sherlock had been charmed the first time he met John, back with the blonde mare and the way she’d torn apart the dog. Most importantly, the way Watson had calmed her. He’d bullied her into cooperating, whispered words of the sea and the sand into her demon-like ears. And then he’d used the iron to keep her grounded.

He’d been in awe, watching his practiced way of moving through the tavern. The cleft of his chin.

But now, with Watson’s hair slicked back and his clothes soaked and clinging to his bones, there is something swirling in his blue eyes; they hold as much underlying terror as the surface of the November sea.

There's red blood on his steady hands, dripping from his wet lips.

He can’t believe he ever thought John Watson may not have the heart to race.

The rider stands, leaving Sherlock sat in the wet sand, the surf shoving at his feet and calves rhythmically.

Watson wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing *capaill* blood across his face. His hands drop to his sides, and curl into tight fists.

He looks down at Sherlock, and Sherlock suddenly feels very, very small.
“Get your pony off this beach.”

-/-

Redbeard is a horse. He's seventeen hands.

A horse. Not a pony.

There's no reason Watson’s words should bother him so much.

-/-

Sherlock is far inland.

Far inland.

There's no reason he should be sitting in his cellar, pistol in his shaking hands, shivering over the kitchen table in the pitch black.

There's no reason he should be so terrified.

There is nothing wrong with him.
The next day, Sherlock spends an inane amount of time cleaning off Redbeard, who is still shaking lightly in his stall, his faded charcoal muzzle turning every which way with the slightest sound or peep of a seabird.

Sherlock puts him in between the crossropes, and soaps away the salt and mud caked onto his red coat, and then rinses and dries him by hand, brushing him down afterwards. Sherlock picks the clotted sand and dirt and grass out from Redbeard’s hooves. And he brushes out the knots in his mane and tail. He braids and unbraids them, not caring in the slightest when Redbeard purposely knocks his nose against his shoulder or stomach and gets snot on him.

He’s determined to calm at least one of them down.

-/-

Redbeard has his moods. He doesn't like standing in water, which is very wise on an island like Thisby, and he hates thunderstorms and fog. The storms, because they make his knees ache, despite his youth, and the fog, because there’s always something to be concealed in it. An uncertain, new water horse, stepping onto land for the first time in a year, or perhaps, ever.

Sherlock reads and rereads the rules.

Within 150 yards of the shore, they have to train.

Sherlock is the biggest idiot on the island. In the universe. Bigger than Bill Murray and his tourist trap of a shop, than Janine Hawkins’ stinking tavern, than John Watson and his stupid black-furred and white-maned stallion.

At anything other than the lowest points of low tide during the recede of the full moon, the cliffs are well within the shoreline boundaries set up by those people who wrote the rules of the Races, all those hundreds of years ago.

Sherlock never even had to leave them.

And so he kicks at Redbeard’s side, the great horse sighing and panting and wheezing underneath him as he runs, frantic because of the smell of the ocean, meters and meters, far, far below them. The water horses can be heard on the winds from the opposite side of the island, their wailing and loud grunting are what Sherlock hears all morning and afternoon. It’s more irritating and distracting than Mrs Hudson’s continual playing of the fuzzy mainland radio at home.

This puts Redbeard into a strop the morning after Sherlock first takes him out. Sherlock can tell Redbeard knows exactly what they’ll be doing - running. And running fast. This feeble, Thisby-grown hay isn’t enough to sustain a racing horse. It certainly isn’t what the sport horses and the water horses at the Stockyard eat.
It isn’t what John Watson’s water horse eats.

There are differences - the water horses need dripping red meat and cold blood. Sport horses and island ponies and broodmares need good hay and grains. Better hay and grains come imported from the mainland. Sherlock’s never been able to afford that sort of stuff. Mycroft’s money used to cover the rent and Redbeard’s board, and that was all, because Mycroft apparently expected Sherlock to get a job. Pedestrian.

(That’s not why Mycroft didn’t send extra money, and Sherlock knows it. Mycroft didn’t want Sherlock to fall under the prick of a needle again, the habits of old. He used to have his solution shipped from very powerful dealers on the mainland.)

As a result, Sherlock has little money. Most of his savings went into him entering the Races, at the Hawkin’s Tavern merely nights ago. There is very little leftover. The stuff he earned by riding to the mill for Molly Hooper was far too meager, but it was also far too much for the job Sherlock’d been doing.

He figures he can use the rest to treat Redbeard. To get him to go faster.

And this is how Sherlock finds himself pulling on Redbeard’s leadrope, clipped to his halter, to no avail. The horse is not moving. His neck extends when Sherlock pulls, but his shoed hooves are rooted to the stall flooring, which needs to be mucked.

“Come on,” Sherlock groans in effort. Redbeard jerks his head up in that equine fashion the capaill can never posses. “We’re going to Tholla to get you proper food-- good food-- the kind for racehorses-- so-- just--”

Redbeard stays put.

Sherlock throws the leadrope onto the flooring, crossing his arms and tilting his chin up at the stallion. Redbeard snorts, and rocks forward. His hooves shift, his stance steadies.

Sherlock picks up the leadrope and pulls again, clucking. Redbeard lets out a low whine that keels up into another snort at the end. “You’re being ridiculous,” Sherlock says, and clucks his tongue again, trying to urge the stallion forward and out of the stall. Josephine whinnies in the stall over. He’ll put her out later - could she stay put and content for a moment while he figures this Redbeard business out?

Sherlock swears - no horse puts on more theatrics than Redbeard.

He groans in relief when Redbeard acquiesces, finally allowing himself to move out of the stall. Sherlock is letting out a litany of thank you’s to whatever god the people of Thisby believe in. Epona, or someone else.

Sherlock turns Josephine out and into the pasture encircling Mrs Hudson’s property, and saddles up Redbeard after currying off his coat.

Then it’s a smooth, if not tense ride to Tholla, on the south side of Thisby, with the pony cart rattling on the dirt and grass road. Sherlock is reminded of the last time they were down this way, the mangled sheep’s corpse spread all across the path, but the incident is not repeated.

The last of Sherlock’s savings are in his pocket.

He exchanges the coins for three large bags of oats and a multitude of bales of hay. Expensive. More expensive than oranges. He leaves the hay in Tholla with his name on it, and carts the grain
bags back to Mrs Hudson’s, feeling guilty he’s gotten nothing for Josephine.

He’ll get the bales tomorrow. People in Tholla know him, ever since that interesting case last summer with the homicide-turned-suicide, but the town’s divided in two ever since some age-old quarrel between two patriarchs, and so Sherlock isn’t exactly sure of where he stands. Skarmouth still has his heart, it’s his town. Redbeard will eat his expensive food, and win the Races for Sherlock.

-/-

“No, shut up.”

Sherlock points his violin bow at Redbeard, right at his face, between his eyes. Redbeard squeals, jerking his head up and getting a light tap of the bow just above his muzzle. Sherlock’s violin is tucked under his chin, and if the bow wasn’t being weaponized against Redbeard, he’d be playing.

He’d been playing, that was, until Redbeard had picked his head up from his expensive flakes of hay on the poor grass down by his hooves and pricked his short ears, glaring into the distance. They’re just outside the stables, lounging around after a cold day of sprints and breaks on the green cliff pastures. Since they’ve come back, a thin haze has settled over Thisby in the evening light. Usually, the wind on this side of the island would chase it away and send it to Skarmouth, the mill, and the Stockyard, but now, it is oddly hushed, and the land is still.

Sherlock untucks the violin, standing from his seat, a cheap hay bale that he won’t allow Redbeard to eat anymore, and looks in the direction Redbeard is.

The is a low, low yowl from beyond the fence, in the mist that so often gathers here.

Sherlock’s heart stammers, and then quickens. His own ears strain towards any other sight, any sight besides the blurry fence and the mist crawling over it.

They’d been out there all day, it’s early evening, and they’d just been out there. Getting the bales from Tholla. Riding. Feeling the wind hum and sing beneath their skin and their pelt.

What else had been out there, with them, haunting the mist?

But it’s just Musgrave, her little feline form, tail high, crawling from between the creaking fence posts and then stalking towards them, in the front of the two-stable barn.

Sherlock scowls, and sits back down on the bale.

Violin back in its proper place, and bow poised above it, Sherlock listens to the wind, waiting, waiting. He does not hear anything else. He closes his eyes, and plays a Scorpio rhythm.

-/-

In the Hawkin’s Tavern, the once-empty blackboard is filling out quite nicely. There must be fifty names on it.
Sherlock wonders how he’s ever going to make it to the first of November, racing day.

There is talk of bets.

Someone discovers Sherlock’s riding an island pony.

No one comes to warn him or beg him not to race. Molly tries the latter, when Sherlock shows up at the bakery to talk to Archie and show him a new catalog from the mainland, one of the ones the boy always likes to look at, but there’s that look behind Molly’s eyes when she speaks, the look that means she knows that he can do what he is doing.

The insults and insinuations hurled at him in the streets multiply ten fold. There’s explosive talk of him being disqualified, and his stomach curdles, but Sherlock always snaps back, “If it’s not in the rules, I can do what I’d like.”

The fat man who threw that at him ‘oooh’ s, as if he’s impressed Sherlock’s taken the time to spit at him.

There’s still talk.

Sherlock watches the blackboard, stops in the tavern on the nights he’s in Skarmouth after an exhilarating ride on Redbeard around the clifftops.

There are the odds next to the names now.

At the very top is the lowest:

*John H. Watson - Gladstone - 5 to 1*

And a third of the way down the list is the highest betting odds:

*Sherlock Holmes - Redbeard - 43 to 1*

-/-

The festival comes.

Sherlock stops by the tavern, wading through the tight knot of tourists’ bodies, all pressed close together and reeking of beer the nearer and nearer they are packed. His racing odds are now 47 to 1. No one is betting on him. The smart men are putting their money on John Watson, and the returning champion horse of five years.

Outside again, the mare goddess is dancing in the streets, a woman in a taxonomic horse head waving to and fro, side to side on the cobblestone, sprinkling pebbles where she goes with human hands. Smaller children are following her, looking for the one shell she will drop tonight, the shell that will grant them a wish. Traditionally, her feet are bare. Sherlock deduces that it’s Adler under that mask tonight.

The deep beat of the Scorpio drums, echoing all over Skarmouth, sets up a background noise, thumping out a Scorpio rhythm for the whole town to hear. The sound slices through the cold air in a million and one places, driving like sewing needles into hardened skin. This Skarmouth is dark and
distant, shaking and powerful. Skarmouth is both a water horse and the sea tonight - horses are painted in vibrant colors on wooden boards and nailed up over the edges of buildings, wards to keep their namesake’s away, the wind sounds like waves as it beats through narrow alleys. The potency of the Races is bleeding through all the cracks in the windows, the splinters in the walls, the seams of the streets.

Islanders’ faces are mostly streaked with charcoal and black chalk, dark demons with flashing wide white grins. Someone nearby screams like a water horse. Sherlock’s heart pounds like a rabbit’s as he weaves between the tourists that are busy looking at the bright paper lanterns hung in lines above the streets. Other people are clutching bits of paper in their hands, a much more dangerous form of magic than the shell from the mare goddess. Sea wishes. Written backwards on scraps of paper and hurled over the cliffs to be caught in the wind and fulfilled by the surging ocean.

“They’re curses,” Sherlock remembers his father telling him once, on the single occasion Sherlock had been brought down to Skarmouth to watch the festivities and get almost swallowed by the rivers of tourists, “Never write a sea wish, Sherlock. You must never do that to someone.”

Sherlock never had. He’d threatened the younger boys in school with sea wishes, if he was feeling as though he was under attack. It came to a point where over half of the school believed Sherlock was a witch, because he could tell who’s parents were getting a divorce and whose were eaten by a water horse last autumn by only looking at their shoes.

His parents had never been fans of the Scorpio festival.

Sherlock wasn’t, either, but he had to be here tonight. Tonight would be when he proclaimed Redbeard as the horse he was true and really riding. The noise and the press of drunk tourists, loud with drink and excitement, and stone-faced locals shoving through the masses are far too much.

The drums throb in Sherlock’s ears as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his long, dark coat. He’s trying not to be seen. He only needs to wait until the rider’s parade. Bicycles lie up propped up against the walls like a pack of coyotes, shoved into and over each other as room had run out. Firelight and yellow hazing circles from the streetlamps cast high shadows against the stone walls. Around the throats of girls that sweep through the streets are necklaces made of punctured shells, and there are jingling bells tied around their wrists and ankles. The noise reminds him of the blonde mare on the beach, the one Watson had wrestled.

It seems as though this festival was invented just to overwhelm him.

He hides in the back of the Hooper Bakery, since the front is packed with fat tourists sucking honey glaze and butter from their thumbs and talking about race odds. He hears his name once or twice, along with ‘that ordinary pony’.

Sitting on the grain-sprinkled floor between great big bags of sifted, unbleached flour, with his knees pulled up to his chest, he watches the half-dozen working ovens built into the wall across the small room, as per Molly’s request. ‘If you’re going to be in here, you may as well be useful. Make sure the cinnamon twists don’t burn.’ God of horses, Epona, knew he wasn’t useful anywhere else.

The scent of honey and sugar and flour and baking powder is so dense in this room, Sherlock wants to gag. Yeast is scattered over the floorboards. The flowing conversations drift in from the front, like the lull of the ocean on a warm, still night. The drums are quieter here, though Sherlock can still hear the distinctive rhythms that the men pound out of goatskin basins, as wide as Redbeard’s chest is. The bakery smells heavenly, and not at all like the sea.

The sound of quick footsteps makes Sherlock snap his head towards the swinging door that bars
him from seeing the business going on at the counter. Archie bursts in, a grin lighting up his young face.

“Mister Sherlock, it’s the parade! The rider’s parade!”

Sherlock bolts upright. He brushes down his coat that has dusty white patches from the flour in some spots. He’s not afraid of Archie seeing him a little messy and worse for wear from time to time, partly because Archie isn't aware that it's not his usual state. He's always somehow a mess in front of the young boy. But the rest of the island cannot view him like that. To them, he is as cold as the deep waters of the ocean.

“Thank you, Archie, and make sure the cinnamon twists don’t burn,” Sherlock makes a vague gesture towards the ovens, and then is shoving out the swinging white door, the paint chipped on this side, but not on the other. Appearances, appearances.

There must be a dangerous glare in his eyes, because no one is shoving him anymore. Sherlock learned long ago that if you look and hold yourself a certain way, the crowds, even drunk, will part for you. He keeps his eyes wide open, scanning the people. It's better to see than to be seen.

“E must be one ah those riders…” Someone whispers near him as the bakery door swings closed with the tinkle of a bell. A flare of pride flourishes in Sherlock’s chest, and his chin tilts up.

That is, until he hears that someone’s companion say back, “That’s the one with the island pony.”

“Forty-nine to one!” Someone else shouts, and the people in-the-know snicker as Sherlock passes, hunching his shoulders up to his ears. Everywhere, people are laughing and singing, drums are pounding, and elsewhere, a motorbike roars, and shrill fiddles are playing. There is no doubt that this is a festival.

He focuses on ahead, searching for the riders and their parade. He spots Jefferson Hope, in his cap, meanly withered old face just one of many in the crowd. Sherlock begins to step towards Hope, who is making his way through the wailing of the singers and the thrumming beat of the drums and the fantastical costumes.

“It’s a good night to be on land,” Someone mumbles, hard to hear around the shouted bouts of conversation all around. It's so close to his ear that Sherlock almost mistakes the words as being meant for him. On one of the side streets, some boys are gathered around a small tire that is on fire.

Someone else answers, “That Watson says--” And Sherlock immediately tunes the voice out.

He can feel the Scorpio drums in his chest, a rapid, fluttering, deep thing. With every pound against the blood-spattered leather, a baseline makes itself known in Sherlock’s lungs.

The small amount of light pollution cuts out the black behind the clouds, lets the red of the bonfires all around Skarmouth be seen in the sky. His mother used to tell him that the island was dangerous, especially at this time of night, because this time is when all the colors known to mankind blended together into a blue-black. A man could walk off a cliff, thinking he was just taking another step onto the grasses. Only the shhhh, shhhh of the sea far below would ever tell him otherwise.

In the center of the streets, gold and red in the light of streetlights and paper lanterns along the telephone wires, the horse-headed woman holds out her hand and one thousand tiny pebbles rain out across the street. Then she flings sand onto the ground, and quashes it into the grout between the stones with her bare toes.

The air smells delicious. Perhaps better than the bakery.
Down beneath the cliffs, in the quay with the drummers, there are booths with locals hawking things and foods to tourists from beneath canvas tents. Introverted locals are hiding in the tavern, their own private place, one that seems singularly separate from the tourists. There’s people filling every inch of space by the pier below the cliffs. Charcoal from the enormous bonfire just outside Skarmouth is taken to be scribed on paper and made into a sea wish, or streaked along cheekbones to disguise someone from the wild of Thisby. It serves the same purpose as the charms on the water horses - hide the people from the heartless ocean.

What on earth is he looking for? What is following Hope going to do? There isn't really a formal parade going on. He sets his jaw in irritation when a man going the opposite way as him bumps against his shoulder. Maybe Sherlock should be following him.

An entire paper could be written on what the island smells like during racing season. He's always raised a bitter lip to it, the scent of Claire de la Lune, the popular perfume that the mainland women wear, the scent of burning rubber and hot garbage, the alcohol of various contents that gets vomited onto the street corners. The seasonal food. The drummers throb and Sherlock snakes up against the side of a building to let them pass as they gone on through their clubbing on stretched spattered-skin. A few tourists get caught up in the procession, and laugh and go along with it, clapping. The locals sneer and push their way out.

There’s a man calling from a rooftop - a rooftop! “Riders? Riders! To the rock!”

His voice is raw - he’s been shouting for awhile. Archie must’ve heard him from an open window or the door. That, or he was standing outside the bakery during the busiest night of the year and waiting, just for Sherlock.

The riders and Sherlock head towards the clifftops away from the epicenter of Skarmouth's craze and hum. Or, rather, Sherlock follows a few people who are obviously seasoned riders to the cliff edges. Again, not a parade. It’s only some people ambling towards the… the whatever. The rock. Yes. That. Away from the outskirts of town, there is an orange glow past the gathered men and women. Some of the men who are tourists about to ride laugh amongst themselves, as if the Races are all in good fun, and it's a story they'll have to tell back on the mainland. Sherlock spies a number of men with fingers missing. One man has an primitive metal prosthetic from the elbow down, and his other fist is tightly clenched, holding a medallion for luck or magic.

The dark black crouching over the island is fended away by two bonfires, one burning high and bright, the other low, hissing out orange sparks into the ground. Sherlock is unsure of where he belongs, and his hands nervously flit back into his pockets. Drummers around the crowds are beating out long tempos and shouting musically in local words - they're more happy to be here than they are good singers. Here, Sherlock can see the very edge of the island, and the sea is black and so is the sky and he cannot see where they meet on the horizon thanks to the dark, but there are thankfully several meters of distance between the fires, the rock, the people, and the edge of the world.

Sherlock follows in the wake of some riders, glad that the crowd parts before them, and their height hides him.

He wretches past people that refuse to move, closer to the bonfires and away from spectators who won't be pledging themselves to the island. He will get this over with quickly, and he will go home. No matter who decides to fight him about Redbeard, tonight he will fight back, tooth and nail.

But then there’s that point of stillness, darker than the black, a man with an expression as dim as the light. John Watson, just past a pair of men that Sherlock had been trying to get past. He's separated from the crowd, looking towards the cliff edge, merely steps away from falling off or standing where the ground could crumble, letting the wind blow back his fringe. He's looking out to the ocean,
clearly waiting. There’s a mainland watch on his wrist.

Sherlock leans towards him, takes a few steps without quite realizing what he’s doing. Then he stops, furrowing his brow at the ground.

The Races are dangerous enough without that. And besides, was it not Watson who spat at him to get Redbeard off the beaches, after he was hauled from the waves?

There are faces that Sherlock recognizes in the massive crowd. Lestrade, Watson, Murray, Hope. Within his own circle, Lestrade is laughing and saying something, the shadows jumping over the indents in his face and spattering firelight. There’s a game of familiarity to all of this, to all of the riders. Sherlock’s stomach is uneasy as he comes to a third bonfire, managing his way in the writhing mass of people and avoiding the champion rider. Before the third bonfire is a great, flat rock, splattered and streaked with brown. It takes a second before Sherlock realizes what he’s looking at - just as Doctor Fletcher is pulling himself up onto the rock - it’s blood. Old, old blood. And a lot of it.

“This falls to me… I speak for the man that will not race!” Fletcher shouts, his hands up and gestured towards the black sky. The bonfire behind him tinges the edges of his corduroy trousers, waistcoat, and hair orange. It casts his face into shadow.

He’s shouting something else now, something about the history of the island, and Sherlock is mostly not listening. He’s changed his attentions to the crowd, picking up life stories from the way the men - and they are all men, the racers - hold themselves, tilt their heads, or part their hair. And he’s trying to tell himself that he’s not at all looking for that one point of stillness in the crowd. Because he’s not. He sees someone make a cross over their head and shoulders, then do it again, backwards this time. Most gazes are locked on Fletcher.

“...many years ago, we used to slaughter the man that would not race!” Fletcher is shouting. A shape, dark in firey shadow, moves behind him - the head of a horse. Sherlock’s heart leaps to his throat.

It's the mare goddess. The woman, Adler, is in a bright red tunic and wearing the horse head on her shoulders, dwarfing her human body. A tail sweeps the ground behind her as she drops more pebbles. It’s impossible to tell whether or not it’s real horse hair, or frayed rope and string. She hands Fletcher a wooden bowl with a flourish. The bonfire pops behind them, sending sparks high into the dark.

“They’re all cross, over in Hawkins. Saying she didn’t drop a shell this year,” A man beside Sherlock whispers. It’s not directed at Sherlock.

“Pssht,” Snorts another man, with dark skin and a darker coat over his body, “She prob’ly dropped it up in Skarmouth, and everyone missed it.”

“All right,” Is the reply, “‘S’not like it-sah real wish, anyway.”

All these island accents, mashed up together. Old ones, new ones. Sherlock used to mimic the old island accent in the hours before he slept, when he was young, when he still had the lingers of a lisp. It’s something rumbling around the ‘r’ sounds that he could never get right, until he spent literal weeks stalking Skarmouth and listening to conversations. He's very fluid with any island accent, now, as well as multiple languages.

Fletcher’s shouting ceases, and the crowd goes abruptly quiet.

Sherlock looks back up to the rock. Fletcher has a serious look on his face, pinched. It’s closer to a
grimace than a neutral facial expression. He tips the bowl in his hand, and blood splashes down onto
the rock. Since he doesn’t step back, it hits his shoes and the ankles of his trousers.

“Rider without a name,” He says, “Horse without a name. By his blood.”

Sherlock hopes that’s not real man’s blood. He’d be able to tell if he was closer, if he had time to
tell if the blood patterns slipped back together or congealed in a certain way - proteins give it away.
But he doesn’t have time. He assumes it’s sheep’s blood. Fifty years ago, it was a man who the riders
slaughtered, as Fletcher recounted. It’s not the case anymore. Good. The island would run out of
men.

The man who was whispering about the shell pipes up, directing to his companion, “Who is it in the
horse’s head, this year?”

“Epona. Soul of Thisby and the cliffs. The mother of all horses.”

“No, no, you daft sod, the woman!” He hisses.

“Jus’ someone with more up front to look at than you ‘ave...”

Sherlock’s mouth quirks down, listening to the speculation of the two men for a moment. The
woman with the horse head, Adler, is now gone, though Sherlock didn’t see her go.

Irene Adler, without the outfit and the tail and the head, has replaced the mare goddess. She’s an
intimidating person, made meek only by necessity tonight. She must act. Still, she looks like someone
who’s never spilled a drop of tea on herself, even if on horseback. Sherlock didn't think it was
possible to have gotten his deduction wrong, of who was beneath the horse head, because there's no
way Irene could change so quickly...

A dozen or so men are gathered around one end of the rock, waiting to go up, and still more are
moving restlessly towards the group. Sherlock is a small, motionless animal.

The first rider steps naturally up onto the rock. He’s got greying hair, and the silver spikes and
dances in the firelight. It’s Lestrade. Sherlock had known he was riding this year. Down at the beach,
he’d been wandering around. Sherlock had glanced him just moments ago. Neglecting his judicial
duties - but that’s fair, because there aren’t many criminals to catch on Thisby. Well. Not that many
that have done something so bad as to deserve being caught.

He’s ridden in years past, but not last year or the one previous. He’d gotten a large slice over his
bicep when he was thrown from a grey mare the last time he raced. Sherlock had seen it in the
reports.

“I will ride,” Lestrade tells Adler formally. Then, he thrusts his hand forward, and Adler’s delicate
fingers snake around his wrist, jerking it closer to herself. She brandishes a tiny blade, and slices his
finger in an expertly fast motion. The blood must fall to the rock, because he relaxes, but Sherlock is
too far away to see it.

“Greg Lestrade. Comfort. By my blood.”

Adler answers, in a voice deep and gruff, and not her own but that of the island, “Thank you.”

Lestrade steps down on the other side of the rock, greeted by a smaller man with a clap on his back,
holding his sliced hand against his abdomen. The next rider steps up onto the mounting rock.

His blood drips onto the rock. And the man after him.
“Isaac Whitney, Altum. By my blood.”

And the next. Another.

One more after that. “Charles Augustus Magnussen,” Says a voice dripping in poisoned honey glaze, “Mary. By my blood…”

Sherlock is jostled ever closer to the mounting side of the blood-stained rock. At first, he fights his way back to his old spot to keep watching, but as the minutes drag by, he lets himself be swept away by the current of racers.

Last chance to back out. Last chance to turn his tail. He won’t get the entering fee back, but it’s better than losing his life. He just needs to get out of here. Like the horrible blonde mare, Sherlock’s breath starts coming in faster. But this isn’t about being trapped on land and on the earth, it’s about feeling trapped in this thin spiderweb of commitment.

There must be close to fifty riders here, of the ones Sherlock can see and deduce. There’s a six to one tourist to rider ratio, with the riders as the minority. A great many people are here to watch. Sherlock may lose his head in all the noise. Heavens know he’s already lost his mind.

Race reports, yes, he’s read those in the past. He knows there’s never been close to fifty riders in the past. Sherlock frowns. What happens to all of them?

“I will ride.”

Sherlock jerks his head up, breath evening out. That voice told him to keep Redbeard off the racing beach, mere days ago.

John Watson is on the rock, his hand cupped by Adler’s smaller ones. Sherlock feels a spark of something, watching the three hands together. It’s a familiar thing, that touch. It must be because John Watson has ridden at least five times before this year. Maybe more, but maybe he didn’t win before the start of those five years ago. Sherlock isn’t sure if Adler has always been the mare goddess or not. He doesn’t come to the Scorpio festival.

The firelight, and Sherlock’s angle, makes a quarter of Watson’s face light up from the bonfire, but the rest of his clothes are dark. The bonfire has spread to near the back of the rock, licking at the base of it.

Adler slices Watson’s finger. Sherlock has drifted closer, and can see the drops of blood, with a small spark of light caught by the bonfire, fall to the surface of the rock and meet the sheep’s blood, pooled in a shallow dip in the rock.

Far away, the Scorpio drummers have moved on and are crashing through the Skarmouth streets, or along the coastline. But Sherlock can hear nothing but silence and faint fiddles, and then:


“Thank you…” Adler whispers back.

There are whoops and hollers from the crowd of riders and spectators, unlike the feedback from any other pledged rider. Just as there were in the tavern, when Watson had first signed up, men are celebrating their returning champion.

But Sherlock looks into the crowd, sifting through smug smiles and slightly discouraged frowns, to find the expressions that are guarded. The ones that hold behind them some malicious intent. The
gilded smiles. Plotting brows. Perhaps there are some that wish him terrible harm. Mm. No. There are definitely some.

John Watson came from the mainland, many years ago. Sherlock can read it in his watch.

Watson believes in Thisby’s charms, but not in using them on his giant black stallion. His hand shakes sometimes, but not others, and Sherlock theorizes it’s the adrenaline kicking through Watson’s system that steadies his hand. Now it is still. He’s survived five years of racing. Maybe more. How will this year be for him?

How will Sherlock’s first?

Someone juts an elbow into Sherlock’s lower back. He grimaces.

An accompanying hiss, “Go!”

Sherlock whirls back around to the rock. It’s his turn, and he hasn’t stepped up yet. His ears burn. He feels less qualified for this than he has ever felt in his entire life, for anything.

Many, many pairs of eyes are on him. Watson’s are, too, from the other side of the rock. He doesn’t look as tall as Sherlock thought he was.

He steps onto the rock, lacking grace.

His heart is hammering a Scorpio drumbeat in his throat. His pulse skips and flutters as he holds out his hand.

“I will ride.”

Adler looks at him, her red lips curved in a dangerous smile. Sherlock doesn’t want to be looked at like this. Not by anyone. But especially not by her, not right now. He doesn’t need to be questioned. His countenance stays neutral, and he is determined for Adler to cut his finger.

She does, wrapping her cold fingers around his wrist. There is a wink of pain, though the blade is sharp. The bonfire roars, one side of his face is hot.

“Sherlock Holmes,” He says, in a voice like everyone else’s, “Redbeard. By my blood.”

The drop falls to the rock, mingling with the sheep’s and the other riders. Here he stands, letting his blood sink into the stone, and into Thisby.

It's exhilarating. It's terrifying.

“Hang on!” Calls someone from the crowd.

His blood runs cold.

He’s said it wrong - he’s extended his hand the wrong way, stuttered, messed up the order of the words, he’s done something wrong, but Irene would tell him, wouldn't she? Wouldn't she correct him? Wouldn't--

It’s Jefferson Hope. “Sherlock Holmes cannot race!”

There’s never been anything more sickening than what he’s hearing now. The way eyes stare and heads turn. This is it. They’re going to kick him out of the Races. Sherlock’s face sears with heat, both from the bonfire and not. His skin feels three sizes too tight. Fault lines like tectonic plates crack
in his skin, he can feel embarrassment seeping out.

Despite this, Sherlock knows there is reason that Hope shouted ‘Sherlock Holmes cannot race!’ instead of just yelling at Sherlock, ‘You cannot race!’

It is because, like most of the lesser men on this wicked island, Hope is seeking support from the masses, not addressing Sherlock like a person, because he will not be strong enough on his own, and in the masses, Sherlock will be felled.

Redbeard. It must be Redbeard. All the things the horse has done for him, and vice versa, feel as though they are nothing.

Still, Sherlock finds his voice even, “And why not?”

Hope is wading through the crowds, coming closer to the rock, until he stands before it. He’s got a couple of men that Sherlock recognizes as mill workers with him, flanking him. Hope’s cap is tipped back on his head, and his spectacles, shiny as the water and resting on his nose, gleam so white from the light of the fire that Sherlock cannot see his eyes.

“The Races have always been about the capaill. Not about the blood, not about the people. If they were just about horses, we may as well have never bothered with them in the first place…”

“It’s not in the rules,” Sherlock says through his teeth. When he was young, he used to be so black-hearted that he’d spit on people’s shoes when he didn’t like what they were saying. Mycroft had broken him out of that. He may have to take up that habit again, “I can ride what I’d like.”

Hope’s smile is sickening, and he is climbing onto the rock. There’s a little discourse in the crowd at this. It has always been one rider on the rock at a time. Adler doesn’t move for him, she stays as still as Watson on the other side. She’s unwavering. This is her place, and not Hope’s. He shouldn’t be up here.

Sherlock draws in a deep, shuddering breath through his nose. He doesn’t like the way everyone is looking at him, looking at Hope, or the way some people are nodding their heads, like they understand what Hope’s saying, and they support him. It’s uncannily like the attention of the capaill on the beach. He could be eaten by either population.

Sherlock wants to get off the rock, because the heat is burning him, as close as it is now. However, he doesn’t want to step down or away, because that means something entirely else than wanting the bonfire’s heat off his face. Sherlock tries to stand as straight as he can. The fault lines crack further open over his skin, exposing magma boiling below. He can't step down.

It means he’s giving up, and Sherlock is most certainly not doing that.

One of the mill workers below extends a hand up for Sherlock to take. He’s wearing a traditional scarf, like a lot of women and men on Thisby tonight. Sherlock crinkles his nose, and goes on, feeling the need to justify himself. “It’s not in the rules. There’s nothing saying I can’t race my horse in the rules. I’ve read them all.” A few chuckles break out. There are a lot of rules. Sherlock can’t bear to look at Adler, or at Watson.

The expanse of the rock isn’t small, but Hope sidles close anyways. He turns to the crowd, seeking appeal and attempting to look reasonable, “Some rules are just too big for paper.” He holds his hands out, like there’s nothing he can do about it.

“Some things,” Says the mill worker in the scarf with the extended hand, “Are too obvious to have to write down.”
Sherlock swallows. He doesn’t know what to say.

Hope rumbles, a chuckle, and the locals who get the poke of fun (Sherlock Holmes, speechless) laugh, some too loudly for the deadly quiet of the scene.

Shame burns hot in Sherlock’s throat. He’s already given his blood. It isn’t like he can take it back.

And just like that, anger is shoving through Sherlock’s veins, crackling wildly like the Thisby winds, racing through his lungs and his heart. “Well, then the rules, are wrong! I’ll follow the rules I was given,” Sherlock snarls, leaning closer to Hope out of fear rather than bravery. “I’m not following something unwritten.”

“Holmes, there’s never been an island pony running on that beach, unless it was running away from a water horse.” The mill worker on the ground says. Sherlock can see his arm’s getting tired. Maybe he’ll drop it, walk away, and go home. Sherlock quite likes that idea.

Hope is close. He smells like fish, and it’s sickening. Sherlock feels too confined, and he feels as though he may fall backwards into the leaping bonfire, the same that throws unnerving shadows across him and Hope and the dark crowd, standing by, watching like a school of fish, waiting to be fed remains off the back of a boat. He’s cornered. He leans away, but Hope follows, edging ever closer.

“You’re asking us to change all Thisby’s ever been, just for you? How can you ask that of us…? Isn't our answer obvious ?” Hope asks, and slides closer, and Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut. Hope’s figure is nearly up against Sherlock’s entirety, smelling like fish, fish, fish, and unfamiliar, horrible warmth--

It’s gone. There’s the scrape of rock, rustle of cloth and an exclamation, more thuds and gasps and shouts, and Sherlock feels smaller than he’s ever felt, smaller than he was on the beach, smaller than he was walking up to the rock, and to the blackboard, and--

“It’s not obvious to me.”

When Sherlock opens his eyes, it’s no longer Hope on the rock with him.

It’s Watson, his dark jacket sleeves rolled up past his elbows, exposing his tanned forearms like at the beach, hands curled into tight fists. They’re not shaking. The firelight is dancing orange over his face and his clothes and his whole body, glinting off the watch on his right wrist. When he looks like this, his lips are a thin line, and there is something to behold in his dark eyes, no longer the colour of the clear sea.

They’re coal-black, nothing but dark, the same shade as the night and as the ocean tonight.

He makes as powerful a figure as his black stallion does.

He’s staring down (down!) at Hope, who’s being hauled up from the ground by the mill workers in traditional garb.

Oh. Watson shoved Hope. Off the rock.

Sherlock looks down, too, even as Watson opens his mouth, “I’ll speak for him,” He bites out. His voice is pitched low, curling around like the smoke in Sherlock’s eyes. Locals are murmuring to each other in the crowd. Tourists are looking for confirmation that this is the returning champion.

“This island runs on courage. Not on the capaill alone. Let the sea decide what’s right and what’s
wrong.” Watson’s looking at Hope as the mill workers struggle to get him standing, but he’s speaking to the crowd, to the hundreds of people gathered around the rock and assessing the riders and talking of race odds.

There’s a cut on Hope’s face, the skin split on his cheek, already purple blooming dark around it, smudge of red. Watson didn’t just shove him. He punched him. Watson punched Hope.

Sherlock blinks.

Why?

Hope smears the trickle of blood across his face with the back of his hand, towards his hairline and the edge of his cap. He’s staring daggers up at Watson, who is as unbent as ever.

There’s a terse silence, then, as a testament of how much this island lives off of Watson’s opinion, the mill worker says, “So, then. He races.”

The rest of the riders give themselves to Thisby. Sherlock has his head down, hiding at the edges of the crowds, ready to make his escape.

“They will ride,” Fletcher shouts, and the bonfire surges and snaps at the air, threatening to consume him, “By their blood, let the Races begin!”

As he slips away from the masses, Sherlock sees Watson, once more that point of stillness, slip a small shell into his pocket.

-/-

“You've given me this. Please, take it back.”

Sherlock hears the timorous voice of a fearful man as he's skulking around the edges of town, the sharp and dark corners that most tourists are too afraid to come near.

He stops.

Around him walk townspeople and riders hold bleeding fingers against their mouths, with apparent disregard for bloodborne pathogens, laughing and headed towards Skarmouth for a pint or for betting at Hawkins. There are advertisements on posters for the Moriarty Stockyard auctions, posted to the outside of stone buildings, smeared to the brick with curling adhesive. They are barely readable, in the shadowed evening.

_The M Stockyard - Five Time Winner of the Scorpio Races!_

_Own a Piece of the Races - Youngstock Auction at 7AM Thursday._

It isn't really the Yard that has won the Races five times. But Watson's name is nowhere on it.

“You must make a wish. It’s the will of the island...”

Another voice, deep and guttural. Sherlock presses his back against the wall and the poster as the Scorpio drummers, driven again by drink rather than skill, crash through his narrow alleyway.
His curiosity and nosiness peaks, and after the deafening drums have gone by, cymbals screaming and beats thudding, he slips towards the corner of the building he's pressed against. The streetlights cast orange spheres on the walk and street below, but he is encased in black and shadow.

“You don't understand. I can't take this. You handed it to me. You've given it to me before.”

Attempting to look nonchalant, Sherlock takes a peek around the corner, seeing something so startling he's got to sharply inhale, the scent of ale clouding his nose.

It's John Watson, standing across from the mare goddess, adorned in full costume.

He squints.

It's not Adler in the costume. He's unsure of who it is, it's impossible to tell in this dimness. It's... unnerving. The person is holding themselves strangely, and their tail looks more realistic than it ever has before. Their feet are bare, but they are dirty, sand and grit caked beneath their nails and between their toes. Bells seem to spring directly from the skin around her ankles, shivering with tremors that are minutely working their way through the goddess' frame. Sherlock can feel heavy magic on the air.

Watson’s hand is outstretched toward the goddess, or, rather, who’s wearing the goddess’ costume. There's a spiraling shell in his palm, the same shell that Sherlock saw him tuck into his pocket after the rider’s parade.

“I've already made a wish. Years ago.” Watson seems to be trying to convince her to take back the shell. The goddess’ hands are hidden in her robes.

“It's time to make another wish.”

“I’ve… I’ve got what I need.”

“The ocean knows your name, John Watson,” She murmurs, Sherlock has to strain to hear it, “It's time to make another wish.”

The goddess’ eye of shale winks in the light. Sherlock can hear the distant roar of the sea.

Watson looks down, an indecipherable expression upon his face. And then, slowly, he retracts the hand and tucks the spiraling shell into his pocket again. He looks at the mare goddess, and seems to draw a deep breath. He doesn't do his terse little nod, like Sherlock’s used to seeing him doing. He merely fidgets his left hand, thumb rubbing over his knuckles, and walks past the goddess, across the street, and into the next darkened alleyway, pavement scuffing beneath his boots.

It seems louder than the crash of the drums, thrumming loudly a few corners over. It seems louder than anything else in the world. When he is out of sight, Sherlock turns back to the corner where the conversation took place, but the mare goddess is gone, off to scatter sand and pebbles somewhere else on the island.

Sherlock turns away from the scene, and picks another route into the deeper parts of town.

-/-
Sherlock’s picking his way back across to cliffs and towards the bulk of Skarmouth, where he's parked the Ford, when he hears a high, short whistle, coming from the direction of the bonfires he’s just passed.

He ignores it, and presses on. The wind is throwing damp sand at his face, his cheeks feel raw. There’s still a slow burn in his mouth and a pinch in his finger, remnants of the rider’s parade. There's also a twinge, niggling scramble of thoughts about what he just witnessed, the interaction between Watson and the mare goddess...

The whistle comes again, followed by a bark of laughter and a, “Ho, Sherlock Holmes!”

Sherlock turns, an irritated look upon his face.

It’s Anderson, the notary, with his feeble brown beard caked in scraggly shadow and firelight. He whistles again. Sherlock doesn’t like his expression or the fantastical bright red and yellow costume he’s wearing. Or the way the wind plays with all the bright layers as he prowls closer to Sherlock. There are other people around. Surely Anderson wouldn’t be so stupid as to do something with witnesses around.

There’s paper crumpled in his dirty, blackened hand. Sherlock looks at him, “I really don’t have time to deal with idiots.”

Anderson scowls, and that’s a familiar sight, indeed.

The notary uncrinkles the piece of paper, and Sherlock widens his eyes. The wind from the cliffs tosses Anderson’s parted hair, and Sherlock’s curls. It rips through Anderson’s costume, threatens to dislodge his great cape.

“Have a look, Holmes,” Anderson smirks, starting forwards. Sherlock resists the urge to lean back. He’s had far too many men far too close to him tonight, “Have a look.”

“Yes, Anderson, I can read.”

“D’you even know what this is?”

On the paper, written backwards in charcoal, is *Sherlock Holmes*. A sea wish.

Sherlock shrugs.

Anderson crumples the paper up again, and stalks to the edge of the cliff, his hands in fists. Sherlock watches him.

The paper is thrown, over Anderson’s shoulder, and over the cliffside. The wind takes it into the black and into the sea.

-/

“How was the festival, Sherlock?”

“Fine, Mrs Hudson.”

“I've just put the kettle on the stove, would you like a cuppa?”
“That'll be fine, thank you, Mrs Hudson.”

That night, as Sherlock lays awake and stares at the hardwood ceiling, he thinks, to the gentle patter of rain. The festival is over, officially, and not many people will be out in the cold rain. It'll put out the bonfires and dampen the rubbish that is littering the Skarmouth streets. It'll fill the ocean and dredge up water horses that would rather face the land than the tides by the rocks.

He wonders what would've happened if Darwin had come to Thisby, after, or instead of the Galápagos Islands.

There aren't many differences between the water horses, like the finch beaks and the tortoise shells. None that Sherlock can catalog, and he's tried. Just the coat colour. Size. When they leap into the sea after a premature rising, their heads begin to lengthen as they dip under, a scream cut off halfway.

They aren't that simple to study. Sherlock's tried. It's irritating and frustrating, to live on an island where magic flourishes but science refuses to.

The capaill are smart. Corpses don't wash up on the beaches, the only places bones are found is in the sea caves carved by the ocean years and years ago. No theories would've been born.

If Darwin had come here, he wouldn't have made it back to the mainland, and his findings would've been just specimens in glass, and nothing consequential at all.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Super long chapter, sorry >.
The Roads, Silent

Chapter Summary

The land is all perilous. High cliffs, cracked a cut deeply into the green - pasture and then air and finally empty pasture again. Below is the sea, whitecaps and black rocks like teeth. The seabirds are tucked away in nests on the cliffsides.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The earth is still, the roads silent. Sherlock is happy for it. Down by Skarmouth, the rubbish from the festival remains. Paper lanterns blown by the wind out to the green pastures, remnants from dinners, plastic pieces around the houses on the outskirts of the town.

The sun hits the cliffs perfectly, at this time of day. That is. If the sun has decided to make an appearance. Today, it has. The island is clear, though there are clouds in the sky. It is not overcast. The air still has a sharp, cold bite to it.

Sherlock doesn’t take Redbeard out to the the spot outside of Skarmouth today, with the tract of beach will be used for the Races. It’s not at all because of Anderson’s sea wish, or the threat of meeting any of the tourists or riders on that side of the island.

He pulls Redbeard northwards, past Skarmouth and towards the mill and the Stockyard. The winds mainly come from the south, so it will be an easy practice, if unrealistic of how the Races will be.

Redbeard is fast below him, a red streak on the fields of light green and fading yellow autumn grass. Sherlock keeps low, low to his neck as he makes the island pony (—no, horse, John Watson’s insult makes Sherlock petulant about this matter) canter far up the island. The better feed is already making his belly shrink, making his legs work faster.

Clucking, Sherlock’s shoves his heels further against Redbeard’s sides, asking him for another burst of speed. He has to squint against the rush of air, breaking the smooth lines of his trousers. The stallion pulls up when Sherlock takes back some rein, slowing to a trot, and then a walk.

Redbeard’s stamina needs work, he’s panting. But that’s why they’re running in the first place. Not wanting the horse’s muscles to get sore and cramped, Sherlock makes him walk instead of halt altogether. Redbeard is heaving in gasps below him, but Sherlock knows Redbeard, knows what he can take and how far he can really go. He daresay, he knows this horse better than he knows himself, what he can take, and how far he can go.

They walk to the side of the cliffs, as close as they dare. The last thing Sherlock needs is for the chalk to crumble below their combined weight and deposit them on the sharp rocks and high tide below them.

Huffing and puffing, Redbeard turns and walks a few feet away from the edge, tracking with it. His neck bobs up and down as he goes.

With the low bump of Redbeard’s gait, Sherlock faces forwards and sits up on his heels, not
looking to his left and to the whispers and the lull of the ocean. When he was very young, and Redbeard was, too, Mycroft had told him to always look where he wanted Redbeard to go. If he looked forward, Redbeard would go forward. If he spent too much time staring into space, Redbeard would, too, and he’d be a terrible horse to ride.

Good thing Sherlock has never believed a word Mycroft said.

He looks out to the sea now, and takes special care in holding the right side of the reins, the side away from where he’s facing, just in case Redbeard trusts him too much and they go walking off the side of the cliff.

The land is here is made up of high cliffs and perilous drops, low grass with a perpetual white crust from the salt winds coming in from the ocean. Below is the sea, whitecaps beating around the ragged stones like a wolf’s tooth. The seabirds are tucked away in nests on the cliffsides, and they dive out into the air or swoop back into the holes in the cliffs every so often.

He doesn’t see anything besides the crests and falls of the waves. The dark blue black, and the occasional tumble of foam. The waters conceal anything that may be swimming below.

In two weeks, Sherlock will be on the other side of the island, right beside this saltwater, on Redbeard. Racing alongside the giant capaill. It doesn’t seem fair to Redbeard. It’s not. It’s not fair.

Redbeard flicks his tail, and the wispy hairs thwap against Sherlock’s trousers. The horse dips his head, pulling on the reins good-heartedly.

Sherlock breathes in the salt and the fishy smell that Thisby has always been tinged with. He can’t back out now. He won’t. Not unless he dies. He won’t have this island thinking him a coward. Thisby is not kind to cowards.

He remembers the festival. He’s always been an outcast, someone not worth a second glance on this island, someone to snicker at or throw a punch at. Now, with Redbeard formally entered in the Races, he’s become a laughingstock. Not that he wasn’t before. He sniffs haughtily. Is a little respect so much to ask for?

You’re asking us to change all Thisby’s ever been, just for you? How can you ask that of us…? Isn’t our answer obvious?

A sudden, loud wail pierces the thin air.

Sherlock freezes, and Redbeard squeals in fright, stomping as Sherlock hauls the reins back, sitting back down on the seat of the saddle. Redbeard’s ears swivel wildly, and Sherlock knows he must be remembering the beach, because Sherlock is, too.

He strains all of his senses towards the cliffs beyond them, because that is where the wail came from.

Sometimes, the island’s atmosphere will throw sound back and forth, playing and tossing it as the wind does hair or children do stuffed animals.

Redbeard’s breath is quickening. Sherlock hums softly, reaching down a hand to pat at the stallion’s neck. It won’t do to have them both incapacitated with fear. Not that he’s afraid. Sherlock swallows, staring off and into the clear day and to the sea.

Surely, he would be able to see something were it coming for them. He’s unsure of where they would go, but he would see it, at the very least. The wind, lightening up now, as if in anticipation,
pushes the scent of brine towards Sherlock. He licks his cracked lips, mouth parted, listening.

The cry comes again. Closer.

But not from in front of them, from behind.

Redbeard reacts immediately, his hooves stomping as he prances in place, getting ever closer to the cliff edge.

A howl of strengthening wind sends him skittering dangerously close to the cliff edge. For a moment, Sherlock sees the hump of the cliff grass where it falls over the edge of the rock, toward the froth of the surging ocean far below. He feels the timeless, swimming sensation of possibility.

Sherlock grits his teeth and digs his heels into Redbeard’s side, unwilling to topple off Thisby like this. Mistaking it for the command of a run, Redbeard leaps into action, bursting away from the cliff edges and splattering gravel as he bolts inland.

Sherlock is bouncing with the speed and the suddenness of it, and trying fervently to rein in the terrified stallion. He yanks powerfully, and Redbeard jolts to a stop, turning in circles and throwing his head up and back erratically.

Another cry, ever closer. He’s breathing hard - where, where is it? It’s a water horse, that much is obvious, but where is it?

Something wails again.

It gets cut off in the middle, and there’s a loud, familiar demand of, “Will you shut up?” To go along with it.

Sherlock blinks.

Oh. This must be someone’s capall, screaming and wailing. Strange, that they would be by the cliffs over here... No, it’s not. They must just be doing what Sherlock is; training. Only. Now that Redbeard’s under a saddle and much more than 150 yards away from shore, what Sherlock’s doing now is grounds for disqualification. Anyone who sees him will report it without fail. He needs to get down.

He listens for the voice, or for the wailing again. Nothing. Where has he heard that voice before? It can’t be anyone he’s too familiar with (though, there’s not many of those), or he’d place it immediately. It was too far away, and too diluted by the wind.

Sherlock leans forward and swings a leg behind him, then dismounts, remaining on Redbeard’s shaky left side. Of course. Redbeard doesn’t know the capall they’ve been hearing is less of a threat, now that it’s got its owner with it. All the red stallion hears is a predator. An old, old predator.

Perhaps Sherlock should not relax, either. Perhaps it is Jefferson Hope, come to drive him and Redbeard out of the Races for good.

“Shhhh,” Sherlock pats the stallion’s shoulder, hushing him like the sea. He holds tight to the reins, pulling them over the equine’s head and using them as a lead to guide Redbeard back to the cliffs. They’ve gone pretty far from them. Redbeard’s ears flick towards him, seeking his voice as a comfort.

If only Redbeard could run that fast in the Races.
There’s a low grunt nearby, something Sherlock can feel in his feet rather than hear in the air.

Sherlock stops, not as alarmed as before, and shoves his hand into the broad of Redbeard’s chest, making him stop. He bends his head to peer out beneath Redbeard’s neck, and spots a great black shape, speeding towards them.

Its hooves devour prodigious amounts of soil and high grasses, it barely leaves the ground for more than a millisecond, and it seems to be miles closer.

It’s so fast.

His heart stutters, and he is climbing briskly back onto Redbeard before he can properly think. Get away, get away, get away …

Sherlock kicks at Redbeard, but the horse is squealing and rearing, and threatening to throw Sherlock off. He hangs on, tightly, and jolts with the landing, the landing so hard that it makes his teeth clack together. Then he’s sitting up, and pulling back the reins so Redbeard won’t go running off again, because he doesn’t need to see grassgrassgrasskynothing. He draws the reins back so far that Redbeard begins to back up, tripping over his own back legs and gangly rear ankles.

The black shape grows bigger, and bigger, and Sherlock can see the rider on its back, but it could be anyone, it could be someone who hates him, who agrees with the islanders--

The weak sun catches on the black horse’s striking white mane, where a rider’s hands are currently clutching onto, weaving braids in threes and sevens, threes and sevens. Then the clouds part and more light streaks over a head of light hair, mounted on the water horse’s back.

This is Watson.

John ‘get-your-pony-off-this-beach’ Watson.

John ‘It’s-not-obvious-to-me’ Watson.

Sherlock tightens his hold on his reins, but does not move. He’s more confident, now that he knows who this is. He’s spoken to Mrs Hudson of him (complained, really, right after he got back from the beach with Redbeard - she’d seen him and asked what on earth was wrong, and Sherlock had snapped back, ‘John Watson!’ and then gone to bed, not to sleep, to think), so at least she’ll figure out something if Watson’s come to murder him.

Redbeard rocks and shifts under him as Watson rides near on his lightning fast water horse, sitting up straighter in the saddle and finally slowing the horse.

Redbeard is twisting, afraid. To make up for this, Sherlock stares up at the blond rider, as the water horse is pulled to Redbeard’s side.

His horse isn’t even panting, despite galloping and devouring lengths of the island. And Watson is looking down at him quizzically. The water horse is too close for Redbeard’s comfort. Sherlock tilts his face up, squints against the light that the clouds have relinquished.

The great black stallion moves, and circles around to Redbeard’s shivering side, leaving only a few feet between the two horses.

“What are you doing here?” Watson asks. It is a question, not a demand. Sherlock’s spine goes rigid all the same.
Having been staring resolutely straight ahead, towards the cliffs, so far away, Sherlock’s head snaps back to watch Watson on the water horse, which passes right behind Redbeard’s hind legs. Sherlock can see the white all the way around Redbeard’s eyes, when he looks back, feel him panting and shaking with fear below him. The scent of brine is strong.

But the *capall uisce* never even bares its teeth. It never looks anything more than bored. If Redbeard is acting like this now, frozen with terror, his ears pinned back at the nearness of a tamed water horse, how will he act during the Races?

Sherlock bites out, “This isn’t your property.”

It’s the first thing Sherlock’s actually said to Watson. Before this, their interactions were strictly Watson’s commanding tone to keep Redbeard away from the beaches, and him asking Sherlock if he was alright after the altercation with the mad blonde mare.

That, and the events at the Scorpio festival, and the rider’s parade. He’s begun to form a profile on Watson, both of his history, his present, and most importantly, his personality, as barracuda-like as it may be. There’s a high moral code ingrained in Watson’s heart and face, along with a protective streak.

Seeing him with the mare goddess, however… that interaction was more than cryptic.

Watson looks surprised at the sound of his voice, and pulls his water horse to a full stop in front of Sherlock. It pulls sidelong in front of Redbeard’s face. It’s so tall and gigantic, that Watson’s feet in the metal (not iron, how strange) stirrups could boot up against Redbeard’s muzzle, if there had been any less space between them.

Sherlock can see the entirety of the stallion. With sloping shoulders and a powerful set of legs, a long, streamlined neck, and that rider, it’s no wonder this beast is a five time champion of the Races. Watson’s legs are bent, clothed in dark trousers cinched at the ankles. His boots (scuffed with slight parallel lines - caused by someone who scraped around the edges of the sole in order to remove crusted mud, but was distracted) are in the stirrups. Sherlock cannot see a charm on the whole damn saddle array or bridle.

The watch is on Watson’s wrist again, just like at the festival. It hadn’t been there at the beach, or in the tavern. Must not be waterproof, like almost everything made on Thisby is. It has to be, with Thisby’s weather. It does not tick, does not reveal the passage of time. It’s broken.

Sherlock can read a lifetime off of that wristwatch, and on the faded *H. W.* engraved on the face, beneath the glass. He smirks. And then he wonders if Watson’s still got the shell in his pocket, from yesterday. He wonders what it means. It won’t do well to ask. He was eavesdropping, and he wasn’t a part of that conversation...

“What’s the look for?” Watson asks.

“Your watch.” Sherlock answers swiftly. It occurs to him that Watson really doesn’t have any right to ask after his expression, but he’ll humour the man, all the same.

Watson holds it up, and looks at his wrist. He takes the reins in hand again, as the water horse rumbles lowly, again the sound Sherlock can feel in the stirrups tucked under his feet. Redbeard quivers. “What about it?”

“May I see it?”

Watson furrows his brow, the corners of his mouth turning down and carving lines into his face.
This contradicts the stormy blue of his eyes, framed by pale lashes. His hair is blown back a little in the front, evidence of his speeding run towards Sherlock, just minutes before.

He doesn’t stare at Sherlock for long, appearing to gauge whether or not Sherlock is going to take the thing and run with it. Sherlock can’t exactly go anywhere on an island pony (horse!) with a well-trained, five time Scorpio Races champion capall on Redbeard’s tail.

This seems to register with Watson, who extends one arm towards Sherlock, staying straight up in the saddle. It’s a practiced thing. Sherlock crinkles the bridge of his nose. “Why not just take it off?” Sherlock asks.

“Because, my friend,” Watson says, with a sly smile, “I’d have to let go of the reins.”

The capall is shaking. So is Redbeard. The difference is the capall’s muscles shudder with restrained power, while Redbeard’s ears are laying flat, and twitching, in fear.

The water horse jerks its head back, pressing it’s chin into its long neck, accompanied by the sound of jangling metal buckles on its halter, and the quick thrash of metal against leather - Watson jolting his heels against the horse’s side to keep it in check.

Sherlock leans forward, with half his attention on the watch, and the other on the capall, whose pupils are drawn back to stare at him. The nostrils twitch and flutter. Sherlock knows they are breathing in his and Redbeard’s scent. He can smell the water horse, too, all fish and high ocean tide.

It doesn’t smell anything like the blonde mare, who was rotting flesh incarnate. Something wrong, wrong, wrong.

And it doesn’t smell anything like Redbeard, who smells like hay and grain and home.

There are scratches over the glass and dents over the side of the watch face. The band is leather, and recently mended by the buckle, to be shortened.

Alarmed, though satisfied, Sherlock sits back, giving more rein to Redbeard to let the stallion relax. It doesn't work. Redbeard whines, and seems to regret it when the capall whines back, higher pitched, and deadly. A mockery - a blue jay crying danger.

“You’ve come from the mainland, I presume.” Sherlock says, by way of diffusing the tension. Watson returns his hand to the reins, pulling them tight. The capall stops shuddering and whining. Its ears are pricked, and alert. It’s still facing forward, feigning disinterest. “You were a veterinarian there. Can't much do that now, not with that shaking.”

Watson’s gaze doesn’t flicker, doesn’t glimmer away, he's unbothered by Sherlock’s deduction. It must be common knowledge that Watson doesn’t hail from Thisby. Sherlock’s getting slow, he can almost hear Mycroft’s tauntings in his ear while he watches the water horse arch its neck back, like a rattlesnake.

He imagines grand crystal chandeliers plummeting to the ground of a mansion’s tiled flooring. Mycroft, somewhere, sits behind a mahogany desk, prim and proper. He smirks, and his hands are folded on the wood before him. We both thought you were stupid. Before we met the others.

Fine. He’ll just have to go deeper.

“I’d say… twenty years ago? Judging by the model and the wear that the salt’s had on it.” Sherlock begins to speak quickly, reaching down to rub soothing circles in Redbeard’s quivering shoulder, “The watch was gifted from your elder brother, which was given to him by your late father. It was
originally a pocket watch, but your brother had the face removed and the band attached, very common, an adaption of generational gifts across said generations. Your brother was a man of untidy habits - very untidy, and careless. He was left with good prospects, but threw away his chances, lived for sometime in poverty, and finally, taking the drink, he died. With nothing, you moved here.”

Watson’s eyebrows climb. “How on earth did you know that?” He asks in astonishment. The water horse makes a slow clucking sound. It’s exactly like Sherlock heard in the fog, that day they found the sheep’s corpse, just slightly quieter. He wouldn’t say tame, because no water horse is. Perhaps… perhaps more docile, is the word. But that can’t be right, either.

Smothered. Quelled. Subdued, only by the man upon its high back.

"I began by stating that your brother was careless. When you observe the lower part of that watch face, you notice that it is not only dented in two places but it is cut and marked all over from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket, when it was only a pocket watch. Surely it is no great feat to assume that a man who treats an expensive watch so cavalierly must be a careless man. Neither is it a very far-fetched inference that a man who inherits one article of such value is pretty well provided for in other respects.” Sherlock pops the last syllable.

The water horse raises its head, opening its mouth to reveal long harrowed teeth, and Sherlock thinks it’s going to scream, but, without even looking, Watson lashes the reins against its slick neck, and the water horse tips its neck back again, quelled. Watson is focused on Sherlock. With him holding something so powerful so easily, Sherlock resolves not to lose the rider’s attentions. The wind sings around them, playing up the capall’s fishy scent.

“The next bit’s easy, you know it already,” Sherlock raises a hand, slowly, to not draw the water horse’s attention like he has Watson’s. He points at the watch face.

“The engraving?” Watson ventures, glancing down and then up again.

Sherlock smiles, “The model is fifty years old, a mainland model, the engraving as old as that. So, it was made for the last generation. Jewellery usually descends to the eldest son, even here, and he is most likely to have the same name as the father. Your father has been dead for many years. It has, therefore, been in the hands of your eldest brother, whose death was the reason you relocated here.

“There’s a multitude of scratches around the side of the watch, and I couldn’t see because of the wristband, but I assume that’s where your brother would’ve used the key to turn the pocket watch when the time went wrong, but he couldn’t fit it in - his hands were shaking. Drunk. You’ve no need for the key because the watch is broken, water damage, no doubt, and the hands are forever stuck at seven-thirty-five. You still wear it. Sentiment. Further evidence it’s an heirloom.”

Watson blinks.

And then he scowls.

“You’ve asked around about me, haven’t you?”

It’s Sherlock’s turn to look surprised. “No. I observed.”

“You got all of that from my watch?”

Sherlock shrugs.

“That's brilliant.”
Sherlock blinks, so shocked he can’t speak for the next five seconds. When he does, he mutters, “That’s not what people usually say.”

Watson laughs. Laughs! At him! How strange! It’s powerful and strangely enchanting, like November magic. “What do they normally say?”

“Piss off.”

Watson’s shoulders bunch up and shudder with laughter, hidden under his breath. Sherlock purses his lips, and continues his work at scratching Redbeard’s shoulder to calm his stallion down.

He looks up, and his eyes are caught on the capall’s. Square pupils peer back at him, not centered on Redbeard. He draws in a breath, “I’d appreciate if you could move your horse.”

Watson looks at the horse’s long, thin ears, and then reaches forward with his almighty grin, and twists one back, so hard it must hurt. Sherlock nearly winces in phantom pain. The water horse does nothing, doesn’t even make a noise.

“He’s not going to hurt you.”

“That may be the case,” Sherlock rebuffs, “But my horse thinks otherwise. Move him, please.”

Watson nods. It’s the same terse thing that Sherlock saw him do back at the beach, with the blonde mare, to the man with the black hair that had pulled Sherlock away from the danger.

The water horse jerks forward, barely lifting a knee before it’s ten feet away. Redbeard is still as a statue, only his ears twitch at the increased distance.

With no more wind to steal the sound on the island, Sherlock looks back over to Watson, who is regarding him, half of him hidden by the long snake-like neck of the water horse.

Sherlock can see its face now, truly and clearly, with no shredded mist or fog or wind. Its long nostrils contract, and it twists its head one way, rubbing its black muzzle its dark chest, some kind of a scratch. It looks less like a champion when it does this.

“I’m John Watson.”

“I’m aware,” Sherlock says.

Watson looks down. The capall looks down as well, suddenly studying its own crystalline hooves. Sherlock has a feeling this is merely a diversion, a distraction before the water horse would strike, if it didn’t have a rider controlling it. It may still lunge, even with Watson on its back.

“And you’re Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock is twisting his fingers in Redbeard’s rust-red mane, “Yes.”

“I asked about you, you know.”

“Did you, now?”

“Yeah,” Now Watson’s smiling, squinting against the light. It almost looks fake, “After the beaches. Heard Philip Anderson scribed your name on a sea wish last night.” His voice hardens, then softens again, “Saw your articles in the catalogs that used to go to the mainland.”

Sherlock fiddles with an imaginary speck of dust in Redbeard’s mane, then steals a look at Watson
again. He smiles proudly, his mind explicitly ignoring Anderson’s name. “And… what did you think?”

When he looks up, John-- Watson’s got a certain look to his face that makes Sherlock want to pull Redbeard away immediately. He considers it. It would do Redbeard good, wouldn’t it? And it’d get Sherlock away from the man who keeps somehow insulting him.

“You said you could tell a mainland horse monger by his tie, and an airline pilot by his left thumb.” The water horse’s neck arches back again, once more the proud, champion stallion. It looks like he’s showing off. But for who, or what?

“Yes.” That’s a particularly old issue, one of the first Sherlock wrote. His personal favorite was categorizing over 240 types of tobacco ash. How far back did Watson look into him? Did he see the tobacco one?

“How?”

Sherlock smirks, “The same way I can read your life off your leg, and your brother’s drinking habits off of your watch…”

“My leg?”

“Last year you had an injury in the Races, and you limp, but not when you're in immediate danger,” The correlation between limping at not-limping is only fully realized when Sherlock says this, “And the way in which you stand, and sit up in the saddle, like you have forgotten about it. It's psychosomatic.”

He turns away, just for a moment, and towards the direction Watson had originally approached from. He pulls up a mental map of the island. Hm.

The mill’s that way. So’s the Stockyard. Watson must’ve come from there. This must be where he rides his water horse in preparation for the Races. It isn’t a bad spot. There’s light right now and less wind than on the side Sherlock is most often on.

“Why are you training?” Watson’s voice hits him, and Sherlock turns his head to stare back at him. Again, again with the questions! Apparently, his participation in the Races has triggered the let’s-question-Sherlock-till-we-faint disease across Thisby! Molly, and, and, and Janine Hawkins at her bloody tavern, and Irene’s stupid lipsticked face at the rider’s parade last night! And now Watson!

Sherlock sets his jaw. “I'm racing.”

“You haven’t a horse to race with.”

All forms of relaxation born when Watson laughed are gone. Sherlock is nearly trembling with anger. His hands, white-knuckled and clutching the leather reins so hard that the folds cut into his palms, are shaking. He purposefully lowers them to the horn of the saddle so Watson won't see.

But the capall does. It turns its head to one side to regard him with one eye, like a bird.

“I’ve Redbeard,” Sherlock says, staring right back at the wet eye. “I can’t switch mounts.”

Watson is thinking over the validity of this answer, Sherlock can see it on his face. It's stupid, Sherlock thinks, how the sun catches in the sandy and silver streaks in Watson’s hair.
It's terrifying, Sherlock thinks, how the same sun showcases the permanent layer of salt and grease over the black capall’s white mane.

“Ah, Holmes,” He says, “You tempt fate. An island pony won't last a second in the Races.”

“He's seventeen hands.”

“Your little pony?”

“Horse,” Sherlock says, clipped, to Watson’s lopsided grin, “He's seventeen hands.”

“And,” Watson says, pulling the water horse aside so Sherlock can see the whole of him, every toned muscle and ebony hair on him, “Gladstone here is thirty four. Your Redbeard’s a pony to him and I.”

“My Redbeard’s a meal to your Gladstone.”

Watson tips his head to the side, an imitation of a nod. “I believe he's actually showing off, today. He must like your Redbeard.”

“Quaint.”

There's a sort of indiffusible tension, sparking and crackling in the air between the pair of them. It's born of short answers and unasked questions, curiosity. Gladstone, the great black water horse Watson sits on, is still looking at Sherlock, wispy white forelock twitching as his long ears do. It - he, Sherlock supposes - doesn't even glance to Redbeard. Redbeard, who is still shaking like he's under threat. He may very well be.

“Allow me to show you a real horse.”

Sherlock jerks his chin towards where Watson is. “I can see one.”

“No,” Watson says, with a shake of his head that Gladstone mimicks, mane tossing, “Not him. You need to see what you're actually up against.”

Sherlock scoffs. “You've won the Races the last five years. You're the one to beat, as Father Stamford’s told me.”

“Ah, Mike. That’s kind of him to say. He helped me quite a lot, when I came here,” Watson looks away, into the wind, which throws his hair. Gladstone continues to stare. Watson’s eyes search and find Sherlock’s again. “The others aren't like Gladstone.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says, and then feels embarrassed, because this is the line Hope went after him for, at the festival. He goes on without much pause, “Or some other idiot would've won.” Sherlock gestures vaguely with one hand. Gladstone’s eyes snap to the movement, the stallion stills instantly, his long ears whip back. Sherlock's breath catches, and he slowly lowers the hand to hold the reins again.

He forgets, sometimes, just how predatory these things are. How they're attracted to movement, how they will chase something, but only if it runs, only if they're made to work for it, to feel the thrill of tearing something apart.

Sherlock can relate to the capaill, this way. The thrum of the chase flooding through his veins and muscles. The symbolic tearing apart of people’s lives. But he'd prefer not to be on the other side of either assault.
“I trust Gladstone more than the rest of them. I shouldn't trust him at all.”

“For god’s sake…” Sherlock rolls his eyes.

Watson looks pressed. Gladstone’s eyes twitch. “No, Holmes, you don't understand.”

“Given how I was nearly killed by the mare on the beach, I think I do.”


“You've managed.”

“Only because Comfort’s sea-mad. He lost her three years ago, she's just come up this autumn again.”

“Alright…”

“Bill - Bill Murray, that is - he’s racing Bascombe. She always goes towards the shoreline. Isaac Whitney’s got Altum. He’s slower, but he runs mostly straight.”

Sherlock squints against the returning wind. He hums thoughtfully.

He could use this edge, that Watson is giving him. But that leaves more questions in its wake.

Sherlock goes with the most obvious one. “Why are you telling me this?” He asks, now tasting the salt in the strengthening wind. He wonders if, perhaps, a storm is on its way.

“Because Comfort’s going to be the one to kill you.”

“Not you?”

Watson laughs again. It's less impressed amusement, and more of a grim thing. “No, not me. Not on purpose, at the very least.”

Sherlock sighs. “What about that blonde mare? The one from the beach?”

“Moriarty’s looking into buying her, from that Magnussen. Magnussen’s already calling her Mary, after the Virgin Mary. Isn't it funny?”

“Hilarious.”

“If he does buy her,” Watson goes on, sitting back on Gladstone, broadening his shoulders, and looking like all the world is there for his taking, “I’m making sure she won't ever be waterfront after this year. She's already killed two men down there.”

“Magnussen is racing her,” Sherlock points out, remembering Magnussen’s voice at the rider’s parade.

“This year, yes. Moriarty will be trying to buy her after the Races. That is,” Watson drops his voice, “If she hasn't killed everyone and gone into the sea again.” A pause. Sherlock watches a seabird fly near the cliffs over past Watson's shoulder. "I could show you a real horse. Gladstone doesn't do them justice."

Sherlock’s interest spikes. Gladstone isn't a good representation? And does Watson truly believe Mary capable of that? He pulls on Redbeard’s reins, to remind the stallion that he's remained here. Redbeard, evidently more comfortable, jerks his head back and then swings his face to shove his
nose against Sherlock’s boot.

Sherlock nudges him back, because he doesn't look anything like a racer when he's doing this. He lifts his foot a bit away from Redbeard's side, anyways, just in case it was uncomfortable for the horse.

Gladstone doesn't react. He's still staring at Sherlock. Apparently, Sherlock’s more interesting. He doesn't know if he likes being interesting in a situation like this.

“Fine,” Sherlock says, “Show me a real horse.”

Chapter End Notes

I have the next chapter written, and a lot of others!
LMK what you think?
Sherlock’s eyes peer between the bars and the half-open doors. Some sport horses stick their heads out and regard him and Watson’s passage.

Others, much larger, and much more like the water horse in Watson’s hold, do not look at him, do not see him, do nothing but rumble lowly from the corner of their stalls, something that vibrates the flooring, and rub their manes off on the side of the iron bars of their door. Their door, which is never open, always locked.

Some come from the water’s edge, helped along by high tide. Some from the undersea caverns, all wide eyes and fright. Some come from the deep sea, with strings of green kelp dangling from their glowing manes.

Some are light, like the chalk and the grey gravel. White, unearthly, like they should be floating somewhere high above the earth and the cliffs. Some are dark like wet sand, with heavily lidded eyes. Others are black as the night, dredged up in storms and in the dark.

But they all want blood.

Sherlock wonders where Gladstone has come from. He knows where Redbeard is from. Some old owner on the west side of Thisby sold him to Sherlock’s family years ago, when Sherlock was little.

Gladstone is a mystery. Gladstone isn’t giving up his secrets. No water horse does.

“Did I get anything wrong?” Sherlock asks. His voice is loud, meant to carry across the ten meters between him and Watson. They are side by side, but far apart. Redbeard is tense under the saddle. He ambles along, nonetheless. Evidently more relaxed, less stressed. Gladstone seems happy to move, to not be idle. He keeps veering closer to the cliffsides, to the sea. Watson keeps him in constant check.

“Harry was a drunk, and the reason I moved here. I'm from the mainland, where I used to be a veterinarian...” Watson answers.

“Hm,” Sherlock hums, and doubts Watson can hear that, so he instead raises his voice to call back, “Spot on, then. I didn't expect to get everything right.” Harry Watson. H.W. It fits the letters on the watch.

“And Harry’s short for Harriet.”

Sherlock pulls on Redbeard’s reins. The horse throws his head back, but stops in his tracks. “Harry’s your sister. H. W. The engraving...”

“Still fits, doesn't it? Hamish was my father’s name. ‘Harriet’ worked for the watch face. She got it fit to be a wristwatch, instead of a pocket one.”
Sherlock grimaces, kicking Redbeard into movement again. The horse trots to cover the ground Sherlock’s lost to Watson. Furiously, through gritted teeth, he hisses, “Sister!” To himself.

Watson evidently sees the anger on his face, because he laughs.

It throws them both into the quiet again.

Harriet. Harriet. *Harriet!*

Once Sherlock’s calmed some, he clears his throat. One of Redbeard’s ears swivels back to catch the sound.

“Mary will be there?”

Watson looks over, squints against the autumn sun, and then shakes his head. “No. Moriarty’s not bought her. Yet. I’m fairly certain he will. You mustn’t tell him this,” Watson adds, kicking Gladstone’s sides with his heels when the stallion starts to lift his knees high, “But I don’t believe he should.”

Sherlock smirks, “I’ve no intention of speaking to him.”

“That might be for the best. He’s very… changeable.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He blinks. Did he just joke?

Watson laughs.

Sherlock doesn’t think about it anymore. It wasn’t a mistake, not if Watson laughed.

“No,” Watson grins, and the sun is suddenly much too hot on the back of Sherlock’s ears, “It isn’t a bad thing, all on it’s own. After all, the ocean changes. And that’s a good thing.”

“The ocean doesn't change.”

“Yeah? The tides and the currents and the waves. Those things change.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, “Not on their own. There’s-- there’s the pull of gravity of the moon for the tides, the wind and currents for the waves, and--”

“Alright, alright, genius!” Watson laughs again, and Gladstone snorts along with him, spraying seawater from his thin nostrils. “Ta, yeah. I understand. The ocean doesn't change on its own. But it does change. Can we agree?”

Sherlock nods. He's not satisfied, no, but, he will reluctantly surrender. This time. The next debate, Watson won't get off this lucky. It's just… the sun. The sun is putting him in a mood, as fair as the day.

Sherlock casts a quick glance to the sky; a dimpled quilt of clouds hides the sun, and below it, smaller clouds race by, hurrying to get on their way. The day is no longer clear. Watson is looking at the sky, as well. Gladstone clucks.

On the crest of the horizon, the roofs of barns and stables emerge. The smell of good manure is pushed to him by the wind. Gladstone’s ears prick up, and even Redbeard’s do, in interest.
Watson drops off into silence, and Sherlock happily follows suit. He’s glad Mary won’t be at the stables. He doesn’t think he could look the mare into the eye. And that would be taken as submission, and his throat would be ripped open.

He has no doubt she’d kill him.

The rest of the ride is not punctuated by anything more than the breeze, stronger here, and the thwaps of Redbeard’s shoed hooves striking the ground. What’s unnerving, however, is that Gladstone’s make no noise. They fall as soft as a feather, but are twice as big as dinner plates.

They turn out Redbeard into an empty corral, still tacked up. Watson says they won’t be here very long, but Sherlock removes his bridle and bit nevertheless. He closes the gate. The stallion seems to despise this. He knocks his head against the panels. Sherlock’s heart aches. He does not show it.

Another thing he does not show, are his nerves. He feels flayed bare, and unfamiliar in this place. It’s uncharted, to him. He’s ridden past the far fences, which they passed a quarter of an hour ago, but never come in here. Never needed to, or wanted to.

He reads small stories off of chunks taken out of the grass he walks on - a stubborn horse who wouldn’t move, and an inexperienced stable hand trying to pull on the lead very hard - and on the white fence posts. There are well-defined, hard-packed paths that look almost like game trails. The wind blows faintly, merely a breeze. It’s a very good location for such a large Stockyard, perhaps the best place for it on the island.

Watson, dismounted, leads the great black horse into the biggest stable Sherlock can see. It’s one of four, they’re all spread out as far as Sherlock can see on Thisby’s flatlands and plains, with many square acres of fencing between them. Sport horses are ambling around inside paddocks. Near the stable they walk towards, Sherlock spies a pair of bay mares quizzically trot up to the sturdy, white-painted fence posts (the paint here isn’t chipping).

They’re close, but not too close. Sherlock can see their arcadian eyes tracking him and Watson and Gladstone.

“They’re only curious,” Watson says, “You’re a new face.”

Sherlock hums, and though he wants to, he doesn’t branch away from Watson’s side to greet the mares and let them push their velvety muzzles into his palms. They’re not his horses, not his responsibility, and this isn’t his job.

He does spot a few stable hands at their posts, some riding horses to get them into shape for the auction, or others leaning against fences and chatting, gesturing occasionally to inside the fencing or laughing when one is bombarded by the breezes.

Outside the main sliding door, when the clouds part for a moment yet again, Sherlock spies a dark stain. A handprint, brown as the dried blood on the rock at the rider’s parade, and unable to be covered by paint, seen only in the right light, just near the door handle.

It wasn’t always racing, that the *capaill uisce* were used for.
They enter the stables, and Gladstone’s hoofbeats become far more pronounced on the unswept cement. Walking to the end of the stable (which must be twenty long on either side, every stall full, how grand), Sherlock’s eyes peer between the bars and the half-open doors. Some sport horses stick their heads out and regard him and Watson’s passage.

Others, much larger, and much more like the water horse in Watson’s hold, do not look at him, do not see him, do nothing but rumble lowly from the corner of their stalls, something that vibrates the flooring, and rub their manes off on the side of the iron bars of their door. Their door, which is never open, always locked.

One does this, and shrieks as Sherlock walks by, making Sherlock leap away as it viciously clacks and rattles its teeth together.

“That’s Beryl... She’s a screamer,” Watson laughs, and Sherlock snaps his head to glare at the blond rider in time to catch an overly enthusiastic wink.

Sherlock looks away, and attributes the warmth in his face to feeling like there’s a capall breathing down his neck. There’s not. Gladstone and Watson are in front of him, he lingers to the side and behind, taking it all in. Sherlock shoots a glare towards Beryl’s stall. There aren’t many water horses.

After all, the Stockyard makes its money from the annual auctions. And water horses are not to be sold anywhere but on Thisby, not to be kept anywhere but here.

“Why?” Sherlock asks, looking to Mycroft. His brother, fourteen, has the low-hung shoulders of someone under heavy burdens.

“It’s illegal.”

“But why?”

“They are killers, brother mine. It’s illegal.”

“There’s got to be another reason.”

Mycroft looks at him. Then he tips his head back, pushing out a long sigh. “You’ve always been one for folklore, and not for the law.”

Sherlock only looks at him, and soon enough, Mycroft fades away.

“Holmes?”

Startled, Sherlock blinks, finally seeing instead of disassociating himself from the current world. There’s a pair of small foals in the stall before him, one lying in the straw bedding and the other peering up at him through the grill. It’s too short to poke its narrow head up through the bars properly. They are both roan.

He clears his throat, looking to the voice that spoke. Watson is staring at him. He hopes, suddenly, he didn’t seem too stupid, or stupid at all. He pinches his lips together.

Watson glances away from him, and Sherlock then does believe that he looked stupid. He grits his teeth, feels his molars press together in irritation, directed at only himself.

Watson’s putting Gladstone into the last stall. Sherlock catches up with the pair of them, ignoring the confused stare of a low-ranking (obviously) stable boy mucking out an island pony’s stall. It’s a potent reminder that he’s not actually supposed to be here. The aroma of decay strengthens and
weakens in some spots, corresponding to what sort of horse, island or water, is in any given stall.

Sherlock sniffs, pausing several feet away from Gladstone and Watson. Watson spits to his hooves, suddenly, and Gladstone’s abnormal ears drop back. He shies away from Watson as the man goads Gladstone into the wood stalling. Sherlock takes in the vague patterning of rust on the grill bars.

“Those aren’t iron?” He wonders aloud, clasping his hands behind his back.

Gladstone turns in the stall, pressing his nose against the little open window. It’s a plain view of another stable, and the wind is blocked by the broad of the other barn. Must be useful, to keep the majority of the scent of the sea away from this horse.

Watson slides the door closed, and then latches it in the two places required for keeping water horses. The stable is filled with the soft sounds that ordinary horses make. The crunch of good hay, the wisping brush of tail on hind leg to nudge away flies.

It’s also filled with the spine-tingling sounds that the water horses make. The constant grate of rocky hooves on cement, pawing at the flooring. The sinister huff of breaths, combined with low growls that keen upward at the end.

“Nope,” Watson says, patting the stall door and then taking a step back to make sure it’s all fixed in place. “Not iron.”

“The rest of the bars are. Even the ones for sport horses.”

“Gladstone’s not fond of iron.”

Sherlock recalls what the black-haired man said on the beach. ‘Thought you didn’t do charms, John.’

“I am sure none of them like it. But. It’s. Doesn’t it… help? Keeps them from tearing your throat out. Or charging into the ocean.”

“You don’t know much about the water horses, do you?”

Sherlock frowns.

“Each one is different. If I used charms on Gladstone, he’d only fight. If I didn’t use them on a horse like, say, Beryl, the dun back there, she’d kill me.”

Watson presses his face close to the bars, and spits again. Gladstone makes an unnatural sound, something strained, yet… broken. Broken-in, that is. Tamed. Almost. But not quite… Sherlock’s frown becomes a grimace.

“Why are you doing that?” He demands.

Watson grins. Even in the strange not-light of the stables, from the suspended lights up above and the small amount of light that the clouds covering the sun allow, it’s otherworldly. In the stall, Gladstone bares his teeth, and scrapes them on the wood by the window, splintering it. It’s littered with older teeth marks and dark smears. “Doing what?”

“The spitting!” Sherlock exclaims.

“Ah, that.”

Yes, that. Now, Watson has to answer the question!
“You ask a lot of questions.”

“And you don't answer any of them well.”

“Well,” Watson begins, and then there’s a long pause. He leans close to the grill bars, though he’s cleverly keeping his fingers away from gaps between them. “Spit. Salt. It’s a part of me, it’s a way for me to be somewhere. When the rest of me can’t be.”

Sherlock remembers Watson calming Mary, the blonde mare who killed a dog a ripped off someone’s fingers down on the beach. What makes his saliva so special that this massive, tremendous beast of a horse is quelled, just by it being near him? What makes Watson so special?

Why has Thisby taken such a liking to him?

Sherlock is petulant about this. Everything about Watson makes him this way - fuzzy, confused. Some underlying emotion that he can’t name, and blegh. It’s fascinating, and terrible, both at once. The island will buck off anyone, won’t care if people born to its soil live or if they die. But Watson seems… gifted. And he’s from the mainland.

‘He’s got one foot in the ocean and one on the land. No one knows the water horses better than him,’ Comes Father Stamford’s voice. Stamford had seemed so sure that the only living thing that knew more about the *capaill* than the *capaill* themselves, was Watson. Yet. He doesn’t use charms. Perhaps… it’s because of that?

No. That’s stupid. Islands don’t have feelings, don’t have thoughts or preferences.

(That’s his objective opinion. Subjectively, there has always been something offbeat about Thisby, a vibration under his feet, the wind cajoling him into doing things his mother would never, to run to the cliffs, to the beach, to the water.)

Watson fiddles with the second latch. Gladstone pushes his face up against the grill bars. Sherlock discovers he needs a shark’s nerve to remain standing still.

“Tell me why you’re racing…?” Watson ventures, finally looking at Sherlock again.

For some ungodly reason, this question slides beneath Sherlock’s skin, combining and mixing in with his jealousy about Thisby liking Watson. It heats his face and makes him cross. He reins in the urge to bare his teeth like Gladstone is currently doing (the difference is that the water horse can sense the tension rattling off Sherlock, and is breathing heavily in his lust for it, whereas Sherlock is only vexed).

“Do you think I just go turning out my secrets for everyone?” Sherlock demands, incredulous.

Watson blinks, unfazed. It grates upon Sherlock. “I didn’t know they were secrets,” Watson says, “Or I wouldn’t have asked.”

The honesty in the answer both disturbs and annoys Sherlock. He frowns further, ever more perturbed when Watson smiles at that.

“Tell me why you’re racing,” He says, because if Watson’s going to intrude, then he can, too.

Watson looks at him. Somewhere behind Sherlock, the stable hand who’d been mucking stalls is wheeling a squeaking wheelbarrow out of the stables. They are alone. Save for around forty horses, still creating the juxtaposition between the predator and prey sounds.
“Why don’t you tell me?” Watson smiles.

“For eleven months of the year, you work for Moriarty, make yourself valuable, and for one month a year, you make yourself *invaluable,* ” Sherlock observes. He glances over his shoulder to watch the stable hand with the wheelbarrow leave through the open sliding door.

Sherlock looks back, and watches Watson spit into the stall again. He does not grasp the idea of the spitting, still, even if Watson’s explained it to him. Gladstone bobs his head, making a low sound that reminds Sherlock of a sickly kitten.

Sherlock narrows his eyes. “He’s not… That stallion isn’t yours.”

“Course not,” Watson says. His tone does not leave room for a reply, and he goes on, “I work for the Stockyard. Moriarty’s Stockyard. And… Gladstone belongs to the Stockyard.”

“You’ve tried to buy him. You want to. Moriarty doesn’t want to sell.”

When Watson laughs, Sherlock shies away. It's no longer brilliant and sunny. It's bitter. His irritation disappears. He wants Watson’s voice to return to normal.

“Five time winner of the great, world-renowned Scorpio Races, of course he doesn't want to sell him to me.”

“Gladstone isn’t the five time winner. You are,” Sherlock points out. He doesn't comment on the ‘world renowned’ part.

Somewhere, in the stables, a *capall* is knocking its head against the wall, a soft, yet eerie beat. An island mare whinnies nervously nearby. Sherlock’s unsure of how the island ponies can handle being surrounded with water horses.

“I'm not the one who’s running.” Watson pauses, and then spits into the stall. Gladstone grunts, then keens lowly, ducking his head in submission. It bobs back up, and then back down again.

“You ride him in the Races, don't you?”

“I receive eight percent of the first place purse, every time I win. I get paid to work here. I’m a consultant for the mainlanders who want to buy sport horses at the annual auction. I’m not cheap to keep,” Watson says. He spits again. Gladstone bobs his great head again in return. “I've offered Moriarty five times more than he's worth. But, ultimately, it's not my decision whether or not I can buy him.”

Five times what a five-time-champion of the Races is worth? That could buy Mrs Hudson’s house. That could pay Anderson. That could get Sherlock to the mainland.

Footsteps echo in the stables. Expensive shoes on hay-strewn cement.

Sherlock looks over his shoulder.

A man in a pressed suit, dark, slicked back hair and a strange something in his deep eyes is walking alongside some bumbling but content tourist, with a small cleft to his chin (not as appealing - *no, not* appealing… not as *nice* as Watson’s) and hooded eyes. Sherlock sniffs. Hm. Nope. Not a tourist, Sherlock can tell from his tie, the bit he can see before it’s tucked into his waistcoat. Horse monger. Wealthy, from the mainland. It’s rather early for someone like this to be on Thisby. These are separate from the ones that watch the Races, or even participate. They are here for Moriarty, and Moriarty only.
Moriarty is the man beside him. His hands are tucked into his trouser pockets, and his body language says he’s easy-going, and accessible. Someone that someone else would like to talk to. Sherlock sees the line of his underwear peeking out from his trousers. Smells his overbearing cologne. Makes his deductions. Scowls.


“Ah, John,” drawls a nearly unfamiliar accent. It’s a northern mainland one. Of course. Moriarty lived on the mainland, once upon a time.

It’s very peculiar, how Sherlock knows about Moriarty but he doesn’t know him. He knows he used to ride horses and own them on the mainland, but he doesn’t know why he doesn’t ride them anymore. He knows he owns half the island, but not which half.

The pair of them grow closer. The monger has a light peppering of stubble over his face. From his breast pocket, Sherlock spies a stained handkerchief, with a familiar address half-obliterated from liquid upon it. He looks back up to the monger’s face. He has small lips, light eyes, and something smeared on the side of his mouth. A few old, tiny pockmarked scars on his forehead. Nicotine stains lining his fingernails.

“Mister Moriarty,” Watson greets back. His voice has a slightly different tinge than a moment ago. He’s slipped into a professional voice, a customer voice. Naturally. Watson is the product most horse mongers are here to buy. He’s the one whose advice is sought, the one whose opinion is held to impossible standards. “What can I do for you today?”

“I’ve a good man named Henry Knight, looking at my horses. Mister Knight, this is John Watson, our resident champion. And,” Moriarty’s eyes fall upon Sherlock, and then flick back up to Knight, “One of his stable boys.”

A nerve is struck.

He’s very clearly not a stable hand, from the way he’s dressed to nearly everything else about him.

(He pays no mind about what that last bit reveals, his stable boys, meaning Watson is very much at the top of the food chain, here at the Stockyard.)

“What can I do for you today?”

“Mister Knight,” Sherlock smiles sickeningly, sticking out his hand. Knight smiles, takes it, shakes, as if he were someone important enough to seriously be introducing himself to this wealthy monger. “I see you’ve only come in this morning. Ferry ride breakfasts are always so disappointing, aren’t they? And it really is a pity they don’t allow you to smoke, I know I’ve been inconvenienced dozens of times, and you’re just dying for a cigarette, aren’t you?” Sherlock drops Knight’s hands and reaches into his own pocket, removing a half-empty, smushed carton, then offering a smoke to Knight, who since has lost his smile, but, with a perplexed look, takes the cigarette anyways. “Sherlock Holmes.”

Watson shifts, nearly imperceptibly, behind him. It’s not his place to speak, not his property, not even his job that has him here. He is, quite literally, something Watson dragged in. Knight sticks the cigarette between thin lips, and manages a nearly empty package of matches from his waistcoat breast pocket. Sherlock catches the imprint of a pocket watch as he replaces the package again, taking a drag.

Moriarty grins over at Knight and then at Sherlock, false memory and realization suddenly in his eyes. “Of course! Mister Holmes. I’m quite a big fan of yours! All those articles, so clever, so fun…” The tip of Knight’s cigarette glows. Heavenly smoke fills the air.
Sherlock blinks. He hadn’t... he hadn’t known Moriarty was aware of his articles. Clearly, it’s a cover, he doesn’t want to seem rude or harsh in front of Knight, someone who will be buying horses. By the look of him, he’s quite rich.

Watson is at his side, and then in front of him, crossing the scant distance between him and the two men, and simultaneously forcing Sherlock back, lest Sherlock end up flush behind him. He takes a step back.

“Mister Knight, it’s a grand pleasure to meet you.” Watson flashes him such a big smile, something that appears so sincere, that Sherlock has to hold himself still.

Knight has big ears, Sherlock notes with a tinge of irritation, ears that stick out from his short hair. No doubt Watson’s noticed.

“And you, John,” Knight pulls the smoke out from between his teeth, “I-- that is to say, Mister Watson…” Knight begins.

Watson laughs. A slight tilt of Moriarty’s head says it’s all planned. “Oh, no, please, call me John.”


-/-

Sherlock excuses himself.

He feels three kinds of gazes on him when he goes.

One. The confusion of Henry Knight.

Two. The fire of Moriarty, burning twin holes in his back. It’s something wicked, something that he can feel through his clothing, a little too like the stare of his brother. Moriarty, he realizes, may be properly clever.

Three. The disappointment of Watson.

It’s only after Sherlock arrives home, that he realizes he didn’t even see what Watson wanted to show him - a real horse.

-/-

“No, you aren't listening!” Sherlock shouts into the dull quiet. He reclines so far back on his flour-caked stool that it may tip, that is, until his shoulders hit the wall and he can lean properly. He crosses his arms and tucks his chin against his neck.

“I am listening, Sherlock,” Molly snaps back, up to the elbow in dough. Archie is sprinkling flour into the large mixing bowl every few kneads, “You just aren't making proper sense!”

“I am!”
“You're not!”

The sound of a bell. The front door’s been opened.

Molly sighs. “Archie, could you get that?” She asks. Archie nods and exits the back of the bakery through the swinging doors. Molly goes on kneading. “You're telling me that John Watson brought you to the Yard? As a way of preparing for the Races?”

“I don't know what it was for,” Sherlock clarifies, “I only know that it happened. He brought Redbeard and I to the Stockyard, and I witnessed Moriarty in the middle of showing a mainland monger around. The event was altogether quite unremarkable.”

“Sherlock,” Molly sighs, the sound as quiet as the folds of sugar dough, “If it was unremarkable, you wouldn't be here trying to talk to me about it, would you?”

Sherlock scrunches up his nose. The front door bell chimes again, and a few heartbeats later, Archie comes back through the doors. He picks up his paper bag of flour and continues spotting Molly’s work with it, so the sticky dough will be easier to work with. Sherlock knows it gets difficult because he's done that job for Molly before.

He does that when the rest of the island gets too boring. Which is very often. He's mainly taken over the back of the bakery. He's managed to make Molly believe he needs the space. It was easy, because the woman likes him much more than she likes to admit.

“Is John Watson the winner from last year?” Archie asks to the silence. He sprinkles more flour. Molly answers, “Yes. He's the one who got knocked off at the end.”

Sherlock perks up. He stops leaning on the wall, sits up straight instead. He brushes off his shoulders, because there's no doubt there's white marks on them. “Knocked off…?” He ventures.

“I thought you read the race reports,” Molly says. The front door bell chimes. Archie sets the bag down and goes to answer it. Molly only looks over her shoulder after him before going back to work. Her ponytail slips over her neck.

Sherlock returns them to the topic, “Only when I hear that they are interesting.”

“So, you don't know what happened?”

“Mrs Hudson told me someone was hurt after the conclusion of the Races last year. And that that person was a five-time champion.”

“It was Watson. You know, the man you spent the evening with?”

That makes it sound far less innocent. Sherlock crosses his arms again, eyes the red ovens across the room. Molly should take them out a few minutes earlier than the timer says to, to maximize the cooling time before the after-dinner rush by the tourists to the shops. Sherlock can practically taste the gritty sugar dough from the sweet bread Molly’s working, that's how powerful the scent is.

“You remember it,” Sherlock states.

“Yes,” Molly says, finally removing her arms from the cast-iron bowl. She takes a step back and wipes her forehead, slightly sweaty from the work and the heat that the ovens bring to the shop, smearing flour. “I was there.”
“On the cliffs.”

“Yeah.”

“So you didn't really see it.”

“Oh, for--” Molly crosses to the large aluminum sink beside Sherlock. She flicks flour into his trousers, Sherlock scoffs, and she turns on the tap and sticks her hands under the stream. “Do you want to know what happened, or not?” She works up to the elbows with the hand soap.

Sherlock works his jaw as he brushes off the flour, “I do.”

“Then how about you stop being difficult?”

Sherlock scoffs again. Molly turns off the tap.

“It was the end of the Races, and Watson finished first. He was bringing that big horse of his around to the side to get out of the way, and someone just--” Molly glances to the swinging door. Archie is busy up front, she shouldn't be worried about him overhearing, “Someone’s water horse barreled right into his. I can't recall whose.”

The front bell chimes. More people came in. Molly apparently decides that Archie needs help behind the counter out front. She picks up the basket of freshly baked loaves and sweets.

Sherlock scoots off the stool, a thump when his shoed feet meet the floorboards, and follows her as she leaves the back, slides out behind her and behind the counter. Since he's eager to hear the rest, he helps her load the glass display case and ignores the presence of the man whose mouth is watering, who is paying Archie and holding a greasy paper bag. November cakes. They're hardly warm, Sherlock can't see the appeal,..

“Watson was knocked off to the sand,” Molly suddenly continues as she crouches beside him and removes the few stale rolls, replaces them with cinnamon swirls, “And he was almost trampled as the rest of the racing horses crossed the finish line. Might've taken a hit or two, I can't remember. Got nipped a bit, but those capaill are always biting anything that moves. He's got a limp now, you know.”

“I know,” Sherlock quips. He stands as Molly does. She squeezes past him to put the basket by the back room door.

“But he's still racing. He's a bit mad, isn't he?”

Sherlock glances out the front windows as he pulls on his gloves, to the dark. He can see his reflection in the light of the bakery, and the faint outline of Redbeard just outside the door by the riding post and the trough. Tourists pass by on the walk outside the shop, occasionally pointing to something. The smell of bread and cinnamon is in the air.

“He may be.”

Chapter End Notes

sherlock: *goes to molly to complain about his love life*
Sherlock rises early and drags Redbeard from his stall. The stallion puts up a fit. He’s not had a good time of going out lately. Sherlock’s never really brought him outside during November and October before, never had to, never wanted to. He was always scared for the horse’s life, and for his own, because, surely, if Redbeard encountered a water horse, he’d be horrified and leap away from Sherlock.

The concern has always mostly rested on Redbeard’s life.

But Sherlock drags him out all the same. The air is chaste and crisp, striking against his face and pinkening his ears. God. How the cold bothers him. It dives beneath his skin and wedges and wiggles there, like bugs.

Sometimes, he’d feel like that if he were high, scratch at the crook of his arms until they bled. He still has needle-marked scars, and broad scratches, just there. It’s one of the reasons he prefers long sleeves to short ones or rolling them up, why doing so makes him so uncomfortable.

He could feel when cocaine was dirty, or when a morphine solution was dangerously diluted. The way it raced through his veins too quickly, or chafed just beneath the first layer of his skin.

Redbeard snorts, and, in his turn, drags Sherlock out of his thoughts.

They’re ambling alongside the cliff edges. He hadn’t realized that. He hadn’t realized that. He wonders if they ran.

Redbeard isn’t panting. Sherlock dismounts, pulls Redbeard by the reins along the cliffside, and watches the push and pull of the ocean down far below. He imagines what the coastline will be like in two hundred years, when the rocks here crumble and, instead of steep chalk cliffs, Thisby will be made into something entirely flat.

He screws up his nose as his boots hit the earth, because he doesn’t like the idea.

There are twelve days until the Races, after today.

Later, the earth holds a strange power to it. The cracks in the dry ground seem wider, the grasses higher. There is no fog, but the air is as heavy as if there was. Sherlock knows when a water horse is near. He’s known all his life, everyone born to Thisby soil does.

His heartbeat feels askew, just half a beat off, all day. The wind cuts straight and low across turf made deep, dark green by the clouds pressing overhead. When the gusts blast across Redbeard’s face, strong enough to check his speed, he spooks and shivers. The air stinks of the capaill uisce.
Neither of them wants to be here in this night-dark afternoon.

But he knows they ought to stay. If there is wind or rain on the day of the race, he needs Redbeard to be solid. Not the slippery, jerky animal that he is right now.

It’s the first time in many years that he’s feared for his own, as well as the stallion’s. Perhaps somewhere, deep and locked and chained down in his mind, his brain has found something interesting, something Sherlock has not yet had a chance to study.

It doesn’t take all of his genius to figure it out. He hates the answer. The answer thrills him.

(Why does he miss every warning sign?)

-/-

Redbeard’s blood fizzes under the saddle. Sherlock touches his neck, and the horse jumps and whinnies nervously. Sherlock is reminded of the mares and the young fillies and colts at the Stockyard, which reminds him of John Watson, which irks him. He wretches the reins left and pushes his heels into Redbeard’s side, a touch too harshly.

Redbeard runs, and Sherlock feels him leap and bound with as much energy as a new colt. He may be just as good as one. Horses on Thisby live longer, can run within minutes after birth instead of hours, but tire quicker. Sherlock has always figured it’s the magic, wearing them thin.

From a scientific point of view, he can't discern what it is, and it constantly makes him cross.

He kicks Redbeard’s side, and the horse’s stride lengthens, until he is devouring great lengths of the island, and Sherlock must squint against the frigid air.

He returns in the early evening. His biceps ache, and Redbeard’s legs tremble as if they were made of flimsy seaweed. Josephine snorts in the next stall over. Her stall has been mucked, it’s clear even in the blue wash of dusk. Sherlock scrunches up his nose, because Mrs Hudson really should let him do those things, she’ll throw out her hip again.

Resolving to clean out Redbeard’s stall tomorrow, to line it with the cheap hay, now useless, Sherlock proceeds into the house.

Mrs Hudson is downstairs in the kitchen cellar, fumbling around several verdant oranges by the sink. The strings of dried herb bundles dangle precariously over her head, and along all the tops of the walls. There’s too much stuff, and too much tidying. Sherlock sniffs, and makes sure to step on the creaky steps to alert her of his presence. He’s fairly certain she knows he’s here anyway, she’s got that sort of sixth sense all elderly ladies seem to have.

Mrs Hudson looks at him. She looks upset. Sherlock wonders if she’d found out about the baker from Tholla’s two wives on the mainland. Mm. She’d be more upset at that, wouldn’t she? Of course she would. Sherlock’s eyes dart around the room - paper on the table. Training reports, they’re like the newspapers here. Someone’s died. She couldn’t be troubled over just that, could she? Someone she knew had to die.

Sherlock takes stock of when he last saw Mrs Turner, and, no, she’s fine, too, because she waved to him just twenty minutes ago, when he passed her sheep farm on Redbeard. He waved back.
“Training reports…” Sherlock mumbles as he drops off the last wooden step. It creaks after his weight’s left it.

“Could you believe how bad it is this year, Sherlock? Seven men, dead since the festival…”

Sherlock says, “Is that counting the man at the festival?”

“The one who went over the cliffs? Yes, it is, don’t you think it’s horrible?”

“They’re not all riders.”

“That doesn’t make it any less horrid.”

Sherlock settles at the kitchen table, inhaling the scent of cooked mutton. Really, he wonders how people get by without Mrs Hudson’s cooking in their lives. Not that he’s hungry. “Absolutely appalling,” Sherlock agrees.

Mrs Hudson whirls on him, and for but a moment, Sherlock fears she’s going to throw something at him, because that’s the sort of look on her face. He leans back in the iron-backed chair.

“You’re the one who should be concerned with all of this rubbish,” Mrs Hudson announces after a lengthy pause, then turns to smash some plate in the sink and turn on the tap. Her arms work furiously as she washes something with frustrated resolve. “You’re the one who’s-- who’s racing.”

Ah. No one she knows has died. At least, not anyone majorly important to her. She’s merely fretting over Sherlock’s wellbeing.

“Precisely,” Sherlock pushes back the chair as he stands, “I’m the one who’s racing.” He rounds the table to stand beside the determined woman, “And you’re not. So,” He leans forward to brush a fleeting, fond kiss to the side of her face, “It’d do your kind heart well to stop worrying.”

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Today, there is a high note in the wind as it hurls sand and salt and reddens Sherlock’s cheeks. It makes Sherlock’s skin itchy and raw. He spends the tired, pale orange morning up and running by the cliffs, the ones where he met Watson and has resolved to train at, then rides to Skarmouth in the afternoon to bother Molly and Archie for a bit, snacking on a light lunch of gifted November cakes before retreating back out to the empty cliffs.

He stays up on them, racing over the grass and tiring out Redbeard until late afternoon leaves the island colder than usual. Sherlock expects frost to be present in the early morning, soon. Then, he looks down, watching the old ocean pound the beads of gravel below.

The cliffs here are lower, more grey than the racing beach. The shore is made up of uneven plates of rocks and gravel, with teeth-like rocks sticking out of the shallows that could sink a fishing boat were it being pushed against them. This terrain is no good for riding on, and even with the low tide, there’s hardly any room for them to stand. Sherlock watches the water, eyes the breakers for an ear or a head. A beach like this, in local folklore, is said to be haunted by the old water horses that charged into the sea during the Races and never returned, because of how closely the cliffs and the ocean are together. It’s supposed to represent how land turns to water and water turns to land, and how the water horses are always caught on the middle ground.

Sherlock compares this with the racing beach. The other is far longer, sandier, and wider, and the
cliffs are more chalk than crumbling grey. Pain lives in the sand, like fiddler crabs. Blood spills soaked into the billions of grains in a single handful. On both sides, the ocean is turbulent, and here, it noisily smacks against the rocks and makes fragments of stone crush together as each wave recedes, another taking its place half a second after each.

Clouds pass overhead. Two days ago, when Watson was up on the cliffs with him, when Sherlock was at the Stockyard and the gigantic Gladstone was an arm’s length away from him, the sun was out. Sherlock was stupid to think the weather would last. Wind tucks under his jacket sleeves, lifting them away from his arms.

Sherlock risks lifting his eyes from the sea towards the sky, where gulls screech questions from above, gliding on the air that funnels, cut by the cliffs. The guillemots in the rocks of the shore make as raucous cries as the terns nesting in the cliff face. Sherlock smells seaweed and fish and the dusky smell of bird feathers and mites.

Redbeard snorts, dips his head to the stones.

Climbing up the narrow, steep path is somewhat easier than trudging down it, as gravity is no longer working against them and trying to tear Redbeard down and fall. Sherlock licks the salt from his lips as he goes. It’s crusted his mouth and eyelashes. The cold presses up against him, like another body. Redbeard’s hooves slip and skitter on the loose pebbles a hundred times in the climb. Sherlock leans forward, towards the stallion’s neck, to ease some of his weight.

Finally, Redbeard, huffing irritated and gasping breaths through his nostrils, which contract and flare erratically, steps onto the hump of cliff grass that rests over the cliff edge, and pulls the rest of his body up. Sherlock whispers nothings and scratches and rubs the red horse’s neck and shoulders in praise.

The wind is assaulting them again. Grey clouds roll over high above, like obedient dogs searching for treats. They go quickly, urged along by the rough gusts. There are some hills here, and thinning bushes made meek by the Thisby weather, and scraggly trees, hanging onto the bare edges of the cliffs and feeding off the poor soil. All the fully grown trees were culled off when the first people of Thisby set foot here. It’s why the wood on houses is peeling and splintering and old.

There’s a large outcropping of rocks a few furlongs away, and smaller mounds scattered around, hazardous, half-hidden by hillocks. It always smells more like fish up here.

“That can’t possibly be Sherlock Holmes, can it?”

The voice strikes Sherlock through the blurs of wind rushing past his ears, past his focus on the clouds above, and past his general spacial awareness.

He turns, finding that Redbeard has already done so, ears pricked and alert, neck high and tense as he watches Watson approach. Redbeard must’ve known they weren’t alone immediately.

By the edges of the land, where the grass begins to thicken and clot, against the grey and white skies, heavy and hanging with the weight of water, is that great big black _capall_ and its champion rider.

Gladstone, the black _uisce_, is inspired by their appearance, it seems; instead of slowing to a walk as Watson approaches, he trots nearly in place, hooves trampling several distinct spots on the island grass, skin shivering with excitement. Watson has a dancing black horse underneath him. Only when the wind from the cliffs tangles through Sherlock’s hair does Gladstone pause to smell. Then he’s back to twisting, ten feet or so away, the distance that politeness demands.
Sherlock can read the last two days off of him, as if Watson was holding up a neon blinking sign. Spent all of yesterday riding, some bucking horse, because his legs are pressed tight to the side of the water horse to stretch a pulled muscle in the inner thigh. Sherlock knows for a fact more buyers were poking around in the barns yesterday, heard it from Molly. So, Watson spent yesterday showing off horses and being the general entertainment.

Gladstone’s hind leg lifts up, high, knee rubbing belly. It appears this horse got exercise yesterday, too.

Sherlock blinks, eyes raising to the rider. “You’re here again.”

“This isn’t your property,” Watson says, and he grins. It takes Sherlock a moment to remember that those were the words he spat at Watson, merely days ago. It feels like centuries, time is crawling so slowly. Diffidently, Sherlock casts his eyes downward to hide a smaller smile.

“Not yours, either,” Sherlock notes after a moment, with a tilt to his head.

“Means it’s free rein, which means I can be here,” Watson flicks the reins of his great water horse, which jolts its head to one side, showing off a powerful profile. “You know, I never did get to say a proper goodbye to you, two days ago.”

“Had to run.”

“So does everyone.”

Sherlock regards Watson for a moment, and then lets his mouth twist into a smile. Watson follows suit. Redbeard snorts again, as if fed up, and Gladstone’s long, thin ears twist unnaturally to catch the sound.

Watson laughs, “I’m sorry if I dragged you to the Yard. I really didn’t mean to. I… I just know that you’re going to have your fair share of trouble by the time of the Races.”

“Will I?”

Nodding, Watson glances up at the sky, and Gladstone picks that opportune moment to wring his serpentine neck forwards again, following the swivel of his ears, to regard Sherlock. The movement is so quick that Sherlock only registers it after it’s happened. Sherlock stares right back at the horse, and soon enough, Gladstone seems more interested in Watson’s foot than Sherlock, contorting his face back to nudge at Watson’s boot in the stirrup, high up on the horse’s belly. Sherlock sees Redbeard’s mannerisms in that move.

“They’ll still try and keep you off that beach,” Watson says, “It won’t have ended at the festival.” Watson quips the reins and Gladstone’s ears push forward, head swinging back to follow them.

“It’s their own fault. The rules should’ve been more specific. Has no one ever tried what I’m doing? If so, I find that hard to believe.” Mm. No, Sherlock doesn’t. This island is full of many morons and few exceptions. Still - having Sherlock on the beach should be a balm to the seasoned racers, he'll be an easy one to beat. He rolls his shoulders back and preens. No, he won’t.

“No one’s as clever as you. No one’s thought to look past the rules on paper,” Watson smiles, and Sherlock thinks, crossly, that he looks devilishly stunning and robust. Watson’s dark riding trousers and rolled-up white sleeves and his posture, upright and purposeful, make him look like he’s meant to be on Gladstone. Sherlock feels impoverished in an outfit just like that across from him. Perhaps it’s because Redbeard doesn’t make as imposing a figure. Both horse and rider are aware of it. That horse is absolutely enormous, even to one as tall as Redbeard. Thisby is a land of giants.
Sherlock is suddenly quite cross that his curls tend to tangle and hang limply in his face after an attack by the wind, because Watson looks put together, short hair scrappy from the rushes of air. Sherlock shoves his hair back, only to have it fall back again when he replaces his hands on the reins.

Again follows that immeasurable silence, and Watson is again that point of frightening stillness. Then, “Holmes, when the Races are about proving something about yourself to others, the people you beat are as important as the horse you ride.”

Sherlock says, “But that’s not why you race. You don’t care about who you beat.” He furrows his brow, squinting against the air. Truly, it doesn’t matter who Watson beats, because he’ll beat everyone, anyways.

“Not one bit,” Watson says, and before Sherlock can slide in some prying question and gloat over his, albeit small, victory, Watson goes on, “But it means that people don’t want you on that beach, because if they don’t beat you, then it means that they lost to Sherlock Holmes and his island pony.”

*If they don’t beat you...* That sounds like Watson is expecting Sherlock to win. Or. Maybe not. But he’s expecting him to have some kind of chance. Perhaps a better chance than his 49 to 1 odds in Hawkins’ have given him. Watson expects Sherlock to not lose, to beat at least someone. Or maybe the right word isn’t ‘expect’, maybe it’s ‘assume’. Sherlock isn’t sure how he feels about that.

“He’s not a pony.”

Watson tries to remedy, “Holmes and his island horse...?”

“Sherlock.”

“We do not have to contradict-- oh?”

Sherlock’s cheeks are on fire again. It’s that little surprised ‘oh?’, somewhere between a tut and a hum, that Watson says that lights him up like the cresting waves at night, under a full moon. He’s pale, it’s going to stick out and make him look stupid, especially in this light, and, christ, why does he even bother talking? He swallows. “Sherlock. It’s my name. You might as well use it.” Sherlock waves a hand dismissively.

Watson smiles, and Sherlock hopes against hope that he’ll-- “Sherlock. And my name’s John. Some people call me that.”

He doesn’t invite Sherlock to be one of them.

To make up for the disappointment that that completely did not cause, Sherlock decides to tackle the comment from moments ago, drawing back the reins so Redbeard’s head doesn’t slouch like it’s doing now. Sherlock opens his mouth, but, beating him to the punch, Redbeard blows out through his nose with his mouth shut. A greeting sound, staring up and over at Gladstone.

Stopping, Sherlock glances up at the black *capall*.

Gladstone is focusing on Redbeard now. Those predatory eyes, more towards the front than the side of its head like a normal horse (evolution at work, meant to focus, meant to see completely, to concentrate, to hunt), stare accusingly, incredulously. But Redbeard is no longer squealing, though he does tuck his head shyly.

Gladstone blows back, deeper and longer. Then he jerks his chin back against his long neck, as if sheepish at his introduction.
Watson looks between the two horses, and lets out a bark of laughter.

It isn’t difficult for Sherlock to follow - it seems easier to laugh when Watson’s already doing it. Redbeard shifts his weight, stagnant too long, and nickers, soft and quiet, like a mare to her foal, only Sherlock and Redbeard are neither one of those. Sherlock, letting his laughter dissolve into breathless giggles, pats Redbeard’s neck. It was nice of the horse to check up on him.

“As I was saying, before I was so rudely --” He tugs on Redbeard’s ear lightly, making the horse turn his head back, then releases, “-- interrupted.”

“We were having a conversation--” Watson’s heels dig into Gladstone’s sides, and the massive horse crow hops as if he’s been burned, but it seems to be all in good fun, “--Weren’t we?” Watson tries, fending off endearing giggles as he looks back up to Sherlock.

He tries to keep his expression as serene as a tidepool on one of Thisby's clear days, but it doesn’t work, just twists up his face. The little kick and Watson's giggles has warmed him up to the other man.

The wind gasps, long and low around their feet, flattening the grass and tangling up the horse’s manes. Redbeard’s tail flicks, already forgiving Sherlock for the ear pulling. Sherlock rubs the spot that Redbeard loves, near the horn of the saddle, a late apology. Watson is getting Gladstone back under control. Sherlock remembers his father once telling him that no water horse was ever meant to trot, let alone keep still. “I did,” Watson says after a moment of thought.

“Why would you think anyone would lose to me?”

“Because they’re all in love with the ocean.” Gladstone hasn’t stopped moving since the crow hop. His neck is arched, too. He looks ridiculous as he preens for Sherlock and Redbeard. "They only want to get back to it. And they're hard to catch, and they're fast."

“Then,” Sherlock goes on, “You think Redbeard would be faster.”

John’s face twists. He hesitates. He hesitates, before answering, “The capaill are always faster. I don't know what sort of training you're doing, running on the firm sand by the shore, wading through the shallows, running on the rocks or the gravel, chasing the sun, charging back and forth or all over the island. Racing dogs. The capaill uisce are always faster. Period.”

There are many things that Sherlock can take a decisive answer on. Formulas, the laws of nature, time, and space. This is not one of those things. John Watson, renowned champion of the infamous Scorpio Races, said without thought that someone would lose to Sherlock. He only disagreed with his former statement after thought and hesitation. This revelation makes Sherlock’s heart sing and flutter in his chest, a leaf shaken by the devastating gales. He tries desperately to drown it.

“Then you wouldn’t mind racing me.”

The phrasing is what makes this statement a killer. Watson would have to argue with him, because Sherlock will most definitely insist upon it, just to keep the conversation going. This conversation, said from the backs of a predator and a prey animal, with such extreme highs and lows, awkward silences, and things that Sherlock can’t understand.

Watson’s eyebrows raise, his forehead crinkles, hairline deforming. Sherlock sees him grip the reins tighter, as if Gladstone will comprehend what’s happening and leap into action because of it. Gladstone is already quivering, never quite still.

“Race?”
Sherlock nods.

The wind buffets them again, finally stilling Gladstone, as he stops to scent it. A few bushes on a craggy edge of the cliffs shudder one way as it blows inland. Sherlock can smell rain on it, far away. A storm has been building up for days, and he wonders when it will finally come. It’s sure to be wrecking when it does.

Watson looks thoughtful. Sherlock rushes to accommodate, “It’s not much time. If you disagree,” He looks out towards the cliff edge, to the ocean far below, and waits for a lapse in the wind before finishing, “It’s only because you doubt yourself.”

Which is how they end up racing.

Watson leads Gladstone a ways away on the turf, and Sherlock removes one of his feet from its stirrup. His heart pounds in his throat. Redbeard’s skin is hot to touch. Gladstone is a water horse - he will fight to run towards the ocean. If the race is even close… Perhaps there’s a chance to be had, after all.

Sherlock adjusts his stirrup from Redbeard’s back, one leg crossed over the saddle as he does. He’s too lazy to get down. Sherlock would never do it on any horse but Redbeard. Fitting his boot back into place and sitting up, Sherlock rolls his shoulders to fix any crick in his back, then leans forward to check the security of Redbeard’s halter, and sits back in the saddle. It’s old, handed down from his father, with the Holmes family crest carved on the underside of the leather - a lion and a unicorn.

He looks over to Watson. Gladstone is twisting and anxious below him, hard to hold. Sherlock again imagines that Gladstone can understand what’s about to happen, wishes he'd seen him in the Races before. When he starts picturing how striking John must look when he's putting immense effort into a race, he has to stop and push the cold back of his hand against his cheek to cool it off.

“Are you ready?” Sherlock asks Watson, voice raised over the wind.

Watson laughs, “I feel as though I should be the one asking that.”

“To the big outcropping, over there?” Sherlock points. They have a ghost of a chance. Watson nods.

Sherlock bolts, springing off across the field. Joyfully, Redbeard is pushed immediately into a gallop, tail snapping in his thrill. He hops over a small mound of grass, a largely unnecessary movement.

Now, Sherlock cannot hear the ocean’s ceaseless hushing, it’s a grey blue blur somewhere off to Sherlock’s left, and the cliff edges transform into a colorless rush of contrast against the sea.

Behind them is the hard pounding of sea-hooves turned into something solid, so Sherlock takes a big handful of Redbeard’s mane to keep the iron lengths from whipping and distracting him. Leaning low, Sherlock pushes his heels into the horse’s side - hard. The hoofbeats pound closer.

The two horses gallop through the cliff grass, both of them nimble over the uneven surface.

Watson overtakes him a split-second later, hardly a hair between the two horses and his and Watson’s feet, and Gladstone is all powerful, rippling muscle, knees lifting high and landing ten feet from where they kicked off. Sherlock catches Watson’s eye, and Redbeard does another odd kick and hop, dragging them back forwards. Sherlock's cheeks hurt from the cold and his grin. Watson whips forward, the giant horse drawing further and further up and away from them as Redbeard tracks, steady and straight and true.
Gladstone doesn’t even seem to be trying.

But Watson pushes his luck by asking him for more speed - Sherlock sees a heel shove into the black mass, and instead of curving away from his leg, Gladstone curves toward and around, veering across Sherlock’s path and dangerously near to the cliffs. Redbeard pulls ahead with great force as Gladstone tugs closer to the edge, wanting the saltwater.

Redbeard is not concentrating, his ears are pricked and pressed forward, something that irks Sherlock to no end, because Gladstone is all streamlined muscle just behind them, although he is still fighting for the sea. Redbeard bucks playfully in excitement, jolting Sherlock in the saddle and, after each time, taking a long few seconds to regain control - not time that they have to spare.

Watson and his horse have righted themselves again, moving fast, overtaking and then already twenty lengths ahead within a handful of quick seconds. Sherlock growls in Redbeard’s ear, and his legs pump faster as he begins to listen. Sherlock reaches behind them, cracking his hand down on Redbeard’s haunches, hard. Redbeard squeals and his foreleg kicks out as Sherlock lets more rein, but it does the trick, getting his attention.

With no more bucking, Sherlock surges forward, and Redbeard gives it everything, head lowering. Sherlock crouches on his back. Curses his long legs, and he presses them ever further into Redbeard's rusted coat, both pressuring the horse to run faster and trying to make himself ass small as possible.

It’s no good, though, the capall has more speed than an island horse can ever dream of. Every one does. Watson leans forward, and they gain more ground, fast. Sherlock can see no more than a black blur ahead of them, the white on Watson’s shirt ruffling and sticking out.

They’ll have fifty lengths on Redbeard before they make it to the outcropping, no matter how something as big as Gladstone shouldn’t be able to run this swiftly. Determined, Sherlock whips the reins against Redbeard’s neck. Sherlock jerks his heels so hard his muscles hurt. It’s barely of any use - Watson is still far, far ahead. They’re going to be annihilated in this run. A strain of hopelessness pumps through Sherlock’s arms that ache with holding the weight of Redbeard's speed.

That’s when the wind throws the scent of the sea against the island.

The reaction, Sherlock can see from way back, is immediate. Gladstone twists, clearly not used to being assaulted with the wind during his training, loses his footing, stumbles, but doesn’t fall. It gives Redbeard precious time to sprint forward, spraying Sherlock’s sleeves and face with bits and flecks of mud and spit that's flying back from Redbeard's open mouth. They’re only ten lengths behind, with Gladstone gaining more ground.

It occurs to Sherlock that the capall is trying. Not hard, but still trying. In the evening light, or, lack of it, Sherlock can see the determination and surprise written over the horse’s body, from his long pinned ears to his massive feet. The horse gains more head.

It’s something that holds Sherlock over as they lose, racing past the outcropping after Watson.

Redbeard takes more than twenty lengths to slow to a trot, and a few more to a walk. Sherlock tries to turn him back, but the stallion is gasping through his nose, and so Sherlock lets him twist and turn in his grip. It was a very rigorous workout. Vigorously, Redbeard shakes his head, jostling the reins.

Hard thumps on soil and grass.

Redbeard’s breath puffs out, hot and heavy. Sherlock swings a leg back and dismounts, looking for
Watson, who emerges from behind the outcropping a moment later, still on Gladstone, who looks even more restless than before, were that possible. With a highly arched neck, Gladstone prances forwards. Watson’s back is straight, never more a champion. His chin tilted, eyes and hair catching the last light of day.

The horse and rider slow their trot as they come close. Gladstone’s head bobs.

Watson is breathless. Sherlock holds tight to Redbeard’s reins as Watson dismounts, dropping from that incredibly high saddle and onto the packed earth. His hair is more windblown than Sherlock’s ever seen it, and he resists the urge to reach up and touch his own to judge the damage the race had on it.

Watson, breathing heavy but not panting like Sherlock is trying not to, slaps Gladstone’s wet neck. Sherlock isn’t sure how it got wet. The champion horse isn’t even breathing hard, and yet, has it broken into a sweat? It smells stunningly like salt. This is sea water, dripping from the horse’s own pores.

Watson’s grin pulls Sherlock back to reality. He shakes his head, stupefied. He looks at the ground, then back up, sighing contentedly. “I look at your face, and I wonder, Sherlock Holmes.”

This, said in such a quiet, but reverent tone, pulls at Sherlock’s mouth. He turns his head slightly to pat Redbeard’s smooth muzzle away when the horse starts nosing at his hair, desperate for attention. He puffs warm air over the back of Sherlock’s neck.

“It seems as though I’ve lost,” Sherlock says, facing Redbeard. He smells like hay. It’s comforting, near all this stink of fish and bad salt, sour sweat and bird droppings.

“It was closer than I thought it was going to be. Much closer. And,” Watson says, drawing Sherlock in with his gaze again, “It’s John.”

“Ah,” Sherlock nods, secretly pleased, “Yes, of course.”

“I believe I have more to say to you. But, it’s late.”

Sherlock couldn’t give a wit about the time. The sun is red, somewhere way below the horizon, and the rest of the sky is purpling and darkening.

“Can I see you again tomorrow?” John asks. John looks to him, scratching awkwardly at his cheek, which has a shadow of stubble over it. Sherlock can hear the scrape of fingernails over skin, now that the wind has done its damage, twisted Gladstone and allowed Sherlock to have a sense of faith. “Can I trust that you’ll be here?”

Sherlock says, “The racing beach is hardly safe for me.”

Watson—*John* laughs. Sounds like it’s back to being sunny, and John is suddenly someone that is not aloof and far away, but more grounded than anyone else on the island, “Do me a favor. Don’t let anyone shine your saddle, and don’t let anyone else feed your horse.”

“And you?” The words tumble from Sherlock’s lips before his head can stop them. Unable to draw them back or sink into the earth, he watches John for a reaction.

John’s smile is small, a small, and a secretive smile. It’s as masked as the mare goddess. Sherlock wonders if he still has the spiraled shell in his pocket, or if he’s already made his wish. His blue eyes are alight. So are Gladstone’s, which glow in the purple wash of light. “You don’t like to do anything the easy way, do you?” John says, and Sherlock doesn’t have a clue to the meaning of it.
Sherlock smirks against embarrassment, and replies, “I didn’t know it was the hard way when I started on it.”

Chapter End Notes

4k of this came out of me in one day wtf......
(the 'He doesn't invite Sherlock to be one of them.', and the 'Which is how they end up racing.' lines are right from the Scorpio Races novel, and they do race each other in the book - please read it!)
"You're not bored now, are you?"
John snarls, "Go."

"You seem cheery, Sherlock! A good day of practicing? You didn’t go down to those beaches again, did you?"

"Never so, Mrs Hudson. I was a fool to do it the once."

"Then it was a good day? It was so windy - the side door screen blew in."

"Mm."

/--

It isn’t the sun that finds Sherlock in the morning, streaming through the window as it often does in his cramped little room.

It’s a knock at the bedroom door.

Sherlock manages to crawl from the burrow of duvets, pulling a deep purple one over his shoulders as he shuffles to the door. Hair a tousled mess, tired and limp from the briny wind and a missing bath, Lestrade is the one to greet him.

Sherlock nearly shuts the door in his face. He frowns instead.

“Who let you into the house? Or did you take it upon yourself to barge in, ever the good officer?” Sherlock is pleased that his voice is as low as usual, though it is a tad rough from sleep. He collapsed into it merely a few hours ago, having been working on a *capall uisce*bone. Exposure to seawater versus freshwater. Results have been... Naught. His theories on the bones themselves shifting versus just the flesh and skin of the horses when they are fresh from the sea or return to it have not been proven one way or the other. And to think that this is how he spends his free time.

Lestrade opens his mouth to counter Sherlock’s snark, but there’s a call from downstairs, “I let
him in, Sherlock! Said he wanted to speak with you!”

Sherlock glares over Lestrade’s shoulder, as if he can see Mrs Hudson through the wooden walls. Then he glares at Lestrade. At least he came in with permission.

Lestrade grins, “You know, that look isn’t half as intimidating when you’ve only just gotten up.”

“I’ve been up for hours,” Sherlock retorts.

Mrs Hudson shouts again, “Surprised anyone would want to talk you, this early! You’re always in such a mood!”

“Thank you, Mrs Hudson!” Sherlock snaps, and then lets his eyes travel back to Lestrade. His grey hair contrasts the dark sack overcoat with its gleaming rows of buttons, and the breeches. His cap is in his fist, like it always is when Lestrade is inside a building. The man is well-dressed, for so early. It’s still dark outside. Well, blue.

An awkward silence.

Then, Lestrade clears his throat, “Look, I--”

“If you’re here to attempt talking me out of the Races, I would advise you spend your valuable time elsewhere.”

“I’m not--”

“Maybe protecting the good people from those nasty pickpockets in Skarmouth? The square’s always filled with them--”

“Sherlock--”

“I know it’s hardly employment, what with how you all conduct yourselves, but--”

“Sherlock --”

“Don’t you have a job to get to?”

“I do, actually!” Lestrade shouts. Sherlock sniffs. Embarrassed by his outburst, since he’d obviously been expecting Sherlock to interrupt again, Lestrade sighs. His hands wring his cap. “We know--”

“We? If Donovan is anywhere near whatever you want me to take a look at, because you clearly do need me to look at something, don’t do that drooling, moronic face in my--”

“Could you! Could you maybe stop interrupting, yeah?”

-/

It’s a delightful murder.

And, shockingly, it’s not motivated by the rush of the Races, like absolutely everything is this
time of year.

Moreover, it’s not quite a torrid affair. Neither is it a crime of passion. It’s premeditated, and Sherlock adores it.

Janine does not adore it, because the young girl’s body was found out back in the alley of Hawkins’ tavern, near the bins. Bloodied, a rip at the side of the throat. She lays face down on the disgusting brickwork of the alleyway. She’s a tourist - obviously. Bright yellow sundress, stained dark red. Sherlock grimaces at her wardrobe choices. Really, on windy Thisby, with all the gamblers and lechers, and she was going around in that?

It looks like a messy rip in the side of her neck, but Sherlock, dressed in his long woolen coat and dress shoes to combat the wind that’s funneling through all the alleyways in Skarmouth today, sees it for the neat handiwork it actually is when he pushes her short hair aside. Clouds rush along overhead, and Donovan glares and folds her arms across her chest while Lestrade notes something about the wind and how he has better ways to spend today than leaning over a bloody corpse.

Anyone who knows their way around cutting edges and knives knows that it’s not the stab, but the ‘twist and rip’ that will bleed someone out the quickest. And they’d have to make sure that a main artery was hit, so the carotid in the neck, or the femoral in the groin are the usual places of attack… An arterial stab wound is nearly impossible stem, and would require immediate medical attention, if the victim wasn’t to bleed out.

Lestrade says some other inconsequential things. Donovan snarks. Sherlock scowls, holding his magnifying glass over the incision, and wondering if he should announce her business with Anderson to the small crowd of officers nearby.

(They do have to shield the sensitive tourists from this area. Who knows? Some of them may not return, if they see that Thisby has as much of an issue with violence as anywhere else in the world does.)

“Don’t touch it!” Lestrade says, appalled. Sherlock continues to stick his gloved fingers into the wound, anyways.

Sherlock glances to the ground. He frowns, stands up, and removes his bloodied gloves, slipping his magnifier into his coat pocket.

“Stab wound. Sharp knife, victim bled out. She’s a tourist, here with her… brother? No, father, going by her heels,” Sherlock points out the purple color on her ankles, “Stab wound here…” Sherlock touches his middle and forefinger to his pulse on the left hand side, “Carotid artery. Slashing both sides of it will result in immediate unconsciousness, as blood flow to the brain will be cut off, death will be short thereafter. Slashing just one would result in a slower death, and she would’ve bled out. Lestrade,” Sherlock clips, and the silver-haired man looks up, “Flip her over.”

“You can’t move her, yet,” Lestrade says, “Photographs haven’t been processed. We don’t know whether they turned out or not.”

“So you’re just going to leave a body behind the tavern, hoping no one will notice, until your photographs turn out?” Sherlock looks over Lestrade’s face, but nothing in it says he’s joking. Angry, Sherlock flattens out his mouth. “Fine. Then, gather around, look at her, I know you’re all unbelievably slow, but she’s pale.”
“We know she bled to death,” Donovan bites in, “We’re not stupid.”

“I disagree.”

“Holmes,” Lestrade huffs.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “She didn’t die here.”

“What?” Donovan says, “Yes, she did, look at all the blood. It’s everywhere.”

“Look at her dress!” Sherlock shouts, disbelieving. When Sally gives him a strange look, one that says she both thinks him insane and annoying, Sherlock pushes his filthy gloves into one of his pockets, fixing her with a look that could kill. He hopes it does.

Crouching, Sherlock purposefully glares at Lestrade, before pulling out the yellow of her dress where it was pressed up underneath her hip.

“I told you not to move anything--!”

“If I’m going to walk you through how I solved this murder, you’re not going to need pictures.”

“There’s paperwork--”

“Then draw her.”

“Epona above,” Lestrade curses, looking to the sky before running a hand over his face. Sherlock scowls again. “You said you’ve solved it?”

Sherlock clears his throat, pulling the fabric of the dress out gently so he can see the bloodstains. “Yes, it was horrifyingly obvious. I only agree to explain it to you simpletons because I don’t feel as though anyone on the island should purchase their meat from a murderer… Quite a hazard. The dress, if you please.”

After a moment and the exchange of a look with Donovan, Lestrade sighs and waves a hand for Sherlock to continue.

“If you observe, difficult for you lot to do, I know, but if you manage it, you’ll see that she died on her front.”

“Freak, if you’re just going to sit there and tell us what we already know--”

“But she didn’t just die on her front. The bloodstains don’t go below her waist - her legs were propped up when she was stabbed, like a slaughtered cow. She was purposefully bled out. Facedown, as she died, then was dumped here, where she continued to bleed onto the ground. But, as you can clearly see from said staining and said blood on the ground, the new pool of blood doesn’t reach the old stain, marking at what angle she was propped up, by six point seven centimeters. Big difference, big enough of a difference for the spread of the stain not to be just capillary action - I’ve done a whole set of experiments on the way blood adheres to itself and to varying textures and brands of fabric... Therefor, she wasn’t murdered here,” Sherlock finishes, finally drawing breath again.

“You haven’t said who the murderer is, Holmes,” Lestrade says.

“I’m getting to it. If I am trying to educate you slobs on how to actually do your own work
along the way, then arrest me. For now,” Sherlock says, standing once more, because he’s done
with this now. How is it that the officers on this island are so blind? “Where on this island could
you bleed someone out, drain them of all but a liter or so of their blood, and clean it up easily?”

Donovan snorts. Sherlock looks at her.

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you bleed someone out, drain them of all but a liter or so of their blood, and clean it up easily?”

Donovan snorts. Sherlock looks at her.

“Do you have something to say?”

“You could do that anywhere in the island.”

“But then you’d have to be seen dragging a girl’s dead, bloody body around, wouldn’t you?
Hm?”

Donovan shuts her mouth.

“So? Where? Near here?” Sherlock assesses the officers. His expectations were never high in
the first place, but they fall lower with each passing second. He groans. “No one? Really?”

Lestrade puffs, working with his tongue. “The, the, the… the beaches…?”

“No, you idiot, there would be sand stuck to the blood on her, in her hair, everywhere!”

“What about the gravel ones? The rocky ones? On the other side of the island?”

Sherlock takes in a breath to spit something back, but his mind stutters to a halt.

The other side of the island.

‘Can I see you again tomorrow? Can I trust that you’ll be here?’

Sherlock blinks. Evidently, John could not trust that Sherlock would be there. Oh.

Sherlock spins on his heel and begins to walk away. It’s barely noon, the sun is weak and
feeble and maybe Lestrade could drive him back to Mrs Hudson’s property in that ugly cruiser
of his like he did on their way here, Sherlock could get Redbeard and he could go to the rocky
cliffs, and John would be there, and Sherlock could apologize and--

“Holmes! Where’re you going?”

“The-- the butcher’s! It’s the butcher’s, where the riders get their meat, it’s their- their son, he
was seeing the--” Sherlock gestures to the body, a little further away than he was before, “The
girl, she wanted to break it off, he killed her two days after she mentioned it to him.”

“Two days? How do you know that?”

“For two days every rider on the island has been complaining how horribly cut their beef
hearts are for their capaill, the son’s been angry, slashing things, practicing. It was
premeditated. He knew what he was doing-- arrest him, and do it quickly. He may still be
cleaning the blood off the floor. Her blood, not cow’s blood.”

Lestrade ropes him into coming. Sherlock says he would rather slit his own throat. Donovan
shouts at him for making such an ill-timed comment. Sherlock is cross.

By the time Sherlock tackles the butcher’s son and they go sliding into the wall of a Tholla
alley, crashing into rubbish skips and spooking loose chickens as they go, it’s evening, and
Sherlock has friction burns on both of his forearms. They burn and sting and swell up as
Lestrade shoves the son into Sally’s cruiser and Sherlock into the back of his, saying something about ‘getting you home, so Mrs H can have a look at you.’

Like Sherlock noted before. This murder was delightful. 

Obvious, but utterly groundshaking in its deviation from the lowy, boring standard of crime on Thisby. Gambling isn’t even illegal, like it just became on the mainland. There’s too much of an economic angle on the riders of the Races. Besides, even if it was outlawed, it would continue, and everyone would keep doing it.

-/

In his anger that night, Sherlock shoves expensive hay into Redbeard’s stall and crossly runs the hose to refill the water bucket without emptying out the stale rest of it from this morning. He also feed Josephine a handful of expensive oats, because she’s old and deserves kindness even when Sherlock is angry.

He was ready to walk away from a murder scene, just to get to John on the cliffs. Granted, it was a very boring murder, more boring than the last one, three years ago, and easily solved, but he was still ready to walk away from it. Horrendous, that his life has come to this, Sherlock thinks, as he catalogs the texture of the capall femur bone.

He takes care of his arms, winding gauze around the burning patches of skin. He flexes his fingers and frowns at the sting that he feels as the skin pulls taunt over his muscles.

-/

It’s a very bad day, the next morning. The clouds are high and thick enough that light can’t make it through the water droplets, giving them a deep grey sheen. They look heavy and waterlogged, and even Redbeard, under his saddle, eyes them warily. What’s that saying about animals and storms?

Perhaps John isn’t coming. After all, Sherlock can honestly think of several hundred chores or things that the Stockyard would need to get done before the coming rain. Horses need to be turned out, that damned monger, Henry Knight, needs to be sold his thoroughbreds, and stalls must be mucked. Hay must be distributed from the dusty lofts, and water refilled. Maybe veterinarians need to be phoned in, if some mare has a twisted ankle or an overstretched tendon in her neck. Then Sherlock remembers that that last one is one of John Watson’s many jobs.

And probably, the rest of them are his jobs, too.

Sherlock recalls Moriarty’s voice, his stable boys. Clearly, John is in charge over there. And everywhere, down on the beach, in town, at the festival...

If John doesn’t come, it will be entirely Sherlock’s fault. He spent yesterday racing around Skarmouth and Tholla, and, God, that was a bad idea of his. This is also a bad idea.
He wonders if John waited for him, even if it was only for a few moments. Perhaps John never showed up at all, and he'll come gallivanting into the scene today to apologize, and he won’t ever know that Sherlock wasn’t there, either.

Sherlock’s mind recoils from the thought. He allows Redbeard, puffing from his run here, but not as badly as last week, to walk a few meters away from the cliff edges. Sherlock looks over at the sea, grey and dark blue, capped with white as waves tumble over to eat at the island.

Sherlock is just wondering how bad the storm will be, if it will strike today, when Jefferson Hope arrives.

On his giant water horse, Hydria, Hope wishes he made an imposing figure. He doesn't. Hydria is a smooth grey beneath him, with flanks tinted with darker browns and flecked with white, not unlike all the whitecaps that beat the rocks below the steep drop of the cliffs. Hope looks like hot iron, with deep bags beneath his eyes. Just over his cheek is a spot of purple, painted on by John's fist at the festival (this is thought with an inappropriate amount of thrill). Even from here, Sherlock can see yellow skin healing the edges. There is a man with a lean, hard frame, and squinting blue eyes riding up alongside him on a chestnut water horse, with half of its mane rubbed off and the tail mangled and knotted. Over both of the water horses, there are draping red and white tassels, and flowers razing what little hair they have.

Sherlock can’t imagine why they’d be coming up here, looking full of purpose and of themselves. Sherlock looks beyond Hope, but there is no one else. He pulls the reins, and Redbeard halts. Sherlock doesn’t like the way Redbeard shivers at the sight of the grey capall, nor the way that the water horse hones in on him.

The chestnut leads the way towards Sherlock. They cross the twenty meter line with no greeting, and then the ten, and then, they are so close, that Sherlock has to resist the petty urge to strike out with a bare hand to shove the horses back, they're in reaching distance and not backing away, because Redbeard is sitting on the edge of panic, hooves shifting nearer to the cliff edges. Redbeard trusts Sherlock too much. Sherlock barely trusts himself to stay still and seated on the iron horse.

“And how's the Holmes sister doing today?” The unidentified man calls out, jolly. "Obviously well, isn't she?"

It's a few moments before Sherlock recognizes that he means him, Sherlock. His lip wants to curl up in a sneer against the shunting wind. And it's another moment before he is affected by the mention of siblings, for his own is long gone.

The man’s chestnut snaps at Hydria, and the sound of those teeth snapping together make Redbeard flinch while the water horses move back several feet, displaying themselves to each other and to Redbeard. Sherlock tries to hide the fact that he can't keep Redbeard still by rocking him into motion, pacing him back and forth, dangerously close to the cliff edges. Both of the predators are affected by the wind, clearly not used to being assaulted with all these scents while they have riders on their backs. The chestnut clacks its teeth near Hydria's ear, who retaliated by stomping her foreleg down hard, and making a hissing sound high in her throat.

Sherlock jerks the reins back until Redbeard quivers into something of a halt again. Sherlock can see the white in his eyes, see the puffs of breath from the capaill. "It's almost sad, how simply your mind works."

“It's a bit right,” The man on the writhing chestnut says, “Down on the beach, they say you could look like a girl from behind. All that hair.”
What a stupid thing to do. Sherlock is ashamed of how much it distresses him, nevertheless, and the heat of that threat washes over him. He sets his shoulders, tilts his chin up, and the chestnut's gaunt face stretches up to watch him.

Sherlock says dryly, with no hint of amusement, “Does your wife know about that tourist that you and the butcher's son shared?” Sherlock asks, tilting his head as the wind ruffles his hair from behind, giving him a crown of sea-twisted curls. It's unclear whether or not the man is aware of the girl's death, and even if he does, extremely unlikely that he assisted in the murder in anyway, because the butcher's son said nothing of it when put into custody. Sherlock will report this to Lestrade when he gets back to town. No murder, but there's still a good amount of criminal activity that law enforcement can be made aware of.

The man frowns and turns to Hope, like he's just realized who he's insulting and what Sherlock is capable of dredging up from his past. Hope’s grey mare makes a hissing sound high in her throat as the chestnut regards Redbeard, legs cramping and feet leaving the ground for half a second before they return, shaking as they ever did at the scent of the sea.

Redbeard snaps his head one way, swinging his neck out of instinct, and the grey beneath Jefferson Hope sticks it's face out and up, neck lengthening. Redbeard’s ears pin back, his rear hooves dance perilously close to the cliff. Sherlock wants to pop the reins and make him run, but it would be no use. Even in the gathering fog and the night-black of this afternoon, the capaill would catch them. And he wouldn't want to give Hope an excuse to chase them. He can imagine the excuses. 'Hydria just bolted after him - couldn’t stop her! Shame about how the roads got all bloodied, again…'

This is, truly, the man who loathed his presence in the Races so much, that he broke tradition and stood up atop the rider’s rock to try and bring Sherlock down. Sherlock looks to Hope’s company - this is the mill worker. He’s lacking his traditional scarf and garb that he wore to the festival, and he is no longer extending a hand to help Sherlock down from the rock. He looks more like he wants to shove him from the edge of the island, see him flayed out on the sharp rocks down below.

“This is your wake-up call, Mister Holmes…”

“I don't recall asking for one.”

“Doesn't mean you don't need one,” Hope’s grin never leaves his face. The light’s not right, however, so Sherlock can't tell if the expression is born out of sadism or genuine amusement. He stares at the bruise. “A little birdie told me you fancied having a trip to the mainland. Looking for your big brother, then, eh?”

Redbeard happens to save him, then, by suddenly bucking his head down from Sherlock’s hold, leaving him scrambling to gain the reins back. The stallion squeals as Hydria and the chestnut prowl close.

There is no sound of hooves on long cliff grasses. The capaill don't make sounds as they near and leer.

The wind carries the foreboding scent of heavy thunder, making the horses all restless. Not a sound is heard. Not until the first few drops of water drip from the dark, dampened clouds above. Sherlock half-turns his face, checking to see if there's room for Redbeard to move, in case the other men make a move and the red horse is alarmed and moves suddenly backwards. There's a few scant inches between Redbeard and the edges. Sherlock pulls the reins, and Redbeard, nearly petrified, forcibly leans away from the cliff.
“Everyone’s got a *capall*, Holmes,” Hope smiles that sickening smile, only half his teeth showing. The horse mimics the countenance, mouth pulling up too far, too close to its wet eyes, too many teeth, “Except *you*. You thought you could change all of Thisby…”

*Thought*, echoes Sherlock’s head, *past tense, thought, thought*--

“And you must’ve believed no one in the world would stop you…” Hope goes on. The man beside him grins devilishly. There's only Hope and that man next to him, he's not even sure who it is, but Sherlock knows he's not good news, and he's not going to help. He's here with Hope. He's here with Hope.

Sherlock's never been teased from the back of a giant *capall* before, let alone from two of them. Yet, even if all three of them were set on foot on the earth, Sherlock would still be at odds, would still be threatened. "Is this your way of getting rid of me?"

In this moment, he regrets everything. He regrets signing up for the Races. He regrets buying expensive hay, and interacting with- with John, and attending the festival, and--

Hope drawls, “Let me take you for a ride. Let's race…”

“So you can kill me? Get me out of your precious Races for good?”

Hope’s lips twitch. The sky sprays rainwater on Sherlock’s face.

“They're not really *my* Races, Holmes. They’re *his*… And he warned me about you, little while after I saw those articles in the paper. He even set up that little warm up for you, yesterday. Brilliant stuff, might I say.”

“Whose Races? Who warned you about me?”

Sherlock leans back, and Redbeard tucks his head against his neck. “Who would notice me?” Sherlock snarls. No. That's not the right question. Plenty of people would notice him, doing what he's doing and riding Redbeard, but who would *warn* Hope about him? What would be the point of that? He's hardly a threat, on an ordinary horse.

“Riding an island pony in a race for the water horses. Everyone’s noticed you,” The man on the chestnut rumbles. It sounds too much like the thunder Sherlock knows is coming - like the grumble of sound clapping somewhere distant.

“You're too modest, Holmes.” Hope goes on. The *capall* clacks its blunt teeth together.

The line of its mouth pulls up towards its ears, far back.

“I'm really not,” Sherlock snaps right back at him.

The man in the bowler hat jerks his chin in Sherlock’s direction. “Come on, Sherida,” The man says, laughing and giving him a feminine name for his earlier comment-made-threat, "Let's see what you’ve got.”

“I'm not racing now,” Sherlock grits his teeth into a barren smile. The wind festers and slits his throat. It sings through the sharp blades of grass. More raindrops begin to spatter on Sherlock’s face.

“Of course you're not racing! We’ll be making good and sure of that.”
Hope laughs. So does the man in the bowler hat. His isn't a mean laugh, per se, but it isn't a thoughtful one, either.

“Where are your balls?” He sputters. “Let’s have a go, before the rest of the fun.”

But all of a sudden, where racing day had haunted his every thought, dictated his every move, that's a faraway concern. The immediate one is that Redbeard is shaking and ready to crumble like the cliffs on this side of the island. Racing day won't ever come for him, if he doesn't manage to walk away from this encounter. Redbeard’s going to have to settle through much worse behavior from the water horses than a little snapping and hissing.

Again, Sherlock glances behind himself, wondering if there's room for him to back Redbeard away. There was, last time he checked. Now, however, they're crowded so close that it isn't possible, and he gets an eyeful of the tumultuous sea beyond the thin strip of rocky shore, and belatedly wonders if any capaill are lurking like sharks just beneath the uneven surface of the water. He faces Hope and the man again with a sour expression.

The bone-chilling faces of the horses swing down and up, side to side, predatory eyes focused forward, darting to Sherlock’s neck, as if assessing weak points. Sherlock tucks his chin, and Hope reins in Hydria, drawing the horse’s long mouth and wet teeth back as the bit moves up, up, up. The rein plays tricks with Sherlock's grip on the reins and slicks his hair against his forehead.

But the chestnut horse sidles up alongside Redbeard as the man rounds off, its entire wet body gliding harshly against Sherlock’s leg and shoving Redbeard to the side, making him have to gather his footing again, so precariously balanced on the very edge of the island.

Sherlock’s breath is coming in faster. He tries not to remind himself of Mary, and Mary’s shrieking, or the way she moves, the way they all move, and the way they always smell like something has curled up inside them and died, and they are breathing it out.

God, the stench is horrible, and with the sky spitting water, wetting down Sherlock’s grip on Redbeard’s reins and his hair and everything in the world--

Redbeard throws back his head and whinnies - high and scared. It looks as though his legs will collapse underneath him. Hydria’s throat makes a sound, a horrible sound, a shrill cry that keens upwards at the end, and it evokes fear in the place in Sherlock’s chest that is reserved for instinct.

Keeeaaaaawwwwww.

“Your pony is frightened, Sherida,” The man on the chestnut says, and presses his horse close again, hard and knocking against Redbeard, so close Sherlock can taste the stench of sun-bloated seals and baked kelp on rocks after high tide.

Suddenly, Redbeard lurches one way, as if stung, and Sherlock gasps, tasting rain, reining Redbeard in before the stallion can barrel into a baleful Hydria, which the horse clearly would like. The chestnut horse snaps its teeth, shakes its head, making them clack together like a rattlesnake. Sherlock leans away from it, but is alarmingly sandwiched between him and Hope.

He begins to wonder which he would rather die at the hands of.

Sherlock’s eyes plummet to a spot behind Redbeard’s ear.

Redbeard has never been so shaken - he’s like a newborn foal. His legs quiver - the front are
splayed, and he’s leaning back, ready to seize and bolt, his ears are swiveling rapidly, slashing through the air in response to too much stimuli, and Sherlock can see the air puffing out, cold and fast, from his tensed mouth.

There are drops of blood welling up in a gashed line, and the red begins to fall, seeping down easily as it is aided by the rainwater. It’s incredibly dark against the iron color of Redbeard’s fur.

Sherlock’s mind aflame, his face snaps up to the man in the bowler hat. He sneers, “Every drop of his blood spilt will be ten of yours.” It’s not a bad cut, shallow, barely a scratch. But it’s there. It’s the mark of this man’s horse on Sherlock’s, on Redbeard, it’s a testament and a challenge to who is in control of the situation. Sherlock’s ready to make everyone around him bleed.

He has nothing to fight with, but he’s angry, god, there’s red crawling through the edges of his eyes and he knows he’s baring his teeth like a water horse and his hands are shaking and cold on the reins.

This may very well be the strategy. To rile Sherlock up, hurt his horse, the only real constant in his life, and that will be excuse enough.

‘It was self protection.’

The man’s dark blue eyes widen. Then he smiles, clandestine. Even in the low lighting, with the clouds rushing by overhead and the rain sprinkling down, Sherlock can see the crow’s feet at the corner of the man’s eyes, the wrinkles next to his nose, and Sherlock hates it all.

The chestnut capall bares its blunted teeth. Hydria creeps closer, a gruesome smile befalls Hope’s countenance. Hydria snakes her head. Christ. How do these fiends always know when to become all the more frightening? Do they have an extra sense, for deciding when their rider has malicious intent, and then act upon it? They all know that this is working Redbeard up into a frenzy.

Redbeard has no chance with these massive predators. The instinct is there, fight or flight. Neither is an option, and it’s weighing as heavily on the horse as it is on Sherlock.

Redbeard takes a step back, and his whole rump jerks, because he’s stepped onto empty air. Redbeard is crowded against the very edge. Sherlock’s hands shake harder.

The fire of a gunshot reports through the air, crackling like lightning, booming like thunder, and Sherlock’s sure he’s just had several heart attacks simultaneously. At once, the chestnut horse rears, forelegs flailing and neck curving and it’s screaming, Hope jerks, and so Sherlock bolts.

Redbeard has been keyed up, waiting, restraining. To let loose like this, his speed is shuddersome.

As is the whining cry that follows; sinister.

But then he’s stumbling, tripping over his own hooves, his own ankles and desideratum, the urge to flee. Selfishly, Sherlock does not care that Redbeard may strike a half-hidden rock that the grass growing high and brown may conceal. What matters is that he gets away from the mess, away from the questions that have been seeded and sewed like strangling ivy--

Another gunshot. Redbeard’s legs continue their difficult rush forwards after a near-trip. The rain rips at Sherlock’s cheeks, turning them redder and more raw, until they feel like pricks of
ice, stabbing at his face.

And this is where John Watson appears, out of nowhere. There is no fog - Sherlock didn’t see him approach, all he knows is that Redbeard curves away from the heel Sherlock presses into his side, and that this move runs him towards John Watson, mounted on the back of his giant black horse. He’s a shape and then he’s John. Sherlock slows as he approaches, unsure of what to say, maybe to open his mouth and apologize for not being here yesterday, because that’s the only thing that is currently coming to his angry and twisted mind.

Sherlock sees the revolver. He pulls Redbeard, unhappy he is near yet another water horse, even familiar, into a stop.

It’s small, maybe capable of holding six bullets, a model from the mainland that’s at least twenty years old, and John is wielding it expertly, pointed forwards and into the distance. His arm is extended, his hair is damp and pressed down, the front sticking up in a ridiculous way that makes Sherlock think he ran Gladstone, fast, just to get here.

“John,” Sherlock manages, as soon as he’s close enough to actually say something. John’s eyes are focused forward, his mouth set in a grim line, brows drawn together in a way that Sherlock can only describe as dangerous. And... alluring. The pistol gleams in the barely existent light.

Sherlock follows his line of sight, the rain making it difficult. There’s a streak of brown, far away by the edges of the cliffs, which are the horizon in Sherlock’s eyes, but it’s gone too soon. Sherlock frowns, identifying it as the chestnut water horse, belonging to the mill worker. But where was its rider?

Then there is the grey. And there is Hope.

Riding up on his horse, through the rain, Hope is grasping the reins with only one hand. The other is curled up on his lap, like he is on a hissing Hydria. His shoulder is bleeding profusely through the wet, white cotton, and his face betrays a world of pain. Redbeard cowers, taking a few nervous steps backwards. Gladstone’s heavy breaths deepen, and the predatory stance widens. Incredulous, Sherlock watches John.

The revolver is pointed towards Hope. The grey’s eyes are rolling as it shakes and shivers with restrained power. The bells over its reins rattle and quiver.

Vague, surely temporary veil of safety falling over him, the chill begins to set into Sherlock’s skin, raising the flesh. He can feel it in the marrow of his bones.

“I will not merely graze you again,” John says. There’s a deadly smile over his face, now, between a smirk and something joyful, like this will be pleasurable. “I will not hesitate in using this in Sherlock’s defense.”

Surely, there is something wrong with his hearing, his ears, something is wrong with him, because those words did not come from John’s mouth. The rain falls.

Sherlock next glowers up at Hope. He almost wants to stick out his tongue - but the situation is too dire for that, so early. He almost wants to laugh.

He wants to crush Jefferson Hope. To shove him from the water horse that dwarfs Redbeard, that stirred him up into madness, that pushed Sherlock nearly over the cusp of sanity and fear. Step and crush his bleeding wound underfoot.
Sherlock sniffs.

John doesn’t glance over. He hasn’t, this whole time. Sherlock would feel almost neglected, if it wasn’t for the fact that John just offered to shoot Hope, again, should he harm Sherlock.

John’s arm is perfectly extended forwards, revolver aimed high at the man, the other hand holding Gladstone’s reins, keeping the connection between them. Gladstone is a statue. They’re both statues. Carved in marble, flawlessly exquisite, down to the last hair on Gladstone’s mane and tight line between John’s concentrated brow. His skin looks like wet gold.

“Watson, you of all people should know, the Races are sacred,” Hope manages with that sick smile, and his *uisce* tries to stare down Gladstone. It’s a horrendous mistake, because the mountainous black champion wrinkles back his rotting lips, flashing yellowed teeth. A low, guttural sound made in Gladstone’s throat splinters the fizzling air.

The grey-spattered horse’s ears flay back, flicking rainwater.

“Nothing on Thisby is sacred,” John replies smoothly. His voice is as steady as the way Gladstone is leaning forwards, almost swaying. Gladstone’s head slants downwards, another petrifying noise ripping from behind his teeth, hissing out through his long nostrils. If Sherlock wasn’t on John’s good side, he’d be shaking more than he is now, with the cold nestled up against him and the rain permeating every thread of fabric on his body.

“You don’t mess with the Races. You know he’s already angry--”

“I think you’d better leave,” John interrupts. His thumb leaves the side of the gun to audibly cock the hammer, drawing it straight back.

**Clackclick**, as it releases.

The thumb returns. John’s finger is pushed tight against the modeled line of the trigger. Sherlock stares at John’s hands, shivering.

“You won’t only graze you again. I promise,” John repeats. His voice is brilliantly even.

Hope looks at Sherlock. Sherlock does his best to stare back, but his hair is wet and in his face, so he’s sure he ends up looking more like a petulant child who fell into a pond than a threatening adult man who could murder Hope in over three hundred and twenty ways. Hope groans as he forces both hands onto the reins. Good. Sherlock wishes Hope hurts in the worst of ways.

“You’re not bored now, are you?”

John snarls, “Go.”

Hope beats him down with one more stare. Then he jerks Hydria, almost mad with the water and the wind, and walks her away. Gladstone snaps his tail delightfully as she retreats. John follows Hope’s progress with his gun.

Sherlock closes his eyes, taking deep breaths, and leans forwards until his head is against the line of Redbeard’s neck and mane. The shudders, he feels, are strong.

“Are you alright?”

John looks to him while Sherlock sits up. The revolver has been tucked up, probably put
against the small of John’s back, in the waistband. Safety on, naturally, though it must poke into John’s skin, seeing as how he is on a giant water horse. “Sherlock, are you alright?”

Sherlock nods, looking away in the direction Hope rode in from, expecting to see the chestnut brown again.

“No, come on. Honestly,” John pleads, and Sherlock suddenly wants to be anywhere but here. He doesn’t want to be in the rain anymore. “What happened?”

“Jefferson Hope happened,” Sherlock snaps, and he yanks on one side of the reins until Redbeard gets the message and pulls away from Gladstone’s side, where he appears to have been stuck. It’s cold, wet, and he just wants to get home. Perhaps he’ll catch influenza, or a cold, and he’ll have a legitimate excuse to not get out of bed on the day of the Races--

“Sherlock!” John calls, and Sherlock pushes his heels into Redbeard’s side, who begins to trot. There is the sound of a sigh, lost to the drizzling of rain, and then John has silently caught up. Gladstone is as meek as a sheep, walking silently with huge steps as Redbeard trundles along, still spooked. “What happened? Did they do anything to you?”

“Just tried to get me out of the Races,” Sherlock informs John, “Nothing new. You can see the cliff edges from where you shot, you saw what happened.”


And then pieces click into place. “You shot him.”

“What? Well, you did see Hope’s arm, he was bleeding, nothing bad, but it may be a little sore on racing day--”

“And you shot the mill worker. The one on the brown capall. Then it went over the cliffs, most likely taking the body with it.”

John is quiet. He glances away from Sherlock.

Sherlock can scarcely believe it.

John barely knows him, yet he shot and killed a man for Sherlock, and injured another. He’s… unsure of what to make of this.

“He wasn’t really a great mill worker.”

“Oh, no. Terrible.” Sherlock agrees. He didn’t know the man.

And, suddenly, John is giggling, and so is Sherlock, ducking his head and trying to turn away so that John won’t see his face, his pleased expression and the way he can feel the skin scrunching up at his eyes in some sort of wicked glee.

“Stop, stop it. We can’t laugh, someone died,” John calms, before breaking back into a ring of chuckles.

“It’s hardly my fault.”

John grins at him, “You can’t imagine how much it is.”
finals guys. finals.
Hoofbeat

Chapter Summary

Gladstone takes an interest in the mist past Sherlock. His wet, fish eyes are pinpointing something that Sherlock cannot see in the white. Sherlock wants to ask about it. Speaking will break the settled, heavy silence. Sherlock can’t decide whether or not he wants to do just that. Perhaps breaking it will be the end of this horrible, dreading wait. Perhaps it will be the catalyst.

Chapter Notes

TW for assault? Though it's pretty in line with the rest of the story. Thought I would say it anyways.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A roll of thunder passes overhead. John looks up, squinting against the slowing drizzle. It’s a contradiction - thunder means the storm can become heavier, yet the rain is steadily thinning into a greying mist. Sherlock’s hair has not forgiven him, he’s unsure if it ever will. While his clothes and curls and skin aren’t soaked, he’s certainly rumpled, more than a bit disheveled.

The long grasses are weighed down with clinging drops of clear water. It’s all bent, as far as Sherlock can see. Gladstone doesn’t make noise, and Redbeard’s hooves plunk down on the hardened dirt road rhythmically. The iron horse is walking lazily. Sherlock doesn’t push him.

Gladstone is shivering, his knees are lifting far up and it’s obvious that Gladstone wants to run. John is keeping him tightly in check, reins pulled up close to his stomach. (The stomach that Sherlock imagines can look a number of different ways - hard and sculpted and flat, which fits John’s work routine, or perhaps softer, which fits his age and frame, and Sherlock really must look forwards again before his face catches aflame.)

“Aha,” Sherlock announces suddenly, just for something to say. He’s a lover of silence, but John is a curious companion for the trip home. Which… What? John’s plodding Gladstone along beside a shaken Redbeard, and Sherlock. He doesn’t look as if he’s going to turn around. Sherlock must make conversation in order to keep him from realizing his mistake and looping back. “I’ve got it, John.”

One of Gladstone’s devilishly long ears swivels to catch the sound of his voice. “Got what?” John asks, sparing a glance down at him before focusing on the wet road ahead of them.

“We’ll rig it.”

“You can’t rig the Races, Sherlock,” Says John, and Sherlock is pleased with this answer for a multitude of reasons. For one, John knew immediately what Sherlock was referencing (not that big a leap, yes, alright, fine), and for another… Sherlock delights in hearing his name slide out from John’s mouth. It’s so easy for John to say. Like he’s been saying it forever. One more, John said nothing
about the implication that they would both be doing the rigging. Both of them. Together.

“Why not?” Sherlock snaps back anyways.

“There’s too much to lose, for everyone. Everyone’s racing for a reason - would you take a bribe?”

Sherlock’s shoulders slump. He wasn’t invested in the idea, but he’s got to keep up appearances.

“No.” He pouts.

John licks his lip. His eyes dart away.

“There. See. Neither would I. You live by the sheep farm, up there, don’t you?”

“Missus Turner’s. I am her neighbor.” Sherlock has no idea why he’s revealing that. It doesn’t matter. But apparently it does, because John’s… walking him home? Escorting him? Maybe John doesn’t trust Sherlock not to get into trouble for the few miles it takes to get to Mrs Hudson’s.

“A bit far out, isn’t it? How do you get to Skarmouth so often? It’s windy.”

“It’s always windy.”

“But especially windy out here. No wonder your hair’s always… curly.”

Cheeks heating up impossibly against the cold bite of the aforementioned wind, Sherlock defends, “That’s merely how it is!” He reaches up a hand to pat his fringe, which is no longer all pasted to his head. Parts of it are obscenely fluffy with the heavy humidity and the no-longer-existent rain. Instead of any falling, the rest has gathered up and the clouds have dropped, covering this side of the island in white. He then holds the reins up to his chest in order to appear defensive, making Redbeard squeal lightly in distaste as the bit pulls his head back, forcefully arching his neck. Sherlock loosens his embarrassed grip, now more embarrassed for his troubles, and pats Redbeard’s neck in apology. He gets a whip with the tail for reprimand, a fair punishment.

John laughs.

“Ha! Yeah, right, I’ve never seen anyone’s hair curl like that naturally! How much product do you really use?”

“None!” Sherlock lies. John looks at him. “The effects are always gone by noon.”

“So now you’re lying to me?” John puts a hand to his chest, still holding the reins and faking an astounded face. “And I thought we’d already moved past that stage in our relationship.”

Gladstone’s ears squash suddenly against the side of his skull, long pistons of flesh melting into puddles of contrast against the white mane. His nostrils flare - Redbeard’s gait shifts to a four-beat rhythm instead of the hearty three he’d been since managing. He’s slowing down into a walk to keep pace with the massive capall that is halting.

John looks down, to the other side of Gladstone’s great haunches. The horses reel to a stop.

“Oh, that’s… oh.”

It takes Sherlock a moment to see. Gladstone’s mass is in the way.

Hanging over the stone wall, mossy and low to the ground, the one which lines the road and the fields, is a body.
Sherlock tries pulling Redbeard into a stop, and instead of slowing to a walk like he normally does, Redbeard stiffens immediately. The horse’s head swings up, and his ears prick forwards. His tail stops whipping at the back of Sherlock’s legs in search of pesky biting flies.

But Redbeard isn’t looking towards the road. Ears swiveling, his head is elevated to focus on the distant hillocks in the green pastures, facing the rolling white mist, which has settled low to the ground in a wispy fog. Some continues to drizzle down, giving everything a shiny wet sheen.

Recognizing that Redbeard isn’t paying attention to him, Sherlock keeps his hands on the reins, in case the iron horse decides to spook or bolt. Allowing Redbeard to handle the situation, Sherlock studies the body draped over the stones. He doesn’t see the wool that indicates it would be a ram or ewe from Mrs Turner’s farm. In its place is sleek fur, black and white. It would’ve been lustrous and smooth if it wasn’t sticking up in cloistered clumps. It doesn’t smell yet, and Sherlock fleetingly wonders how long it’s been there.

Blood drips from mangled chunks of flesh and torn fur, staining the coarse grass.

John sits up in the saddle, slowly. Sherlock watches his eyes scan the surrounding moor, stopping at each rocky outcropping to study the land. These outcroppings are just distant shadows in the fog. “It’s still bleeding.”

Sherlock watches the heather bushes and sparse gorse. Some rocks are scattered over the terrain, only shapes, and Sherlock stares at each of them in turn, as if any could conceal the culprit. He highly doubts a capall uisce would hide behind something so small. He highly doubts a capall would hide at all.

Gladstone takes an interest in the mist past Sherlock. His wet, fish eyes are pinpointing something that Sherlock cannot see in the white. Sherlock wants to ask about it. Speaking will break the settled, heavy silence. Sherlock can’t decide whether or not he wants to do just that. Perhaps breaking it will be the end of this horrible, dreading wait. Perhaps it will be the catalyst, and a hungry water horse will come charging from the rolling fog.

“Let’s keep going. Almost home?”

Sherlock stares at John. He almost forgets to nod.

He sends one last sorrowful glance to the dead border collie.

They find a crushed jaw, sticky with torn ligaments and curdled blood, down the road. The chipped teeth are shiny, wet in the drizzling water. The tongue is missing, though part of the gleaming trachea is attached. Sherlock presses his calves harder into Redbeard’s sides, the horse spooks - and moves on, fast. John has Gladstone lengthen his strides.

“Not to worry,” John hushes in his direction. Redbeard quickens through the fog. Sherlock bounces in the seat with the rushed trot. “Gladstone thinks all of Thisby belongs to him. There isn’t a horse ashore that would challenge him.” John pats the night-black neck, fingers twisted in the white mane. Gladstone clacks his teeth against the bit in his mouth.

Sherlock remembers the low sound that Gladstone had made, when Hope was still a threat, a long sigh with punctuated whines, quiet, with tough forces of air behind them. With the champion capall on alert as he is, head high, neck elongated, ears hot and pressed forwards, Sherlock wonders what other noises he would make in defense. Gladstone’s eyes are wild, searching. Sherlock would say they were frantic, but they’re not. They’re patient. Looking for a weaker enemy.
Slits have emerged on Gladstone’s neck, contracting and fluttering. Sherlock stares at them. John notices and looks down. He pats them, cooing, “None of that, now,” into Gladstone’s ears. When he lifts his hand, all the remains is a black pelt, gleaming in the bleak, wet day.

Sherlock says, over the three-beat bump of Redbeard’s gait, “And what if one has only just come ashore? They couldn’t know not to.”

“Then they’ll learn the hard way.”

Sherlock is worried that Gladstone will lash out and snap Sherlock in half, just for something to bite, for something to be between those crushing teeth.

“I don’t believe you’d want to be on his back for that, would you?” Sherlock points out.

Somewhere far away, something is lurking in the floating white mist. Sherlock just doesn’t know where it is. Gladstone makes a chuffing, snorting noise though his nostrils. It doesn’t make him sound like a champion at all, it makes him sound like a foal, ready for a skirmish and bounding on new legs. Sherlock keeps Redbeard at a trot, but has never been so grateful to be so close to a capall.

They reach the fence that borders Mrs Hudson’s property, and Sherlock pulls Redbeard to a halt, the black water horse following. He can see the house, a great hulking, dark shape in the white.

He eyes Gladstone. Just because he has John on his back, a man Sherlock is ready to admit that he trusts, just to himself, does not mean that the horse is ready to be left unsupervised. Gladstone looks at Redbeard.

“Er- thank you.” Sherlock finally manages to step down from Redbeard’s saddle. He stands next to the iron stallion’s head. Redbeard knocks his face against Sherlock’s arm, getting snot on his coat. Sherlock scowls. Gladstone watches Redbeard.

Redbeard no longer seems to mind.

John smiles kindly, “It’s not a problem. Was rather nice, actually.”

“What, you shooting a man for me?”

“The walking part!” John exclaims. His mouth makes a war on his face, fighting several competing expressions at once. Sherlock adores it, then abhors that he adores it. “Well, yes, the, the shooting part. I’d go back and do it again. Not because I enjoyed it. Just. I’d do the same thing, in the same situation. For you.”

Sherlock blinks at him.

Then Sherlock asks, “Are you alright?”

“Yes, of course I’m alright.”

“Well, you have just killed a man.”

John grins heartily. He looks around, as if nervous. “Yes, well… That’s true, isn’t it?”

Satisfied that John is okay, Sherlock turns to undo the metal gate. He’s immediately quite embarrassed that there’s rust on the hinges, and that the gate squeaks. Josephine whinnies from faraway at the noise, evidently hearing his return. Gladstone’s ears shoot up to capture the sound, his head lifts. Looking for an excuse to step out of the conversation, Sherlock pulls Redbeard inside the gate by the bottom ring of his halter, and closes it behind him.
He looks up and John is still there.

His eyes seem to snap John out of a daze, because the man suddenly jerks, like he’s just woken up and realized he’s got somewhere to be. The connection makes Sherlock think about what John looks like when he’s only just gotten out of bed and that route of thinking isn’t going to bode well, so he smiles up at the rider. John smiles back. The moment would be awkward, to someone standing outside of it, but since Sherlock isn’t, so he rather likes the stupid smiling.

John waves, “I’ll be seeing you.”

He starts to turn Gladstone, and Sherlock sputters out, “I apologize.”

Gladstone shivers with the anticipation of movement. He’s obviously not liking that Sherlock is making John wait up for him. “What for?” Asks John.

“For not. Being there. Yesterday. I was in Skarmouth - there was, a murder, you see, and I just…” He stops. Breathes. Looks around in the mist, sees no shapes, relaxes. “I lost track of time. I apologize for not coming.”

John’s smile does not fade. “And here I thought you didn’t like me.”

“Why would you ever think that?”

“Anderson’s got in his head that you don’t like anyone.”

“Anderson’s a moron.”

“Yes, well,” John sighs, and Sherlock’s heart flutters, “We can all be, sometimes.”

-/-

“I’m telling you, the man was a complete stranger - walked right up to me and gave me the bag.”

“Big ears?”

“Yes - how did you--?”

“Henry Knight. Mainland monger, here for the Stockyard auction. Most likely thinks you work for Moriarty. Why else would he give you a paper bag of - what was it?”

“A flower! Like, like those bluebells in the pastures. Only it was purple, more open. Very pretty.”

“What’s the point in that?”

“The bag said ‘London’, but I could barely make that out.”

“Oh, souvenir, then. From the mainland.”

“Am I supposed to give it to Moriarty? I can’t exactly walk right up to him!”

“No, Molly. Just keep it. It hardly matters. It’s a flower. Can’t be that expensive.”

The bell tinks above Sherlock’s head. Molly sighs, melting into the countertop. “I don’t see the point,” She confesses, rubbing a streak of flour into her hair.
Sherlock shrugs. He nods to Archie, blankly wiping down empty tables, and leaves the sweet-smelling bakery with hands sticky in honey glaze. He really does not see reason for the flowers to function as a gift from Knight to Moriarty, but perhaps Knight comes from a family or farm that likes botany… no, that’s not it. His hands aren’t nearly grubby enough for that. He’s wealthy, and he doesn’t bother with dirt…

His mind inevitably performs the shift to thinking of John. Of that chestnut streak against the sky - the water horse flying over the cliff to return to the ocean instead of remain tied to the land. Of the two reports of gunfire. The whole event is unbelievable. Sherlock would’ve loved to stay home and in bed thinking about it all, but Skarmouth had called to him, and so had the rest of his expensive oats for Redbeard, finally ready for pickup. He’d waited a few hours after John left and the heavy mist had lessened before returning to the town. He’d had no encounters.

Well, perhaps the border collie’s body that was missing from the stone wall counts as an encounter. What had come to claim it?

He’s thinking, walking down the darkening streets of Skarmouth when it happens.

Sherlock can catalog every weakness in both of his attackers, but he can do nothing about it when he’s pinned against brick.

This is true in every situation. Seeing all is not the same as being able to do all. Sherlock is gifted in being able to devise roundabout ways to getting what he wants, or getting his experiments to yield conclusive results. But this isn’t an experiment. It’s happening, and it happens fast, and he sees nothing but a blur of motion, and--

The stinking rot of burning rubbish, hot pitch, like the night of the festival, hits his nose, before his head hits the wall, bouncing off with a repulsive shot of bright pain.

He’s spun around, head spinning as well, suddenly weak and sick to his stomach, wanting to double up and keel over, but he’s held upright and shoved deeper into the Skarmouth alley, away from the waning evening light and storefront lamps, stumbling and pushed, hands rucking up his jacket, the sharp side of a blade held to his throat from behind.

“Nothing,” Spits a gruff voice behind Sherlock. His head spins. He assumes they mean weapons, and the hands linger on his waist for a moment too long to be innocent. He shivers, violently, and thinks he may wretch, right here.

Two pairs of hands (only three hands, really… one hand is… something. Busy. holding the knife. Against his neck.) shove him again, and he collapses back into the brickwork of the alley wall. His knees wobble. This place smells vile. His eyes aren’t focusing.

A man demands, “Now, what do you want from Thisby’s champion?”

The woman holding the knife presses it into his bare throat. He’s vaguely aware they’ve torn away his scarf and can see the tail end on the ground across the stone alleyway.

The man beside her says, “Nothing good, I imagine.” He grips Sherlock’s wrists tightly, scraping the bumps of his ulna against each other in fat hands, pushing them against his churning stomach. Sherlock sneers, but his mouth won’t work correctly.

He tries blinking, but it only makes him look dazed. He tries again. His vision won't clear.

“I bet he wants to cut him up,” The woman remarks. Her voice is scratchy. The knife bites at Sherlock's left carotid artery.
It brings up a groggy memory.

He gasps out, “Butcher.”

The man steals a confused look at the woman. Sherlock doesn't understand - and his eyes are trying to roll back up into his head. Not butchers, then, not the murderous son’s parents. The parents of the boy who killed the tourist girl with the yellow dress. The dress was so soft, where it hadn’t been hardened in a crumpled position with blood… He shakes his head, even if it has the effect of making the woman more alert, ready to slash his skin open.

These are gamblers, he finally notices. It was so obvious. But he couldn’t, he can’t… think.

Sherlock’s head aches, deep inside.

“Cut him up,” Repeats the woman, “See what’s moving around inside…”

“How it all works…”

Sherlock’s very familiar with the workings of human anatomy. He’s studiously dedicated to physiology. He doesn’t need a subject to ‘cut up’. He doesn’t want one. He struggles suddenly, the broad side of the knife threatens to crush his trachea. He wheezes.

“Flay Watson open, hm?” The man snorts back a mouthful of snot and spits it somewhere, “Is that your goal?”

Sherlock tries twisting out of the hands, but they're everywhere, and his eyes are closed. “No,” He says, quiet. He doesn’t want to see how John looks on the inside. He doesn’t want John’s beating, bloody heart in his hands (or some other organ that doesn’t have the ridiculous connotation of love, none of them, they should all stay where they are, keeping John working in that mysterious way he does). Picturing the scene, scalpels and crimson droplets on a shining metal autopsy table, makes him sick. His banged-up head may make him cry, just thinking about it. He’s already tearing up, and horrified to hear a scratchy break in his voice as he shouts, “No!”

One of the man’s beefy hands clamps over his lips, squeezing harshly at his cheeks, digging half-moons with scraggly fingernails. Sherlock squirms, trying to push himself back into the alley wall, but his hands and face are held firm.

They want him to be quiet - why? Who is near enough that they would be able to hear him?

“See? Look at him, he looks like he’s going ‘na cry.”

“He looks more like he’s going to piss his knickers.” The woman laughs.

Sherlock would put more money on the former.

Mind coming back, slowly but surely emerging from the black, Sherlock’s eyes widen, flashing wildly side to side. They’re too deep in the tangled corners of Thisby back alleys for anyone just passing by to see him. His ears struggle to hear anything beyond the taunts of the man and woman before him, shoving him so far into the stone walling that he is certain he hears something in his back pop by force.

People. There must be people. The sky is hardly dark, Skarmouth will be filled with people.

Sherlock struggles to open his mouth, and when the grimy scent is too much to bear, he snaps his teeth down on a finger.
(How much pressure does it take to bite off a finger?)

Unlike meat, flesh, skin is very elastic - it's like trying to bite through rubber, because it gives under force, sinks. But doesn't break.)

Sherlock bites harder.

(It wouldn't even be his fault if he truly did bite it off, the man shouldn't have his hands on Sherlock's face in the first place.)

The man rips his hand away from Sherlock's mouth, shouting something. Sherlock wants to grin, but he's focused on wheezing breaths, ramming his knee into the woman’s low-hanging gut, and dashing to make his escape.

-/-

He doesn’t even fit the odds.

Sherlock stumbles, hits the wall of Hawkins’ Tavern. His head swims, images float by without real semblance. He sinks to the stone ground, holding his head in his hands. To anyone, he'll look like a drunk. It's a good cover as his brain works quickly to reassemble itself.

Gamblers.

They would want him out of the Races for one reason - so he wouldn’t ruin their game. So he wouldn’t magically pull up from behind and race ahead, and win, make them lose money.

Why would the gambling man and woman waste energy on him? He isn’t a threat. He can’t win the Races.

He can’t do it.

-/-

In the evening, Sherlock breaks open one of the cheap bales of hay, sitting against the shared wall of the stable and Mrs Hudson’s house, and drawing the hay over his legs to fight the chill. His violin sits next to him in its case, and Redbeard’s head pokes out of the half-door across the narrow way from him. Josephine is making soft sounds in her stall.

Sherlock’s lips are dry, he picks fitfully at the skin until a twinge of pain stops him, then laves over the spot, irritated he’s done that to himself. He rolls a piece of hay between his thumb and forefinger, watching the bent tip spin.

Redbeard repeals his head when he realizes that Sherlock isn’t going to pay him any attention, ducking his nose into the bucket of oats held there by wire. He can't have too much, or else he’ll get ill on them. They’re still good for him to have - levels of protein in stocks of oats have a large range, due to different cultivation and management methods. Where there’s protein, there’s better muscle.
Little over a week until the Races. There are still riders prancing around and flinging their horses through mock gallops on the beach down by the racing tract of sand. It’s still light enough for them to be practicing, conditioning their capaill and trying to hold them away from the sea, weighing them down in bright tassels and shrill bells.

Were they planning to kill him? If so, they did a terrible job. Sherlock’s not even half dead. His head hurts, but he’d looked at himself in the mirror and his pupils seem fine, his eyes are focusing and muscles all working to his command.

Discouraged, yes.

Shaken, yes.

Knows that he doesn’t belong on the beach, yes.

But not dead. And he swore to himself that he wouldn’t give up until he was.

They want him to stop. This by itself is against him, even now the wind is throwing his hair through the slit of the open stable door. He can see the white mist, piling in from all sides. Water drips from a crack in the ceiling, one that makes a hole in both the actual roof, and the ceiling, which is the floor of the hayloft, directly below it.

It puddles on the concrete, rhythmically sending tiny droplets flying as drops drip down. Sherlock wonders how long it will take for it to erode a dip in the floor, a dip like in the rock at the rider’s parade.

So, he’ll keep running. All of these encounters, the rider’s parade fiasco, Jefferson Hope and his companion on the cliffside (Sherlock goes back to thinking - should he be worried that John killed someone? For Sherlock’s safety? Sherlock may have very well died without his welcome intrusion. Should Sherlock really be associating with someone that is so ready to kill for him?), the gamblers - man and the woman. None of them will stop him, not until one of them kills him. Who will feed and keep Redbeard in shape and happy? Mrs Hudson can probably do the later.

And Redbeard’s not too young, he doesn’t need to run around all day to not be morbidly obese. Perhaps Sherlock can write a will and guilt John Watson into riding him every so often.

Sherlock busies himself flaying a few pieces of straw, imagining a myriad of messy death scenes that await him. He somehow gets the image of the Catherine wheel into his head, a medieval torture and execution machine. He smiles crudely at the thought of it.

More likely, what will happen is that he’ll line up for the Races on the day of, and Redbeard will run forwards, Sherlock will turn his head and there will be a horse. He’ll get ripped off and be a pulpy streak on the sand for the gulls to eat, and Redbeard will be forcefully drowned in the tide, swept out to sea. He imagines bubbles spilling from Redbeard’s tensed, submerged mouth, eyes white all the way around, red and stinging in the salt water, and swallows.

He decides not to imagine anymore. Redbeard is alive and well, and Sherlock looks at him while leaning more heavily against the wall and shifting hay onto his lap. It’s getting colder. He wonders where the sun has gone, reaches forwards to turn up the brightness of his electric lantern. Outside, it’s grey and white, and he can’t see the sky. He can’t see more than ten lengths away from the slitted door.

Distantly, there’s a sound.

Sherlock stops.
He listens, staring out the stable door. He can’t see the bordering wooden fence from here, but knows it’s there. The noise comes again - the faraway pop of old nails, and, faintly, wood splintering. Something crackling, something thumping to the hard earth. Thunder rumbles overhead, and the rest of the noise is lost to it.

There’s not enough wind for something like that to happen - for the ancient fence to fall on its own, to crack by itself.

He breathes, slowly. Minutes pass. Maybe it’s nothing, after all, Redbeard hasn’t even looked up. His stance is relaxed, from what Sherlock can see of it. He munches noisily.

Now, Sherlock hears an odd creak.

It’s an old house. Everything on the island is old. Wind blows in screen doors and shifts the groaning ceilings, throws tufts of grass across open pasture.

There are lots of creaks in the stalls. The fence that surrounds the property creaks in the wind, nails come loose often. Musgrave will pad through the dusty hayloft above and step on the wrong floorboard, and the wood will whine. Josephine butts her head against the walls of her stall, making the door hinges complain. Redbeard likes to push his hindquarters against his walls, too, when he has a scratch.

But this isn’t the cat, a horse, or the wind.

It hasn’t exactly made a noise like a squeak of a hinge, or the joint of a fence. It’s soft, more like a pat. An experimental tap against wood.

It comes again, a tender knock. The stable door rasps against its bottom track.

Redbeard’s head has emerged from the bucket. There are oats in his mouth, stuck to his nose, but he is not chewing. He arches his neck up to his full height, and freezes. His ears are pricked, eager and listening, neck stiff. Sherlock remains still. He can’t see Josephine from where he’s sitting on the cement in the hay, but since there are no sounds from her stall, he assumes she’s also frozen.

Everything is held in limbo. Suspended in the air - like micro sediments in water. It will settle so slowly that it will never touch the ocean bed, held forever by turbulence in the ocean. This moment feels like the eerie rise of screeching violins. He wonders when the rest of the instruments will join in, when he’ll be released from this horrible wait.

He listens for another noise, something that would explain why Redbeard’s gone so still, something that would explain the quiet noise. Redbeard’s ear twists to catch a noise on the other side of the wall. Sherlock doesn’t breathe, as long as Redbeard remains high and alarmed like this, so will he.

Silence.

Then,

 Whuff

A sighing puff of air. Unlike the sounds of the hushing ocean. More like the mist gusting softly over the roof. Sherlock swallows.

More soft sounds follow, barely above the reverberation of the mist. Soft, soft, soft.

The sound of feet.
Footsteps.

No.

Hooves.

Slow hoofbeats, falling gently outside the open door.

Redbeard’s ear flicks to the sound of another *creak-pat*, and remains trained on that spot. The rest of his body is a statue, carved from heavy limestone, never to be moved. More hoofbeats, the sound of the foggy mist outside, the electric lantern casting a yellow circle of light in the dark stable.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY. sorry guys, started my summer job and have been way too tired to do much! Thankfully, the chapter after this practically writes itself. thank you!
Gleam

Chapter Summary

It snaps into action -

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hoofbeats are unfamiliar.

Gladstone makes no noise or nearly no noise when he steps. Redbeard’s hooves happily clap down on roads, be them brick or packed dirt or loose gravel. Josephine’s ankles tend to tremble and pop when she does anything more than amble slowly around the paddock.

Mary, the blonde mare, with the shivering harness of bells and iron nails that dug into her hide, the saddle blankets draped in Thisby’s colors to keep her tied to land… He can’t remember what sounds she made as she moved. Everything was so quick. She was in one place until she wasn’t. He can only remember the quaking bells, rattling inaudibly as she quivered with restrained force, and he was faster than a whip.

Sherlock can’t hear any bells.

He can’t hear the gentle rasp of a backside in a leather saddle. There is no sound of buckles on a bridle, being fixed or tightened or mended. No brush of iron stirrups on hard riding shoes. No whisper of flaps against thighs. Nothing.

There is only a throbbing heartbeat in Sherlock’s ears. It may be his, it may be Redbeard’s thundering muscle, but it is there, rushing with the white noise.

*Creak-pat.*

The stable door shifts.

*Creak-pat* comes again, and then the sound of a sigh gushing over wood. *Whuff*, again. Redbeard’s eyes strain to see the source of the noise, but he gives no other tells of being a living, breathing animal.

Sherlock’s own gaze darts back to the door. He sinks back against the wall, as quickly and silently as he can without knocking the lantern over or rustling the pieces of hay that are piled over his lap.

He melts against the wood, thanks the heavens for the bales of straw that block the *capall’s* view of him, but still allow him to stare, wide-eyed with his mouth popped open, through the space between the wall and the bales. His view is partially obstructed by wayward hay pieces sticking out of the shape they are meant to conform in, but the sight is enough to steal all the air from his lungs in one foul move.

Here is the thing that comes awake in the night. It is horror and fear embodied, and is as black as the bottom of the ocean. In the dark, it is only an incomplete jigsaw of white - a piebald. The black patches of its body are lost to the gloomy world outside, and it looks like a phantom.
It pushes its face through the stable door, knocking it open wider with the squeal of ancient wood.

Its eyes long and wide, gazing into the stable. Like Gladstone, earlier that day, there are thin slits in the side of its neck. Remnants of gills. This has recently come ashore, perhaps in the rain. They shudder as it slowly breathes.

It’s hungry.

Nothing else resembles what Sherlock would say belongs at the Stockyard, or in the Races. It has nostrils on the front of its face, running up its muzzle and stopping just past the forward-facing eyes. This does not look like a horse. Unlike Mary, the mouth is not narrow, but it is frothing red sea foam lightly. It drips from the twitching, fat lip. Deep in its throat emerges a sound, like a whispered, squealing scrape.

There is nothing separating Sherlock, Redbeard, and Josephine from this night-black horse. It has its head through the crack in the stable door. This door isn’t like the one for the stalls - there is no opening the top and having the bottom remain closed. It is pulled on a track - there runs a narrow strip of outside darkness from the ceiling to the cement flooring.

Halfway up, higher than any ordinary horse would be able to stretch their neck to, is the massive horse’s nose, snuffling with reeking sniffs at the big wooden panels. The capall next investigates where Sherlock’s hands had been last - the door handle. It breathes hotly on the metal.

The door is open, and the horse is now feeding its neck through the slit, peering into the stable and hooking its head around the side of the door. Another soft hoofbeat as it shifts its significant weight from one hind leg to the other. It looks at the electric lantern down by the toes of Sherlock’s boots. There are tiny, reflecting orbs of light in its eyes, harsh on the gleam of the wet eyeball. It blinks, and twists an unnatural ear.

If it wanted to, the capall could step into the stable. It could bully its shoulders through the crack and it would be in here, mere feet from Sherlock, under the roof where Sherlock has spent his days feeling safe. He’s covered from toe to waist in hay, blending into the bales that are hiding him from the horse’s view. This makes no difference. The capall knows that he is here.

The water horse looks at Redbeard. Redbeard makes no move.

Exactly how many times have they been told, how many times has it been proven, that to move is to die? That the capaill are hunters more than they are scavengers.

The capall opens its mouth and Sherlock half-expects to hear hinges squeaking, see a jaw popping, because opening an equine mouth that wide should not be possible. It emits a low whine, with pulsing clucks behind it, horrifyingly keening upwards at the end.

Keeewawawawwwwww …

It is almost, almost like Hope’s horse (or was it the escaped chestnut? Sherlock cannot think), and that is enough to have Sherlock nearly biting through his bottom lip in an attempt to quiet himself. Directly in front of him, Redbeard’s ears lay flat against his skull, the only movement he makes.

All that protects Sherlock and his beloved horse is the width of the crack in the stable door. The horse has no more neck to push through into the stable, its shoulders are preventing it from stepping inside but this can change in an instant.

Sherlock can’t think about this.
Gently, he leans his head back against the wall, staring up at the inky ceiling. Only the nearest corners are illuminated by the light. If the light were out the darkness would cover him more than the hay is. He can’t move to turn it off. The only thing worse than facing a capall is facing a capall with no light to see by. They can see in the dark, he cannot. His eyes flick back to stare at the capall through the hay bales and wall--

And it’s looking at him.

Both wet eyes are trained on Sherlock, seeing him through the little window of straw he’d been using. The heartbeat in his ears vanishes.

He can’t look away.

The gleaming gaze stares at him. Ever so slowly, the piebald peels back its lips, revealing crushing flat teeth and rotten-green gums in order to scent him better. This horse’s gaunt face is no more than black-and-white canvas stretched over delicate bone. Both ears are cupped forwards to catch every sound he makes. The door creaks and complains loudly as strong shoulders test its strength. It is not pushing hard yet the door threatens to fall.

He can’t breathe.

He knows that the piebald will kill him if he runs but if it crashes into the stable he knows he will try to run anyway. There's nowhere to go.

*Don’t move, don’t move, don’t move.*

Outside, there’s a yowl.

A wailing noise.

Often times, these things sound like babies crying out in pain, or kittens mewling. The piebald presses forwards, focused on Sherlock.

The wail comes again.

*Oh, god, there’s another one.* There’s another one outside in the fog and it’s coming to get him, to help the first, and--

The piebald shifts its weight away from the door with a long creak. Its lip lays back over its menacing teeth and its devilish ears twitch and flick to listen to the sound from outside. Its head tips back and neck arches up, face tilted to the side in order to hear better. It puts the monstrous profile on display - sloping nose, neck slits fluttering and its strange long ears swivel again.

Again, the yowl, and now it is recognizable. It comes from the body that claws open the car seats and sleeps in the hayloft, that twists around his ankles and hobbles him.

Musgrave. The barn cat.

Redbeard’s ears flick to the noise, and the piebald’s long, long neck begins to retract through the slit in the door.

These things are not pack hunters. They are alone from the moment they slide from the sea to the one where they slip back into it.

He can’t move. His lungs are unable to draw breath, he gasps like a fish, but it’s impossible to get
any oxygen into his body. He’s underwater, he must be, all he can smell is salt and all he can taste on his tongue is the dead things in the ocean.

No one he knows has gone swimming in the Scorpio sea. No one has been between the sharp fanged rocks and in the white-bracketed blue. This moment is the one before you realize the water is sucking at the sand beneath your feet and toes and trying to drag you into the ocean.

The piebald gives him a steadying look as the last of its head slips from the crack in the stable door, though it remains just outside, a threat in the dark beyond the reach of the electric lantern. It feels like the way twilight does - the end of his days.

From the dark-white fog past the water horse, emerges a little feline form, Sherlock can see between the gaps in the piebald’s long legs.

The capall crooks its head and Musgrave does not see it until it moves. Its knees slap against the wooden panels of the stable door as it whips around and bolts towards the barn cat, splintering the wood.

Distantly, he can hear Musgrave yowling, and the continuous thunder of hooves.

Sherlock raises his hands up to hide his face in them, fingers clutching at his unwashed hair. He shivers.

It saw him. It’s seen him - it knows he’s in here. He can move and may risk being seen in the dark and killed. But he cannot stay here.

He allows a moment to collect himself, shivering in the black. Pressing into the sticking hay bales, his mind reformats itself. He draws a deep breath, smelling the ocean, even this far inland.

Sherlock imagines the capall coming back and eating Redbeard and Josephine and he is snatching the lantern off the floor and sliding it onto the empty metal hook meant for a saddle outside Josephine’s stall. From what he can see, the mare is shivering. He glances to Redbeard - how can he take them both? Mrs Hudson is on the sheep farm with Mrs Turner for bridge tonight - but wouldn’t a paddock full of slow wooly prey be the best place on the island for a hungry water horse to stalk about?

In the end, he closes the sliding stable door. He throws the latch into place as quietly as possible. The night is too noisy, filled with Josephine’s soft, distressed whinnies, and Redbeard’s quiet grunting. Outside, he can’t make out more sounds. It's silent beyond the fog and this and the capall are the reasons why he closes the door.

When Redbeard’s girth is tightened, Sherlock flicks off the lantern, submerging the stable and Josephine in darkness, and pulls Redbeard from the stables and into the scarcely lit mist. Above, the sky is darkening ever further, and all around, there is white murk.

He steps carefully. Every footfall seems to make far too much noise. Redbeard spooks at every shift in the fog. He is a scared, twisting thing. Sherlock takes one last glance around, before he turns his back and closes the stable door again. He closes the latch, and after a moment, pulls off Redbeard’s lead and loops it around the handles, lashing it closed further.

As long as Josephine is quiet, she will live. She wouldn’t have a chance if she ran. He cannot bring her.

Sherlock throws a leg up into a stirrup on the near side, then settles his other foot into place on the right. He grips the reins. Redbeard’s ears are turning every direction to catch sound. His eyes show
white, all the way around. His tensed mouth is opened, Sherlock can see his breath in the cold. Sherlock’s fingers flex over the leather, wishing for gloves. No time to spare.

He pushes his calves against Redbeard’s sides.

There’s a break in the fence, somewhere. The capall could be inside the paddock with them at this very moment. Sherlock straightens in the saddle. He is more than his fear, which is nonexistent. An encounter like this won’t hurt him. He’s been banged up in alleyways and threatened within an inch of his life, he’s been harassed and doubted. A water horse won’t scare him.

But it seems like it might, in the bleak white and the twilight.

It’s hard to see far out at all - the sky is progressively getting darker and darker.

He kicks Redbeard, the horse’s stride lengthens.

They come to the broken fence. There are boards of old wood on the ground, broken nails, sticking half out of the fallen ones and half in the ones still attached to the rest of the fence, snapped right in half like nothing. Redbeard stalls for a moment, only having ever exited through the gate, and after a hesitation, Redbeard steps over the broken boards. Sherlock lets out a breath.

Not unlike the day so long ago, when the two of them strayed from the Skarmouth road, something clucks in the shadows.

Redbeard’s face jerks one way, supposedly towards the sound.

The clucks repeat. Louder - closer. There’s no way to place the sound in the ghostly dark, the soft breeze throws it. This air current is not enough to shift the dense fog.

Sherlock wretches the reins and has him facing forwards again. They find the dirt road and start down it.

Outcroppings are discoloured monsters in the mist. The sky is dark now. It makes the mist a wall of shade.

They pass the sheep paddocks, empty as far as he can see, which is not far.

The road is long and he works Redbeard up into a trot, opting to remain sitting instead of posting. It’s a difficult pace to maintain, because going for this long is going to take a toll on the horse eventually, and Redbeard wants to go faster. With a capall in the dark, Sherlock does not disagree.

There comes another sound, somewhere far behind them - the tumble of stones onto hard ground. The clink of bone over rock. Something’s knocked over the mossy stone wall. Sherlock looks over his shoulder, but he cannot see what made the noise.

To run is to die, to run is to die.

Sherlock squeezes his legs into Redbeard’s soft sides, pushes hard, shoves his heels down, toes up. The horse throws back his head and his rhythm abruptly changes, hooves hitting the ground. Sherlock follows the movement with his arms to lessen the strain against Redbeard’s mouth.

The back of his neck feels cold as the air hits it, and his hands are clammy. His mind is clouded and he can’t feel the tips of his fingers. He tangles them in Redbeard’s unfeeling mane and pulls a bit, trying to get feeling back into them.
Tense moments pass with Redbeard streaking down the road.

Sherlock thinks of all the pastures and open fields that they are running alongside. He thinks of all the *capaill* that could be loitering in them, seeing them canter swiftly across the island. It’s not just the one they’ve left behind, perhaps Thisby has become infested.

Sherlock wonders whether Thisby would be better off as an island of forests and trees, rather than made of field and open pasture. It would give things more places to hide, things for the fog to curl around, but maybe it would be easier to get away from the beasts that annually come to gorge themselves on the population of Thisby.

At the first town houses, Sherlock pulls Redbeard back into a quick walk. There’s a while to go until they’re properly in Skarmouth, but the road is evening out, becoming not so ragged on the edges. He’s not sure what his goal was, coming here. It’s dark, and the houses are just stone mounds with small glass windows that reflect nothing but the shadows.

This shade is oppressive. Wandering into Skarmouth feels like walking into a ghost town. There are no people out - the streetlamps that are on have their light caught up in the immediate fog and no further. At least it is easier to see.

It can’t be that late. Where is everyone?

He doesn’t miss their company, he despises most everyone, but having not a single person here is… uncanny. Skarmouth is a lively place after dark, with teenagers knocking down paper lanterns from the telephone wires, Hawkins’ Tavern alight in customers, the bakery serving late-night sweets, the burning of bonfires. All of this is amplified during racing season. And all of this is absent tonight.

Redbeard’s hoofbeats turn from soft pats against the dirt road into soft clicks on the stone walk. Sherlock eyes the alleyways that have mist spilling out of them. The darkened haze has settled against the ground here, against the buildings and the closed shops.

The days are getting shorter here, the sun set not long ago, only on the way here. There should be tourists, or fishermen skulking around corners or crossing the street. The stars are hidden behind a cloaking of heavy clouds. Skarmouth is shrouded in mist and silence. The space is eerie and atmospheric.

Where has everyone gone?

When Sherlock hears the telltale *whuff* of loud breath, it’s obvious.

The piebald.

It stands in the middle of the road, frozen for a moment, then leaning forwards to amble towards them. The slits broadside its neck spit hot air into the mist, it rolls over before it dissipates. Its head is lowered, square-pupiled eyes gazing up at Sherlock from below, reflecting the light from the glowing lanterns. There is plenty of space between them and Sherlock feels as though none of it exists at all. There are no obstacles. Those teeth will rip through him like paper.

Fear pricks his skin, raw and undiluted.

It steers closer and closer. Sherlock chooses to prolong his life, if only few a handful of seconds. Its knee lifts for another step, light glistening off the sea-slick patterned pelt.

With an expert twist, Redbeard gets purchase on the familiar stonework and leaps away, tearing down the street in a matter of seconds. In the same amount of time the *capall* has vaulted into
movement.

The shops are sharp blurs, as is the thinning mist, the streetlamps and windowpanes are flying streaks as they tear past them. A pure strain of terror spikes down his back, echoing through his limbs and neck as he hears the continuous, smooth pound of menacing hooves clapping down on the ground behind them, gaining land.

The mist drops off suddenly, betraying the location of the cliffs. Grunting with effort, Sherlock jerks Redbeard to one side, having him run parallel to the perilous fall.

Like the water horses, he has veered to the sea, compelled by magic.

Behind him, trying to outrun the wind, is the piebald.

The piebald isn’t afraid of slipping, it’s concentrated completely on the gallop, strange knobby legs working at a preternatural speed. Sherlock rushes Redbeard and the horse stutters and trips and glances off of the pebbles on the slope to the sand but he quickens nevertheless.

They hit the racing beach littered with half-eaten November cakes squashed into sediment and bloodstains that the water has yet to reach, trampling through the surf and soft sand and past a few late-night riders trying to get in extra time before the Races. At the chase, these led capaill hawk at them and wrench and twist in their jockey’s grips and try to tear away from leads made of scarlet cord and brass, jingling bells. The man who was playing a Scorpio rhythm on pipes sees them and the melody freezes, uncompleted in the middle. All of this is nonsense as Redbeard flies down the tract of useable sand.

Redbeard’s hooves kick up seawater and the spray soaks through Sherlock’s socks.

They leap over sand dunes beaten to submission by the dozens of hooves that have smothered it into flatness, only to have the tide build them up again. It’s perfectly floored and clean before they thunder over it, rippled firm and hard by the waves. Caged against the ocean and the high cliffs, there is nowhere to go but forwards, and that space is running out. Ahead, the line of water has crept closer to the bottom of the great chalk walls.

The tide is coming back up like that night so long ago, with Sherlock scrabbling up a gravel hill and a water horse swimming below, but now there is a beast streaking after him and he is asking Redbeard for more and more speed, shoving his calves into the iron horse’s side and is pushing him harder and faster--

--when a great long neck slaps into the side of his saddle, delivering a hard blow to Sherlock’s right leg and grinding bone against stirrup. Sherlock hauls the reins to the left, to the ocean - exactly where the capall is trying to steer him.

It is this thought, and this thought only, that has Sherlock yanking back on the reins and listening to the commands of the sea, the everlasting shhhh, shhhh as the waves grip at Redbeard’s ankles, trying to tug them further into the water.

Redbeard grinds haltingly into a stop, and the capall weaves its black and white body in front of the space before them, ensuring Redbeard will not run forward. He would have to turn tail to run and the water horse would snap him in half before he tried. The carnivore is twisted in a strange way, a way that a spinal cord could not contort. Its neck arches back between its shoulder blades, like a spitting cobra. Its mouth is open, Sherlock can see something that looks like kelp stuck between the long molars.
Its sinister mouth is covered in red. The white by its lips is dyed pink from it. The hairs on its muzzle quiver.

Men are shouting by the cliffside.

The *capall*'s splotchy hide wavers.

Sherlock looks down. The saltwater is lapping at its hooves.

It is within rights to eat him. The piebald catches the scent of the ocean brine and jerks its great long face towards the shimmering water. The moment is silent. The water horse is distracted. On the ocean surface, peaks of waves gleam white in the dark and then vanish into the black again.

That's when it comes to him - this horse would rather eat him than drown him. But the ocean is too close for it to focus. Already the strange long head is lengthening, its sides are shaking nonstop. The twisted ears atop its head twitch and shake towards the water, the slitted neck contracts and flutters as it breathes in the grainy air. Sherlock shakes.

The horse pries open its wide mouth again, breathing ghastly smells towards him. Redbeard tucks his nose, and the *capall* clacks its flat teeth, ever the malevolent prison guard.

Once, when he was very small and his parents feet had never left the island, Sherlock broke his elbow on the hard rocks down by the shore. This was in early summer, before the sea was malicious and the water horses swam just off the beaches. All he did was stare at the limp mess that had become of his arm on the drive to hospital, and he remembers Mycroft and Mummy being uncharacteristically unsettled by that.

Another time, he’d poked his head into the sheep pastures through the loops of barbed wire and nearly gotten his nose snapped off by an elderly collie that was too protective of the flock. Then, all he’d done was stare at the dog until the yellow canines had been centimeters away from his face, and it was only Mycroft yanking his ankles back at the last second that has saved his skin.

Sherlock has always wanted to look his death in the face. And now he has, and does not turn his head away for fear of making it easier for the piebald to sink its teeth into the flesh of his neck. Redbeard makes a high, small noise in his throat. The piebald stares at him, but its legs wobble. Sherlock has not seen them swim well and he does not know if the change goes all the way down to their bones, but its legs wobble like it does, like bones are breaking and shifting. The piebald’s nostrils flare.

It snaps into action -

Sand hits his face - so does salt, and he has to squeeze his eyes shut at the sting. Then, nothing. He stays still. His fingers dig shallowly into Redbeard’s quivering pelt, pads against skin and wiry red hair near the horn of the saddle as his eyes burn.

Something crashes into the water. It’s a noise and the moon catching on droplets of water in the night. Redbeard lurches violently one way - something heavy slams into him from the waterside - his boots miss their footing - free fall - the back of Sherlock’s head hits the sand with a solid bounce. Sherlock curls immediately when he hits the beach, holding his pounding head in his hands.

He feels like krill stuck in a hurricane, for the saltwater rushes over him in unfailing waves, he holds his breath as it heaves, and when it sucks back into the ocean to rejoin the masses again, he coughs and spits without really taking in any air at all. Salt’s gone far up his nose, been forced there, making his head swim.
The ocean swells again, but it only drags at his feet, instead of his whole body. His clothes are waterlogged. As stuck with sand as they are, he manages to lift a hand to wrench his sodden hair from sticking flat to his forehead, and he gets sand spread all over his face in the process, but he can see.

There is no piebald capall leering over him, rattling its teeth at him. There is no piebald tearing leather and flesh from Redbeard’s back. The air and the surface of the water are empty.

Instead, there is the open ocean before him, and sand beneath his backside, under his hands, his legs, and he can feel the cool roughness of it under his thighs, through his soaked clothing that clings to him in the wind. He thinks he sees a long black and white face disappear below the turbulent surface. He turns wildly, and his horse is hunched, trembling under the overhanging cliffs. Redbeard is only a shape in the shadows and the wind, surrounded by smaller figures of men. More capaill, these ones held by braided iron and leather, wilted petals and charms, linger higher up by the gravel hill. There is a tall black capall among them. White hair lifts away from an elegiac face.

Drained completely, Sherlock’s arms give out, and he collapses back onto the beach.

“You should’ve seen it,” says a voice, sounding far away, “It was like the sea was reaching for that capall, I saw it, with the moonlight shining all through her. Like it was made of water.”

Sherlock stares up at the sky. Its cloudy. The clouds are lighter than the ocean, hiding the moon behind them. The ocean is black before him. The ocean is black and out there, somewhere, are the capaill, swimming parallel to the breakers and hunting, hunting, and his feet are in the water. He closes his eyes and breathes.

“Move! ” Commands a dominating voice. “Move out of my way!”

Chapter End Notes

I FINISHED MY SUMMER JOB!!!!!!
im sorry this is so late and it was going to be much much longer but I split it into more chapters because it was getting excessive. thoughts???
Have you changed your mind yet?

Chapter Summary

"Have you changed your mind?" Moriarty asks.
"No."
"Neither have I. This changes nothing."

Chapter Notes

He wasn’t worth his weight in meat, not to a water horse who took the ocean as a lover.

It’s only biology, he thinks, hair matting with moist sand, it’s only biology that they love the water so much. Misunderstood and secretive and savage biology.

-/-

He's distantly aware of a jacket draped over his shoulders, leaving his arms uncovered. He's shivering. His wet hair drips potent saltwater down the back of his sodden collar.

Strong hands guide him away from the beach. The hands belong to someone who is also leading Redbeard (he's okay, he's fine, Sherlock would rather die than have Redbeard do the same) up from the beaches. The lights in Skarmouth are too bright.

The mist is gone. The air is heavy with unshed rain.

The hands push him up into Redbeard’s sea-slicked saddle. Sherlock trembles, and Redbeard does the same when he collapses forward to hug and clutch the stallion’s mane and neck. The muscles jump and twitch harshly under his touch.

Clucking, and then Redbeard is moving. Sherlock holds on.

Sherlock holds on.

“There's a storm coming.” Someone says. Sherlock doesn't open his eyes. Doesn't register they’ve fallen closed. “Will you come back to my flat?”

A water horse could ask him if he wanted to go to the bottom of the ocean, and Sherlock would probably nod. He does so.

Redbeard squeals, his shoulders jumping as he stomps his forelegs, jolting Sherlock's teeth. Thunder rumbles, more of a distant growl than a clap or a roar.

Sherlock opens his eyes, though he doesn't move.
A massive black stallion is motionless beside him and the small, red one. It stares at him. If Sherlock could discern between his scent and the one of the capall, he'd be more frightened. But he can't. He and the capall both smell like fish and low tide and something left in the rocks to rot.

Redbeard's reins are tethered to the capall's bridle. Sherlock's never seen something so close. He's going to die. He knows it. Just knows it.

He closes his eyes. There's a puff of breath, and the huge body rocks forward, pulling a reluctant Redbeard with sheer force of strength.

-/-

The hands become arms, become powerful shoulders, become the man Sherlock knows is John Watson. This man helps him down from Redbeard when rain begins to fall, and Sherlock leans heavily into him, too exhausted to argue. Too exhausted to catalogue the safe feelings in the ivory box, locked in his mind.

John's flat is very small. He could roll over in bed and burn his face on the stove - there's that, and a sink, so Sherlock could hardly even call it a kitchenette. On the other side, he could slam his face against the dresser, or the tiny metal hearth that must serve as a heater beside it.

The ceilings are low, the bed is made, but piled with a myriad of color-clashing duvets too big for it. There is a narrow door just beside the sink, closed. Sherlock assumes it's the bathroom. It's dark.

The place is not meant for two people. It's barely meant for one.

Sherlock shivers.

John's hand is on him, pressing lightly at his lower back.

"It's... not much. Certainly not the Skarmouth Inn," John chuckles. Sherlock does not. Awkwardly, John clears his throat. "But, yours is on the other side of the island, and I figured--"

"No," Sherlock interrupts, moving forwards as John's hand presses him into the doorway. "It's. Fine. It's fine. I wouldn't..." He leads himself to a stop, voice dropping into something that is steadily quiet. He wouldn't want to go back to Mrs Hudson's. He knows she's safe. He knew there was a devil in the fog and that it was coming after him.

Him and Redbeard. The latter of which is shaking somewhere, alone in some stall in some stable. Sherlock can't remember which. He grows angry, which in turn only saddens him. His shoulders slump. What if he made a mistake? What if Mrs Hudson isn't alright after all?

"You wouldn't...?" John prompts. Sherlock shakes his head, wet curls flopping on his forehead and making him more upset at their condition. He does not want to answer. "Okay," John breathes out, "Okay. That's fine, Sherlock. Let's... can you walk in the doorway, please?"

He hadn't realized he'd been idling. He obeys, and then John is removing his hand from his back, shifting away from him and Sherlock wonders if his knees will actually give out. John crosses the room in barely two strides.

There are two oil-lamps on the stove that are not lit, and a few light bulbs carefully strung from the
low ceiling by wire. John pulls chords and the room brightens slightly. The small window over the sink shows a few paddocks around the back of the main stable, and the pane is now beaten with rain. Sherlock can hear it on the roof, pattering away. John crouches, and pulls open the bottom drawer of the dresser, which knocks against the bottom of the bedframe.

“Shut the door, could you?” He asks gently. Sherlock feels the wind as he latches the lock into place.

He leans against the door, and shuts his eyes, breathing deeply.

He imagines he can still smell the capall uisce. He begins to breathe quickly. He pictures the capall that chased him, and then he pictures Mary. Mary is a long face and narrow mouth in his head, with slick shoulders and a breath that stinks with the sweetness of dead things.

Why does she unnerve him more than the thing that was readily and actively trying to devour him?

“Here.”

When Sherlock opens his eyes, John’s there again, in front of him, and that alone is what brings his heart rate back to something that can be nearly called normal. John’s removing his own jacket from Sherlock’s shoulders. Stupid. Stupid.

And then he’s replacing it with a dry, big towel. Sherlock instinctively pulls it tight around his chest, ducking his chin. John seems to produce another from thin air. The ceiling rattles when thunder quakes.

Sherlock looks up.

“Don’t act like the room’s going to cave in. It's fairly sturdy.”

John reaches up, and Sherlock’s hair is tousled beneath the towel John throws over his head. Sherlock scoffs, and when John gives up his assault, glares.

John smiles, “Think you can change your clothes?”

“I don't have any.”

“I'll give you some of mine.”

“You're short.”

John rolls his eyes, “I have bigger clothes, you know. Baggy stuff on me’ll fit you. Maybe you won’t like it, because you're always wearing those tight shirts…”

Sherlock’s face heats, “My shirts are not tight.”

“Bet you also think that your trousers aren’t fitted.”

Sherlock humph! ’s and while John returns to his dresser after tossing the smaller towel onto his bed, Sherlock sticks the corner of the towel to remove the water in his ears. And then he swipes the edge along his face and forehead. He feels immeasurably better. He only wishes he knew how Redbeard is doing.

It can't be well. After all the work that went into training him to not be afraid of the capaill uisce! What a waste of time. It’s all been undone in a single cloudy evening.
“How did… Redbeard seem?” Sherlock ventures as John hands him a saggy old jumper. At least it looks warm, because the beige is certainly not pretty.

“You don’t remember?” John questions, laying a pair of short, loose… Sherlock’s face heats again. He’ll be wearing John’s pants, apparently, and it makes the center of his mouth quirk down. He doesn’t want to seem lecherous, however, so he purposefully quells his expression. “No, well. You were in a right state… Alright, well, he seemed spooked, and the rest of the Yard is, as well. It’s a big storm. We’ve had it coming for weeks.”

“You don’t think any capaill will come up?” Sherlock asks quietly. He's not afraid. He's not.

John eyes him. “Some will come up. It's a matter of where on the island they’ll come up.”

“Do they… often? Here?”

“No,” John pats the pants and jumper in Sherlock's arms, then reaches forward the snake the towel off of Sherlock’s shoulders. It leaves him cold. “Gladstone’s manure keeps them away.”

Sherlock scoffs. “Gladstone’s manure could keep anything away.”

“But with all this rain…” John puffs out a breath, and in the small space, it seems to heat the room, to send the light bulbs swinging and Sherlock's heart a-fluttering, like a swarm of locusts after a prospering field. “I put it down by the cliff edges to keep the capaill from coming up closest to the Yard. I want any horse that comes ashore to think they’re going to meet Gladstone. With the gales and the--”

“It's practically a monsoon,” Sherlock groans. John’s mouth turns into a wobbly upwards line. He casts his eyes down and the line becomes a shy smile.

Sherlock has never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Then, there is a flash of bright light outside the window, followed immediately by a shaking, quaking, monstrous roar of thunder, and Sherlock flinches with the severity of it. He shivers afterwards, because water is sliding its way down the back of his neck from his hair. He should've let John dry it more thoroughly.

John whistles, low. It’s reminiscent of Stamford’s, back in Hawkin’s Tavern, the night Sherlock signed up for the Races. He wonders who took up the habit from whom.

“Sherlock, just get changed, get into the bed.”

Get into John’s bed. Sherlock hesitates, and it must be obvious, because John’s mouth flattens out from the beautiful smile with a surprised cough. “I’m not trying to pull anything,” John manages, “I'm making sure you won't get hypothermia, influenza, a cold. You're covered in the ocean, and you're shaking like a leaf.”

“How gracious.”

“Change, you prick. I’ll see if I can get the heater going.”

-/-
Sherlock emerges from the cramped loo (a toilet too close to a countertop too close to a standing bathtub on rusted, iron-clawed brass feet) feeling a world better. He left his sopping clothes and the towel over the edge of the tub, hoping they’ll dry over the night.

The tiny flat is warm, and John is crouched by the minuscule fireplace. Sherlock blinks and watches the rounded metal vent that runs from the hearth to the ceiling as it pings and dings, the clunky metal warping with the newfound heat.

A fire is burning, squat logs tossed with care into the metal grate.

John turns to look at him when Sherlock shuts the bathroom door. The gaze makes Sherlock’s hands antsy, and he keeps them religiously still by his sides to not portray his anxiety. His legs feel too long, exposed, but at least his torso is covered. The baggy jumper bunches at his wrists, and the stretched neckline almost drapes off of one shoulder, and the pants are too tight around the back. He has never been more comfortable in clothes.

The fireplace snaps, and John stands, dusting off his hands like a carpenter. He smiles crookedly, Sherlock’s favorite kind of smile, “Better?”

Sherlock nods, resolutely calm. “I should, um,” Wonderful, he can already tell this is going to be wonderful, “I should thank you. For what you’re doing for me.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I wanted to do this. I wasn’t going to leave you on the beach. It’s nearly November, your feet were in the water, it was dark.”

“You were not obligated to help me. However, you did. And that is why I’m thanking you.”

John says, “It’s no trouble.”

“It’s a little trouble.”

“You’re impossible.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

How is it that Sherlock’s always pulling old lines, repeated lines, out of his mouth? John seems to catch the familiar sentence, because he smiles. And then he asks, “D’you want something to eat?” John gestures to the bed.

“I had something this morning.” Sherlock carefully sits on the edge of the mattress after retrieving the towel John used to attack his hair earlier - it’s a little difficult, sitting, what with the messy pile of folded duvets under his bum. They make for a very lumpy bed.

John laughs, and Sherlock’s shoulders droop, relaxed, as he pats the towel against the side of his hair, trying to see if he can get some of his curls back. It’s full of brine and ocean salt.

John says, “Liar. I was with you this morning. Some of it, anyway. Mike’s going to have a field day, when he figures that out.”

“That I’m a liar? Or that you were with me this morning?”

“Hm,” John hums, reaching above Sherlock’s head to open a cabinet next to the two-burner stove. “Well, he is a priest. So, both, I suppose.”
“He’s never attempted to get me to go to ceremony. Or make me repent.”

“Thank Epona for that, huh?” John removes a flat pan from the cabinets, shuts the wooden door with a click that is consumed by the wash of rain, beating at the roof and at the window. At least now the room is warming up, the skin on Sherlock’s bare legs wouldn’t stand the cold. “Gas burner,” John comments absently, putting the pan over such thing. Sherlock listens to the crack-crack-crack-boomf as the burner ignites. He listens to the rain; looks out the low window over the sink. He can barely see anything, and the stables are vaguely lit by a few bulbs, far away, where the sliding door is slightly cracked open. No stable hands are in sight.

“How long do you think this storm will last?”

Sherlock glances to John. John says, focused on rifling through another cabinet, “Just tonight and tomorrow.” John moves the shiny old kettle from the countertop and under the tap where he fills it, then cracks another burner grate and puts it overtop.

“Well enough. You’ve no idea how I’ve got to bend over backwards to get this place in order after a storm like this. Broken fence posts, spooked horses,” John slicks something he’s retrieved from the cabinet into the pan - it bubbles, “Those doors on the stables? Always coming off their tracks. We need to invest in a round-the-clock repairman.”

“Do it yourself,” Sherlock suggests, “There’s a saying about that. Yes? I’m sure that there is.”

John looks at him over his shoulder. It’s a weird way to look at someone, because Sherlock is sitting almost directly behind him, and John wouldn’t be able to turn around without bumping into him. Sherlock draws his legs up and lets his bare feet stay on the bed to get them out of John’s way. With the small flat smelling like whatever concoction John has on the stove and something masculine underlining it, Sherlock’s muscles unwind further from their tensed arcs.

“I’m a veterinarian,” John finally says. As if Sherlock didn’t already know. “Not a repairman.”

“Don’t you fix the fence posts?”

“That’s not the same as--”

“The same. It’s the same.”

John says, “There’s no getting through to you, is there?” Sherlock shakes his head, a negative. John laughs and Sherlock focuses on the storm and the thunder and the piebald a little less.

“I’ll cut you a deal. You promise eat something in the morning, and I won’t make you eat anything now.”

“That does not sound appealing.”

“That doesn’t sound appealing, either.” Actually, it does, he is liking what he has witnessed of John cooking so far. John has rolled his sleeves up to the elbow to cook. His forearms are exposed, golden tan and muscled. It’s very appealing. Very. Sherlock would like to imagine those gold arms caging him in. Against whatever surface. He’d be fine with anything.

John says, “It’s one or the other. I’ll pick one for you. I pick both.”
“I pick the morning.” Still, he must be difficult.

“Then you have to promise. You really do.” John opens another cupboard, removing a box of tea. From another, a teacup and saucer. And then an unfashionable mug.

Sherlock sighs, as if it were a very big, very exhausting thing to agree to. “Fine.”

“Aha, victory…” John mutters, and turns his attention to the steaming kettle. Sherlock allows a trembling smile to crawl over his face.

There is silence while John pours the tea, punctuated just by ‘sugar?’ and ‘two, please,’ and the offhand growl of thunder from outside.

John sits on the edge of the bed beside him, handing him the cup and saucer.

Sherlock's fingers dance in their twitching around the circumference of the small porcelain plate. It feels strange, sitting here in John’s tiny flat, in John’s pants and jumper. On his bed. Just half this situation would feel strange. He’s never really been in someone else’s place of living, save for Lestrade’s on the scant nights when his old habits would get the better of him, and much less someone’s bedroom. His whole heart is offbeat, pumping out an unusual rhythm throughout his chest and whole body.

He takes his time to observe the room. There is too much clutter and not enough organization. Mrs Hudson would be appalled. Sherlock identifies with it; his own room is much the same, only, skeletons take up quite a lot of space and they do not here. There are a number of equestrian health novels and textbooks stacked on a scraggly wooden chair with thin legs in the corner of the room near the heater. It gives the impression that both the chair and the books are meant for firewood, as they are so near the supply of logs in a basket.

It’s a treasure trove of things that are purely John. His watch is on the counter, stuck forever. Sherlock wonders if he could fix it for him. Possibly, maybe. Water damage can be fixed by substituting pieces inside, it the hands aren’t rusted still. The gears would not be the same, but it would tell the proper time, it would tick and work and function. It would get broken again, with this climate. Sherlock wouldn’t be opposed to fixing it indefinitely.

This is when the screaming starts.

It is sudden and shocking and instantly, the sky cracks with light for a flashing moment and then is dark again - thunder growls, nearing. But even the rumble cannot cover the piercing noise.

It’s a *capall*, and it is close.

Sherlock begins to shake. It starts in his fingertips, and it clatters the porcelain cup in its saucer.

The worst part is that John doesn’t notice. Sherlock doesn’t know why he would want John to see him, scared and weakened, but each time John’s witnessed Sherlock’s meltdowns, Sherlock has been left for the better - even after John told him to stay off the beaches. He had settled. He cannot settle now.

John is looking out the window. Abruptly, he stands, pushing his mug onto the slim countertop. His hands fumble for the loo’s door handle, snagging his jacket off of it, before his head jerks down, eyes frantically searching for something on the floor.

Shoes.
John’s getting ready to leave.

John looks down at Sherlock. Sherlock doesn’t like what he sees in those eyes. Not one bit.

“I have to go and help,” John says, leaning close, “I know what to do. They need me.”

Sherlock’s breath catches. A roll of thunder is lost to the sound of the screaming, muted by these thin walls.

Is he meant to stay in this cluttered, tiny room, listening to this horrible noise and the rain and the thunder by himself? Not knowing what’s going on, how John’s about to deal with this issue - lock up the horses and barricade all the grooms in the stables? What of the pastures, what if--

He pushes the saucer and cup onto the counter - his hands find John’s.

He clutches them, as if they were prayer beads and he a religious man. They’re warm. Solid. Real. He shouldn’t be doing this.

“Let me come with you.”

“Sherlock…” John’s eyes are sad.

His grip shifts in Sherlock’s hand, and for a heart-stopping moment, Sherlock is afraid, very, very afraid. More afraid than he’d been with the blonde mare, Mary, that first day, or Redbeard on the beach and the grey water horse, or Hope, cornering him on the edge of the earth, more afraid than an hour before, running away with the devil on his heels.

But John only threads his fingers through Sherlock’s. He brings up his other hand, encasing Sherlock’s, and pulls it up to his mouth. Sherlock has to bite back a sob as John’s lips press lightly over the knuckle of his thumb.

He’s not afraid. He’s not. But if he were looking at the water horse right this moment, he would know nothing but fear.

Imagining the piebald capall, Sherlock makes a clicking swallow.

“Please,” Sherlock manages, his voice only slightly louder than a rush of breath that comes with it, sweeping away the words like the winds on the beach. The don’t leave me is unsaid but the air hangs heavy and wet as if it were shouted.

It’s as if the screaming is the only sound in the world.

John looks at him for an impossibly long time. Many things are said, in that lonesome blue gaze. Things- things that Sherlock can't identify, that he can't chart, or grid, that he can ’t pin down--

“Okay,” John says, “Come with me.”

“Oh, John--” Sherlock begins, but John gently tugs on his hand with both of his. Sherlock takes the hint, and stands up.

John doesn't let go of his hand. He squeezes Sherlock’s, and then tightens the grip, the pads of his fingers pressing hard between Sherlock's knuckles. It's grounding. It keeps Sherlock here.

And then it pulls, and takes Sherlock outside.
John allows them both a moment to pull on their shoes, Sherlock’s sopping and John’s damp from when he had dragged Sherlock out of the surf.

Sherlock does not get the opportunity to pull on his trousers - his legs would get stuck in them, anyway. John pulls a towel from the bottom drawer of his dresser and hands it off to Sherlock. Sherlock wraps it around his waist and tucks the corner into the top so that it will stay.

In the dark, the stable seems closer than it did out the flat’s small window. No longer are there no shadows, every light in the Stockyard is on. Further down, past the large arrangement of stables and fences, Sherlock can see Skarmouth, far down the road. It is lit up and just a mound roofs on the lighter horizon, an eerie yellow glow in the sky betraying its placement.

John pulls him aside, crowding him back against the door.

Sherlock blinks - partially in an attempt to get the water out of his eyes and partially in surprise. They’re in a hurry, aren’t they?

The champion dissolves any doubts Sherlock had had thus far. John’s fingers slide down Sherlock’s woolen arm until they arrive at his hand. Sherlock cautiously pushes his fingers between John’s, then bends them until he is locked in place.

They step out from beneath the shingles that hang over the door, blocking the water. The rain is heavy and assaults them both immediately and without forgiveness. John’s jumper over Sherlock’s figure is instantly drenched, and though he is once more wet, Sherlock is glad it is with freshwater and not salt this time.

The screaming becomes louder. It has not paused, not once.

John leads them down the slippery wooden stairs and onto the grass. Wind tears at them, and Sherlock squints against it. Thunder growls distantly.

“If you’re away from me for a moment, I will know. And you will be very sorry,” John commands suddenly, capturing Sherlock’s attention. His eyes are a dark, cobalt blue. He glares at Sherlock from under his brow. In this moment, he is as unsettling as Mary. Sherlock tightens his grip on John’s hand. He is holding on so tightly that water has yet to slip between their wrists and wet their palms. John is grasping just as fiercely.

Sherlock responds, water filling his mouth and soaking him to the skin, “If I’m away from you for a moment, I’ll be dead.”

He can’t see the entirety of John’s mouth, but the rise in his cheeks suggest he’s smiling dangerously. It reminds Sherlock of that morning, with Hope and the chestnut water horse and the revolver.

“You’re a very clever man,” John says finally. He tugs on their hands, and they go.

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The stables are alive.

The horses all throwing themselves against the door of their stalls, or actively attempting to kick out their legs. There are panicked grunts and panting breaths - the stall that Sherlock knows belong to Beryl is filled with mournful wailing, a noise that no island pony could ever replicate, winding up the mare in the next stall over. Not one horse is quiet or calm or still.

“Second one to the end, and the last one, let’s go -- Klemp, get that out of here! You don't have time for that!” John interjects to shout at an exceptionally short man who is squeaking his way down the walk with a wheelbarrow. A thoroughbred whinnies.

The man yells, “We can’t get them quiet! You get one calmed and the others work it up again!”

“They're never going to relax with that *capall* out there!” John snaps back. His grip on Sherlock’s hand tightens, and Sherlock can sense how the situation is grating on him. He shoots a look to the short man. The unnamed man promptly drops the handles and sprints off to do some undetermined task.

There rises a high whinny, one that Sherlock had heard many times. Redbeard dislikes the weather. Sherlock is very familiar with this sound.

Though water is glazed over the cement and he runs the risk of slipping, Sherlock tears his hand out of John’s grasp without a second thought to rush to the second to last stall. `

There is a wild thing caged within it.

Redbeard’s leg kicks out, slamming against the panels of the stall. His head is thrown back and he whinnies highly again, panicked eyes jerking wildly, with his ears flicking around to pinpoint the source of his anxiety. He doesn’t have his saddle or reins in, not even a halter on, very unusual for him - it must be adding to his fear.

Sherlock can’t recall a time he was so spooked. He tries cooing to the iron-red horse, but the wail outside rises in pitch and the ponies somewhere down in the stable work themselves up into a frenzy again, dragging Redbeard with them. He kicks out again. Sherlock’s terrified he's going to hurt himself, pull a muscle, chip a hoof against a broken nail or snap an ankle.

He jerks at the hand on his shoulder.

“You can calm him down when I get that noise to stop. He won’t be able to stop with this racket!”

Sherlock looks over his shoulder. John said *when I get that noise to stop*. Does he plan on Sherlock helping? John’s eyes are black in the shadows and sharp swaths of light from the bulbs above. Over his shoulder, across the aisle, Sherlock can see more horses all beating themselves against the walls.

It wouldn't do any good to worry over a horse he can't calm. With a sorrowful glance to Redbeard, Sherlock shifts over a stall, the one that John is now opening. He remains near the door.

Inside, an enormous shape is rocking, wet fish eyes gleaming against the light in the stable. The iron locks make a faint squealing noise as John undoes them.

The massive black *capall* charges forwards and towards the aisle and in that moment Sherlock is certain that death can only be sudden.

John shoves his hand against Gladstone’s chest, slapping it once - the *capall* stops instantly, stepping backwards, ears pistoning back and forth, listening to each noise in the stable. Curiously,
Gladstone tilts his head towards Redbeard’s stall.

What’s the point of having Gladstone out?

Sherlock tries to ask John what his plan is, because he clearly has one, but he doesn’t get the chance - outside, a gun fires. The screaming does not stop. John clips a braided lead onto the ring of Gladstone’s uncharmed halter, twists the rope around his hand, and pulls. Gladstone throws his head back, yanking John up and off the ground for half a second, then drops it again, moving forwards as soon as John has his footing back. Gladstone is already wet. He has not yet been outside.

His white mane shivers against his hide, trembling for a moment, then it freezes, caught in the middle of a shivering transformation. It is sea-slick and glossy-wet, like kelp washed ashore. Gladstone opens his mouth and Sherlock can see something that almost resembles a tongue inside and at the same time does not, but John hits him on the nose, hard. Gladstone’s teeth snap shut.

John looks at him, one hand tracing patterns along Gladstone’s rapidly sharpening jawline.

He says, “I’ve seen them swim, and the change goes all the way to their bones.”

With one sentence, every experiment in Sherlock’s haphazardous bedroom has been proven or disproven based on the thesis.

He cannot spend the time thinking on this right now.

All he can hear is the throbbing scream, the piercing whinnies of the thoroughbreds in the stalls. The panicked, rhythmic clapping of powerful hooves on strong wood. “Stay with me,” John demands, and Sherlock creeps closer to his side. Inside of him, something rank and curling is rebelling at the thought of being so near a capall while another is shrieking somewhere in the dark.

The short man from before, Klemp, has returned, near the door. The rain is pounding on the roof and the outside walls. Gladstone’s breathing grows harsher. “Not out there,” Klemp says, “Moriarty’s out there.”

Why would this man need to tell John that? It’s a given that the owner of the Stockyard would protect his priceless horses, as mad as he is.

But John clenches his fists over the lead. “Keep out of my way. Keep everyone out of my way.” Klemp hauls open the door and Gladstone jerks at John’s arm, dragging him towards the rain. John drops the hand from his head, which had been tracing veins, in favor of clutching the lead. Brute force does nothing against Gladstone, he pulls John outside.

The rain hits Sherlock again, wetting him to the bone. The towel around his waist threatens to slip, and he tucks in the edge once more. How can he help? With the scream as loud as it is, he cannot hear the thoughts in his own head. John keeps walking, though, John must have a plan. Has something like this happened before? The comment about Gladstone’s manure - is this some tactic based around that theory? What good will this do now?

“John--”

The scream is getting closer. Sherlock presses as close to John as he dares - John responds, wonderfully, by sliding one of his arms around Sherlock’s waist, pulling him tighter against him. Sherlock thinks this is for his own benefit before he feels that John’s arm is shaking slightly, and his other is strained against the lead as Gladstone drags them further into the black, veins on the back of his hand prominent even in the low light.
The wind is soughing through the trees, the ones planted for decoration around the edges of the fencing, and shingles from all over the Stockyard are flung over the slippery wet grass. All over, there are squares of light, betraying the locations of buildings that can’t be picked out in the mist and the dark and the rain.

Ahead is Moriarty and an unidentified man. Moriarty raises a shotgun to something Sherlock can’t see, past a line of broken fences. The scream pounds in his head. John has to give up his hold on Sherlock in favor of pulling Gladstone into a stop. This is not easy, the water horse is ready to charge away, over cliffs, and into the sea.

John leans away from him, pushing his own face close to Gladstone’s. Rapt, Sherlock watches him wrench the water horse’s great head down, and there is a blur of flat teeth. Gladstone’s lips are wrinkled back far past the reach of his mouth. He is a monster.

No longer is there the calm horse that first captured Sherlock’s attention at the beaches and on the road by the mill. In its place is a beast that has crawled out of the darkest trenches of the oceans, complete with pearly teeth and drooling mouth.

Abrasively, John tugs on Gladstone’s ear, twisting it and dragging their faces closer together. With his other hand, he shoves the water horse’s mouth away from him. Clearly, John can see what Gladstone has become in the wake of the screaming.

John is humming to Gladstone. There are no words, it’s a small sound and lower than the scream, and Sherlock can only hear because of how close he is to the source.

Rain pounds, the towel becomes impossibly heavier.

Gladstone is standing stiffly, and has a glazed look in his eye and a tilt of his head and ears that means focus on a horse. When he’s not looking at Sherlock, he seems mild, but Sherlock is not fooled and Sherlock cannot trust him. Gladstone is looking into the rain and into the distance but has not forgotten about Sherlock, not for one second.

Moriarty fires his shotgun into the dark, but the scream does not falter. It rises in pitch - it cannot get any louder. Moriarty fires again. It’s out there.

Sherlock knows he saw John tuck his revolver beneath his jacket that he now wears, but John does not remove it. Gladstone rocks, the ear attuned to the sound of John’s humming flicks once. He shifts his weight from side to side, bothered by the noise.

It is this small action that makes him realize that John has a much more dangerous weapon in his hands than a gun.

Finally, Gladstone starts responding to John’s prompts. He starts with a cluck, something like the piebald, and then groans, deep in his throat. Sherlock can hear this noise in his feet, from the back of his heels to the front of his toes - the way a wave is sucked back into the water. His keening slowly rises in pitch, unbroken, and the horses in the stable, unheard until now, begin whinnying loudly. Men are shouting, but the higher Gladstone’s roar rises, the less perceptible the shouts and whinnies become.

Gladstone drops his jaw and his shrieking erupts - Sherlock has to cover his ears, but John does no such thing, continuing to whisper to Gladstone. He can see Moriarty turn to look at them. He can see Moriarty’s eyes, that brown fire. Sherlock meets his gaze, and looks back to John, holding tight to Gladstone’s mane and braiding in sevens and threes, then to Moriarty.
The Stockyard owner stares holes in John.

The two screams fade into one, Gladstone.

His cry rises to fill the space vacated by his contender, a clear territorial marker. *I am here. This is my land.* It’s no different than the wild capall’s.

Except this one, John stops.

It is slow-going, but Sherlock watches his mouth form Gladstone’s name, watches Gladstone’s withers shake in response, like a rattlesnake’s tail, noiseless. Soon, Gladstone tucks his chin, and the scream fades into a groaning, grunting sound. Next, it ceases entirely. Lowering his hands, Sherlock can feel his ears ringing. He shakes his head, but that does not help.

The night is quiet, save for the rain and the wind. It’s a very large improvement. Thunder growls passively, unaccompanied by lightning.

John meets Sherlock’s gaze. He’s panting, and looks a little dazed. Is he surprised that worked? Sherlock almost calls him amazing, but catches his tongue. Instead, he blinks away the water in his eyes and pushes his hair from its plastered place against his forehead.

Moriarty waves them over.

John holds the lead up high, to where it is clipped against the halter, and seizes Sherlock’s arm. “Not a word,” He murmurs, barely moving his lips, and he releases Sherlock. How are John’s eardrums still functioning? Perhaps he whispered because they aren’t.

They meet in the light near the stable. There are severe shadows cut over all their faces, thrown straight beneath them to the grass and cobbles.

There is a sharp glare exchanged between Moriarty and John. Sherlock blinks in the storm - this isn’t something new or angry, they’ve had an argument.

“Have you changed your mind?” Moriarty asks. His greasy gaze slides to Sherlock, taking in his appearance. Sherlock purposefully presses his side more into John’s wet shoulder, refusing to be embarrassed about being caught in a sopping towel and jumper, on property that is not his own, nor his companion’s. He belatedly hopes that John has more dry clothes he could borrow.

“No.”

Moriarty grins, “Neither have I. This changes nothing.” He directs his smile to Sherlock, looking at him up and down.

He hands off the shotgun to the yet unnamed man and stalks away towards the stables.

Moriarty’s words always unnerve him.

John watches him stride away, all confidence in that soaking wet suit. He says to Sherlock, without clarification, “I’m not sure if I believe him.”

Chapter End Notes
WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO school has begun..... it feels awful.
Beryl

Chapter Summary

Bleak, windy, with clouds pregnant with unfallen rain. The grey clouds that his mind had since created for him vanish, and are replaced by those of a storm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inside the stables, Beryl is loose from her stall. The iron lock has been kicked through - there are steaming burns made on the cooling wrap twining over her forelegs.

Her eyes are wide, catching all the light from the swinging bulbs. She sees one from her peripheral and snaps frantically at it, sea foam choking back in her throat. She screams and hacks and sneezes, dripping more foam from her seizing nostrils. She madly shakes her head like a wet dog, spewing snot and ocean at the stable hands that are trying to contain her, to herd her back to her prison cell.

All she wants to do is escape.

Gladstone is the barrier between her and the outside world. One stable hand outstretches his arm towards her as to grab her bell-strung halter, and she crushes her flat teeth down on it, tearing a divot away from his forearm and dropping the bleeding lump onto the cement. The man screams and Gladstone clucks.

Beryl’s face whips strangely over to them - her shoulders move and then the rest of her long neck swings to follow the motion, wide eyes focused entirely on the much larger water horse. Sherlock melts against John, who has become as sturdy as rock.

Beryl is mad, but not as mad as Mary. She realizes what she is in for, much before John has to intervene. She throws her head back, looking for all the world like she will snap out again, then ducks her face low to the ground. She’s growling. It sounds like she’s whispering.

Moriarty, along with his shotgun, disappear out the other end of the stable, and Klemp pulls the door closed behind him.

Instead of retreating to her own cage, she hushes closer, swaying wildly, making even Gladstone subtly even his weight back. Through John, raw power slips against ropey muscle, through Gladstone’s quivering wet hide and way down deep to Sherlock’s bones. Real power, something magic and wicked.

The grooms down the aisle watch, and John moves from Sherlock, subtly pulling Gladstone’s lead. The *capall uisce* tilts his great head down, heavily breathing out rot, hot from his screaming match.

Beryl turns her face towards the open doors beyond John and Sherlock, then the tiny window in Gladstone’s stall, the one closest to the stable doors, almost curiously. It’s a facade, all her attention is on John, because while her neck and head are turned, her eyes are clearly locked on the champion rider and his horse. It's a tactic that may have worked on sheep or fish, but not on people. It’s eerie to
see a clever predator up close like this, to not see a blank stare behind hungry eyes. With a wolf, it’s simple. It wants to eat you, wants you dead. Beryl wants to get her way, wants you to get out of it.

Shuddering, Beryl dips her head down again, strange long legs shivering as she steps closer - then quaking harder as she walks into Gladstone’s stall.

She is shorter than Gladstone, and has to stretch her neck to stick her muzzle out the tiny window in the wood. Her wide nostrils flare, becoming slitted up her face as she tastes the ocean brine carried here by the storm winds. Next door, Redbeard snuffles at the bedding in his temporary stall, unbothered.

John locks the stall, all three metal bolts.

Beryl eyes them as they leave. She’s drooling again. There are pearly teeth hidden in that sea foam. She turns her head, a profile to Sherlock, and her eyes are already settling back to high up on her face, staring him down. She’s stopped moving, and there is the ambiguous intensity of staring something straight in the eye, knowing it’s looking back at him. Invasive and vulnerable.

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They return to the flat and Sherlock unthinkingly pulls off the towel - heavy and dripping and with the pants clinging to him so much that he wishes he had not. John laughs at how they both look and when Sherlock pouts, he takes the towel and leans into the bathroom, tossing it into the bathtub.

Sherlock may almost believe in magic now. They are stuck in the early hours of the morning when John hands Sherlock a dry jumper, even smaller than the last, but Sherlock insists on not changing the pants. John hands him a towel after making a suspicious move that looked like he was going to wrap it around Sherlock’s waist for him.

“You did promise me you would eat something,” John reminds him when the first crest of weak autumn sunlight is shading through the kitchen’s window. The feeble light catches on the suspended water. It’s still raining, but the drops are less massive and more like a fine mist coming down from the clouds in sheets. There isn’t any thunder.

John sets up the burner on the stove with the kettle and a pan, slopping some buttery substance (it actually is just butter, but Sherlock didn’t quite catch it, because he was listening to John say that he was going to get changed, and Sherlock’s mind was reasonably sidetracked) into the heating pan, and then disappearing into the loo after handing Sherlock a spatula and giving him the instruction of just let it brown, okay? Then we’ll have a proper fry-up.

Several long minutes went by.

At some point, the kettle started screaming, and John reappeared.

Sherlock scowls down at the frying pan. The cooking utensil is in his hand, and the splotch of butter bubbles in the pan, slowly blackening. He stares at it, frowning.

John sees the look. He grins that stupid grin of his. The one. That one. The one that says he knows that Sherlock’s mucked up.
“What's wrong?” He asks, infuriatingly.

“I…” Sherlock begins. He clears his throat, deciding to not be embarrassed about this, “I don't know how to brown butter.”

John *laughs at him*. The nerve.

“You can't-- you can’t *cook*?” The champion racer laughs.

“I didn't say that!” Sherlock leaps to his own defense, because God knows no one else will! He brandishes the rubber spatula at John, like a dagger. “I said *I couldn't brown butter.*”

“The- the butter is browning! Right now! That's- that's why it's turning brown? Well, uh--” John breaks off. Sherlock looks at the pan, “Well, black, okay, but still. What an excellent cook you are.”

Through his anguish, Sherlock scrutinizes the black butter.

John pushes the pan off the hot burner, and then clicks that off. He seems to have given up on the notion of a *proper fry-up*. Good, Sherlock wasn’t… hungry, anyways.

“Eight days until the Races,” John abruptly says, back to Sherlock as he pours the hot water into two teacups, “How are we feeling about that?”

Sherlock is sure John is feeling elated at having the Races so close. Then, the biggest season for the Stockyard will have passed, and John can go back to handling the horses, not the people. But that was only half the question. The flat smells like burnt butter, and wet wood. John hands him a cup of tea, and as he spies the contents of the cupboard while John puts the box of tea in its place again, he's pleased to see that John doesn't drink coffee.

“Fine,” Sherlock answers. And it’s true - he does feel fine. Terrified, and nervous, thrilled and excited and enthralled by all the traditions, goings-on, and happenings, but. Fine. So much hinges on him racing, there is no logical reason to not be fine. Not being *fine* would make things that much harder.

Sherlock swirls a spoon around in his tea, purposefully looking away. “You didn't limp last night. You always limp.” John stiffens, and Sherlock goes on, “I told you it was psychosomatic. Even now, you aren't in pain while you walk, are you?”

Silence.

John laughs, “No - no, I’m not.”

Sherlock smiles, and hides the expression in his teacup. For having such a messy, cluttered flat, John has some very nicely painted cups - and Sherlock rarely considers any cup but Mrs Hudson’s to be well-decorated.

John has his face focused on the floor, endearing extra chin making an appearance momentarily, before he looks up again. Sherlock’s fingers dance around the rim of the saucer again. “Do you…” John’s left hand flexes, and Sherlock’s heart leaps, “That, is, I mean, *would* you--”

A rapping at the door.

John frowns.

No one should be bothering him this early, then?
It’s Klemp, the man from last night, with a mixture of sweat and drizzled rainwater over his brow - panting from a run and leaning on the flat’s door frame, unbothered by Sherlock’s presence, sat on John’s bed. “Watson,” He heaves, “We’re in need of vet.”

-/-

Beryl is keening high, scared and in pain. Her spine is sloped and tilted down, highest at her shoulders and lowest at her hindquarters, unable to gain support or purchase. Her back legs are splayed out, one light inner thigh turning black with free-running blood. She tries to shift a hoof and stand up straight when her door is opened, but the leg crumples and she fixes it back against the wood with a loud, clipped scream.

She’s lame.

Sherlock can see her pulse, thumping wildly under her skin just beneath her jawbone. It patters so severely and quickly that he’s momentarily afraid it’s not a pulse, and rather some parasitic organism that is about to burst out from her flesh. But it’s just a pulse, and it doesn’t slow.

She clucks, somewhere panicked and sharp in her throat, then a long, staccato grunt punctuated by heaving breaths out a pale, open mouth. Teeth are visible, as well as beach-white gums. There isn’t any trace of the foam from last night, she is displaying new symptoms entirely.

Leeching away from John for but a moment, Sherlock slips his arms through the bars of the next stall over, where Redbeard is. The horse pushes his dark grey nose into Sherlock's hands, scenting him and where he's been. Other than being alarmed at the screaming fit that Beryl's been throwing, there's no harm done to him. Still, Sherlock fixes his forelock where it's knotted up by his ears, and then removes his arms. Don't be clingy. You're not scared. Redbeard is merely apprehensive, and a little alarmed at the smell of oily blood.

“What is all of this?” Someone trills from across the cement. John inhales harshly, ragged. Sherlock can hear the anger in just the one breath.

Moriarty is there, suddenly, looking disdainfully into the stall and affixing leather gardening gloves onto his hand. He doesn’t seem surprised, and his eyes drop to the collected pool of blood on the messy lining of poor Beryl’s stall. So much has been shed that it no longer soaks into the sand, she’s pitifully standing in her own blood, and her entire left hind leg is red. Her hair has lost its luster, and her eyes are bloodshot.

Sherlock is too busy staring at the horrific scene in Beryl's stall that he does not acknowledge Moriarty until he speaks again.

“Find Klemp a new mount for the Races,” He demands of John. Then, “Put that horse out of its misery.” Moriarty stares at Sherlock’s profile, who potently ignores him until the man has turned away. He addresses Sherlock without looking at him, as if he’s a higher power, “And you, well, I’ll see you later.” Then he’s down the aisle of the stables, accompanied by his ever-present stable hands.

A vile little man.

Sherlock and John are alone.

Outside, the wind rushes against the panels of the barns and fences.
Beryl sticks her face against the stall door, scraping her flat teeth on the metal bars.

“You won’t find Klemp a new horse, it’s against the rules,” Sherlock says. Though there are plenty more horses in the Yard, many fit for riding, it is an unarguable rule (wrong, they could argue anything, but Sherlock has no heart for that).

John watches Beryl knock her nose softly against Gladstone’s little window. She’s lifting her muzzle just enough to raise it above the pane and scent the weak winds coming from the ocean, her home.

John utters his first words since they arrived in the stable.

“Your whole racing is against the rules.”

“Not explicitly. It’s explicit that you cannot change your horse after the rider’s parade.” Perhaps this argument will take John’s mind off of Beryl’s condition. John swallows, adam’s apple bobbing, and Sherlock realizes that it has not done that at all. He might’ve even added more stress to John’s stockpile. He can’t do anything right.

Put that horse out of its misery. To Moriarty, the horses are not alive. They are things, objects to be owned. Sherlock turns his head to the other stalls, glancing around at the lights and the pieces of hay discarded over the cement aisle. There is reason to suspect that Moriarty believes even people to be objects.

They lead Beryl down to the ocean.

John fears she may never walk again. But they manage it. Through the aisle, the other horses are quiet, so used to Beryl’s screams that they seem perplexed in the near-absence of it. The dun capall mare only whines fitfully, a whine that sharpens to a pitched screech when she steps wrong off the cement aisle and onto the ground outside the stable.

The thoroughbreds already in the pasture shy as far from her as they can, pressed close to the fence. One adolescent colt looks like he is considering jumping over it.

Sherlock’s shoes are soaked through with the rain left in the grazing sweet grass.

Beryl doesn’t even have enough strength in her fatally injured leg to fully hold her hind hoof up from the ground, the muscle has been severed and cannot contract - the toe drags in the grass. Blood spews from the indentation under her belly. It’s dripping from her mouth with saltwater, though Sherlock can’t be certain if this and the wound entirely related - capaill uisce have funny ways of messing with minds, the blood may not be in her mouth at all, it may be a mere illusion.

Sherlock isn’t sure whether or not she’ll make it down the slopes to the beach. He waits for her to break away all throughout the arduous walk. As much as he wants to be of support, though he doesn’t know how, he trails behind John and Beryl. Wouldn’t want to distract John.

(He must stay away from those chipping yellow teeth.)

The closer they come to the cliffs, where she can feel the wind and see the expanding sky but not yet the steep drop of the sea, she shrieks, long and loud.

Just last night, Sherlock was so very afraid of her. Although she is a carnivorous animal, with the ability to crush his throat in one swing of her snake’s neck, Sherlock feels pity - sympathy, almost. Such a great animal, strong and powerful and smooth, reduced to tremors and bone and shivers with one cut slice of a muscle.
Beryl trips and wheezes down the slopes, breathing very heavily as the ocean comes into sight. She becomes snappish, then, clacking her teeth lethargically at John’s head - John only slaps her away, getting a smear of greenish blood and the faint imprint of a bell from her halter on his palm.

As they hit the flattened sand and gravel, a group of sandpipers take flight as a single unit, landing down the shore. The sun shines wearily from behind the grey clouds.

John whispers to her.

Watching from several paces away as John reaches to unclip her halter, to free her from the iron and the bells and the charms that ground her and keep her tied to the earth and the island, Sherlock lets the seafaring wind lift his dampened hair from his face and shake it around over his head. The sound of the clip is heard, and with his eyes never leaving Beryl, John backs away.

Again, she clacks her frightening teeth at John, her keeper for all this time. Apparently, the sea is too much of a distraction for her to be malcontent for very long, as, with several very slow, quaking steps, she is reunited with her ocean.

John returns to Sherlock, watching from mere meters away. Sherlock digs the toe of his boot into the sand anxiously. John sees right through this, and offers his arm, which Sherlock takes immediately. John’s jacket is salt-crusted, old, and extremely comforting under Sherlock's palms. Though taller, Sherlock winds his hands around John’s upper arm, and leans into him.

Beryl has waded past the rocks and the aquamarine tidepools that are common on this end of the island’s shore. She is up to her ankles in the water when her legs begin to shake, all of them, not with the weight displaced with her injury, but with change.

Her ankles crack and shift, bones breaking to reshape themselves, her hide turns with the light, becoming nearly iridescent as a raven’s wing mid-flight, and it shudders, like there’s a shivering carpet moving itself around over Beryl’s weakened muscles and tissues. It is reminiscent of a fish’s scales shimmering in underwater sunlight.

Her neck arches lower, flattening and streamlining itself--

And it stops. She has grown long slits by the back of her ears, like the piebald, and like Gladstone, but they are not where they should be. Her eyes are wildly tacking back and forth, to the cliffs, and to Sherlock and John, and to the great expanse of the sea - she's confused and hurting. Terns peep in alarm up in the nests, and Beryl throws her head back, screaming loudly to her mother, her sister, her lover.

The capall struggles forward, a stray wave swiping at the sand under her feet and making her sink lower, her ribs audibly cracking. She's stuck in the middle of a shivering transformation. She still looks like a horse, and she still looks like she's going to fall. Against the sky, the lines of her body look opaque, flickering in and out of view, like faltering notes of an unfinished sea shanty.

The water offshore changes.

Near the sand, the waves have been sucked back, leaving Beryl on land again, and drawing her deeper, closer, to get back into the brine. She hisses shortly, eel-like.

Clutching John’s shoulder very tightly, Sherlock watches, rapt. Nothing makes sense, and nothing else matters in this moment.

The water level rises directly around the capall mare, sloshing around Beryl’s knees and tugging her into the ocean.
John murmurs, at the risk of drawing attention back to them, “It’s what happened with the piebald last night.”

‘It was like the sea was reaching for that capall,’ comes a voice in Sherlock’s mind, clear as day and dressed in tweed, ‘I saw it, with the moonlight shining all through her.’

Up to her neck, Sherlock finally catches a glimpse of the gills by her ears sliding further down, and they are growing. Her ears are pinned back, Sherlock sees one last red of the bleak sun through Beryl’s pinned brown ears, before she is gone forever, and her eyes are focused on the sides of her face when she disappears.

Beryl slides beneath throwing waves. She will never walk on land again.

The wind throws salty water and sand at Sherlock's face, pinkening his cheeks. The striped sandpipers return in Beryl's wake, somewhere down the tract of sand, pecking at the receding waterline.

Above, the gulls are squawking harshly to one another.

“I don’t know what it is about you.”

Sherlock stiffens.

John knows it’s his fault. Sherlock didn’t even know it was, but-- if John sounds so melancholy, it must’ve been his fault. Perhaps he knocked a latch loose on Beryl’s stall as he passed her last night, and she ambled out into the aisle and was cut. But that makes no sense. He opens his mouth to apologize, beg for forgiveness, maybe cry, but John bests him.

“I killed one of them for you.”

Sherlock closes his mouth.

John risks a glance at him, then turns towards the water again. Perhaps, he’s watching for Beryl, looking to see if she’ll reemerge somewhere offshore. “I love them. They’re-- horrible, they’re horrible, and scary, and--” John’s voice breaks, “--beautiful, and I didn’t know you. I love them. On the beach. When you were with Redbeard, standing in the water and that horse came out of nowhere. I had nightshade, I always have it on the beaches. I didn’t even hesitate. I don’t know why.”

Sherlock knows why he went back into the surf to pull John from the water. It’s… disheartening to think John doesn’t know the motivations behind his own actions. Sherlock would like to know, see if their interests aligned. For all the prickliness of a lionfish that John exudes, he is very easy to grow accustomed to. Sherlock wouldn’t like to be excommunicated from him now, later, ever.

The wind lifts John’s hair from his brow, a quivering line against the rest of his serious profile. John toes the sand, “It felt like a regular holiday by the sea when I first sat here.” His left hand curls against his thigh, like he was thinking of saying a few words, but then thought better of it.

At the mention of sitting, Sherlock wonders if John is about to, because he looks fairly sick. Perhaps it’s more of a sickness of the heart, come this time.

“My sister died years before I ever decided to come.” Sherlock knows this. Why is John telling him this? “Her... live-in left her. It was the drinking that drove her off. My father had the same habit in his days. When Harry, Harriet, got worse, she just... stopped. My sister wasn't in her anymore.”
John is trying to open up to him. Sherlock swallows. In the back of his nose, he can still smell burning butter. He sniffs against the body-like press of the cold all around him, and subsequently draws attention back to himself. John falls silent.

Sherlock fills in the gap.

“This wasn't something she could've done to herself. It’s the inside of her thigh,” Sherlock says, shifting nearer to John. “She was in Gladstone’s stall.” The subtext of the sentence is something Sherlock hopes that John picks up. A moment passes and Sherlock concludes that John is just bad at reading into things. “Someone mistook her for Gladstone. In the dark, they could look the same.” To someone incredibly moronic.

This is not something that a horse could’ve done to herself, not on the sharpest nail sticking from the wooden walls - she’s wounded across the inside of her leg, a muscle cleanly sliced apart. This is sabotage. Butchery. And now, as they are scaling the rocky slopes back up to the tops of the cliffs, Sherlock can spot congealing puddles and drips of brackish blood.

Not even the scavenger crabs dare touch it. It’s almost as if it were poison.

John looks at him. His eyes are cobalt again, his tanned face reflecting the yellow of the sand below the cliffs and on the slopes.

Elaborating with a sigh, Sherlock goes on, “Someone doesn't want you in the Races this year.”

“No one ever wants me in the Races because I win them.” The statement is very confident, said with an upward twist of John’s lips. Sherlock has to ignore and hide the way the pride makes him quiver.

“But especially this year,” Sherlock rumbles. Why would that be? What is different about this year than the last hundreds of years? Or, five, if they are going off of how long John has been a champion racer. Sabotage is common. But the Stockyard doesn't let just anyone on their property. Yet, Sherlock is here, and briefly, it occurs to him that John may often bring strains of riffraff home. To himself, Sherlock mutters, “What’s different about this year?”

John laughs without humor, and Sherlock crinkles his nose.

“Oh, come on, really-- really? What’s different?” John is smiling again, but now it looks real. “It’s your first year.”

“It’s plenty of people’s first year,” Says Sherlock. “Who would notice me?”

“It’s the first year an island horse is racing.” A pause, Sherlock scoffs. John answers, “Moriarty’s taken an interest in you,” John finally says.

“He would take an interest in anyone who rode an island horse in the Races.”

“Nope. He thinks you’re clever,” John insists as they pass a few large branches that have been knocked down in the storm.

Sherlock preens while they enter the stables, “I am clever.”

The sand of Gladstone’s stall is fresh and overturned, and the signs of the stable hands who are responsible are all over the stable, turning over muck and grime in the ordinary horses’ stalls. Any blood and manure that were present are now gone.
“You were right, what you said. About me not owning Gladstone. I don’t. But I don’t think Moriarty really does, either, for as much as it may say so on paper. He’s always belonged to the ocean.” John nods to Gladstone’s empty stall, where Beryl had spent her last night on land, “They all do.”

Sherlock purses his lips. “Breakfast?” Real breakfast, this time, where they actually eat something. He did promise John, after all.

John’s teeth shine through his grin, “Starving.”

-/-

Though Sherlock will never tell Molly, he adores the smell of the bakery, especially in the morning. Light is filling the seating room from the entire front wall of display windows, and because of the color the bakery is painted, it casts a lightly pink aura over all the pastries behind the glass. There’s something baking in the back room, November cakes like the one Sherlock just finished, is his guess, but it fills the entire front room, overflowing out the door and onto the streets, tantalizing newcomers into walking inside. Several tourists and a few less regulars are coming and going. They’re all irrelevant.

John, John Watson, born on the mainland and five-year champion of the Scorpio Races, sits across from Sherlock, on one of the small tables. Never mind that they are wasting precious training time, and that Redbeard and Gladstone are both outside (the latter with a piece of John’s shirt tied around his nose - not a charm, something to ground him), because they’re busy.

They talk of the Races, strategies that John has used in the past, and training exercises. John complains about the beef hearts that he spoils Gladstone with, and even advises Sherlock on what to do with Redbeard to tone him up before the first of November. All the while, John continuously throws glances outside, as if to check up on Gladstone. He loves him, after all, but he doesn’t trust him. After an unexpected laugh from John when Sherlock snidely remarks upon the nutritional content of the island grass, a comfortable quiet falls.

Abruptly, John coughs and leans back in the chair, seemingly tucking his undershirt into the waistband of his trousers, casting his gaze out the window to watch Redbeard snuffle at the feet of Gladstone. He can hardly reach.

“That’s what they say, though.”

“What?”

“About the ocean.”

“We weren’t talking about the ocean.”

“Well, we should be. You’ve grown up here, you know the folklore,” John leans forwards again, hands clasped together and elbows on the surface of the table. Offset but not uninterested, Sherlock remains as he is, his own arms already set on the table. “The ocean is love, and the capaill are those that have been consumed by it.”

Why is John talking about love after having been staring at Sherlock in silence for a long several
moments? He flushes. Sherlock loses himself in picking at the packaging of his November cake, his bravery abandoning him, and looking away. “They are sea creatures, symbolism doesn’t exist in reality. Humans are the ones that attach meaning to meaningless things.” After the conclusion of his reply, Sherlock ticks his eyes back up to watch John’s reaction.

John is fixing his waistcoat, tucking his thumbs into the edges (nervous tick?), and averting his eyes. “Of course, I wasn’t saying… Yes, well. Of course, I wasn't saying anything.”

An island man in a red hat with red smudges of lipstick on the corner of his mouth comes through the bakery, and leaves a few moments later with a box of tarts. The lipstick isn't his - not because he's been kissed and it’s rubbed off, but because he puts it on himself. Mouth quirking, Sherlock identifies this habit.

The man's exit, however, seems to have broken the small spell that had been cast over the pair of them. No longer are they alone in the world anymore. People walking by the bakery have come back into focus for Sherlock. And duty calls to John.

With a weary gaze, he says, “I should be getting back.”

*You should be staying.*

Sherlock nods. He smiles, looking down at the cake packaging for nothing else to do. Somewhere by the counter, he hears Molly loudly mixing a bowl of pastry mix. She wants them to remember that she’s there - *yes, of course, Molly, nothing would ever happen, anyways. I hear you.*

“You should be, yes.” Nothing more.

John smiles back at him. He stands, brushing crumbs off his lap. “Meet me tomorrow. The cliffs by the racing beach. And do me a favor,” John readjusts his jacket one more time, “Come this time.”

Sherlock laughs. He does still feel bad about that incident.

The bell above the door tinkles much too joyfully as John leaves the shop. That bell has no reason to sound so nice when John is leaving. His back looks so nice in that jacket, and yes, it's the only jacket Sherlock has really seen him wear, salt-hardened and usual, but it just looks so nice, especially when he pats Redbeard kindly before mounting Gladstone's enormous figure. Water horses are seldom welcome in the part of Skarmouth where people are, but John handles the bits in Gladstone's mouth expertly, and Sherlock assumes that he is off to the racing beaches, or the cliffs where they met formally for the first time.

Sherlock folds his hands under his chin, occupying himself with watching the common islanders and the tourists walk by on the cobblestone outside the shops. There is no need to deduce anyone, he’s so engaged with thinking of John.

For. Whatever reason. That could be.

So, Molly’s voice comes out of nowhere.

“Father Stamford’s the only reason I hired you.”

Sherlock frowns, “What?” He turns his face to regard her.

“When you asked me about the mill, to earn money for the Races,” Molly clarifies, and with a gloved hand, she gently taps the plant with hanging purple flowers on her counter. It’s such a familiar moment, she must’ve been doing it all morning. Sherlock doesn’t pay attention to it. “I said
yes, I know, but before you came back the next morning, Stamford came in. He was chatting on and on about you racing, and then onto Watson.”

Sherlock listens raptly now. “What was he talking about?”

“Oh, I can hardly remember.”

“You must.”

Molly waves her gloved hand, “Whenever someone talks of the Races, of course Watson’s going to be mentioned.”

“Molly…”

“I was having second thoughts about the mill thing,” Molly admits, barely looking at him, “I didn't want to enable you - I don't. I don't like you racing. Father Stamford was going on about Watson’s fall last year, trampled by one of the Yard’s horses.”

Sherlock frowns. He dislikes having this conversation from two opposite ends of a room, more so since people are coming and going in the middle of it. He stands and wanders over to Molly. “He works for the Yard. They wouldn't trample him.”

“He didn’t say it was on purpose,” Molly answers, her small mouth tweaking down as she fiddles with the display case.

She’s not saying something that she wants to. “No, he didn’t. That’s what you believe.”

“Watson was so far ahead, Sherlock!” She suddenly gushes, leaning far over the counter to talk to him even though she doesn’t need to. Like all the air has been punched from her chest, she goes on, words tripping over one another, “There’s no way those Yard riders wouldn’t have seen him, he had practically finished by the time the rest of them got their eyes off the ocean. The horses are hard to control, I know-- we all know they are, but it doesn’t explain it, Watson was off his horse, that next capall wasn’t trying to bite him, it just ran him over.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes. “I’m going to sit for a bit,” He says quickly, and vaults the low door between the seats in the bakery and the back, where his hiding place is.

Hearing Molly sigh, he pushes past the swinging door, half-heartedly glancing around for Archie. The apprentice isn’t present.

There can’t be anything suspicious about John’s injuries. Why would anyone be angry after John had already won the Races?

Sherlock thinks about Beryl, and is suddenly awash in doubts.

Wishing desperately he attended last year’s Races, he tries to recreate the finish line in his mind.

Closing his eyes, Sherlock sits back on a tall stool, and leans against the peeling wallpaper.

Filtered out are the delightful scents and sounds of the bakery. The whoosh of the wind outside and chatter of customers on the other side of the swinging door disappear. The feeling of the stool under his bum is gone. He stands on rocky soil, the breeze tugging his hair astray and out of neat curls. One circle, and the scene is transformed.

He can see the beach, birds and soft sand and all. It’s a calm day, and his mind supplies the grey
clouds that are ever-present over Thisby. Weakly, the sun beams out from behind them, giving the beach the hazy atmosphere that always surrounds it.

Accurate, but not what he wants. Sherlock steps over a fiddler crab darting into its hiding place, and closes his eyes again.

Now he replaces it all with the scene from when he was a child, from when Mycroft took him to the Races. He isn't perched on the cliffs this time with his brother, but up to his waist in the water, and alone, watching, like the sailboats watch the wrecking stones by the shore. He is too close to the sand for the water to logically be this high, but for now, he makes no question of it.

Water horses are griping loudly and snapping at their neighbors’ hindquarters. Riders are pulling up their ankles to keep them from getting bitten before the Races even begin.

A mantra repeats itself in Sherlock’s mind.

*Five minutes, eighteen furlongs, and this will all be over.*

The scenery switches to the devastating madness of the Races, and the weather does, as well, as Sherlock recalls the race reports from that day, almost exactly a year ago, while the newspaper clipping of the report passes over his head, folding itself into an origami gull, and then sailing away on the strengthening wind. Bleak, windy, with clouds pregnant with unfallen rain. The grey clouds that his mind had since created for him vanish, and are replaced by those of storm.

Around Sherlock’s hips, the ocean sloshes chaotically. The golden azure has changed to a shockingly dark teal, tinged heavily with foam.

John appears, strapping and proud and with his shoulders thrown back, and the water level rises.

Chapter End Notes

**HEY GUYS. LONG TIME NO SEA.** can't believe I predicted gay water. Anyways season 4 was mostly bad so I'm going to ignore it
Dredging Feet

Chapter Summary

Sherlock shivers in the water.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Around Sherlock’s hips, the ocean sloshes chaotically. The golden azure has changed to a shockingly dark teal, tinged heavily with legions of foam.

John appears, strapping and proud and with his shoulders thrown back, and the water level rises.

To Sherlock’s midriff, it almost impedes his ability to watch.

The starting line is not so much a line as it is a cluster of strong necks and high-riders. Gladstone is very tall, more than any other capall, and he strides like a champion. Long flexing legs, raised head, peering out at the competition like a fish through aquarium glass. John is mirroring this.

He gazes out to the ocean, like a competitor will rise from the wild sea, his hair lifting away from his face and light blue eyes shaded with color against the white-chalk background. He doesn’t see Sherlock, even though it would be impossible to miss a man standing just offshore on the first of November. John’s only a length away from where the waves are rippling the sand hard and firm, the only man daring to be so close to the sea.

The water shouldn't be this high. John's eyes sweep over him again, never focusing, and it rises imperceptibly higher.

A water horse on the beach snaps at the adjacent rider, flicking back hot ears and ocean brine. For a split second, as Sherlock looks up to the cliffsides, watching people’s hats blow off in the strong wind, he can see himself, very small and frizzy-haired, high up on the edges among the yellow of raincoats and the mud-green of traditional Thisby scarves and coats. He shakes his head. No. These are not those Races. Mycroft and his own younger self disappear.

‘The weather was anything but fair - Islanders and tourists alike expected rain to fall during the 1961 very-anticipated Races…’

Above him, the stormclouds are gathering and darkening. In the distance, thunder rumbles, very much like last night in John’s flat. On the wind, he can smell pine from the island and fish from the quay by Skarmouth. A dark shape moves in the water by the shore. Must be shading from the clouds overhead.

A gull cries at him. Sherlock looks up, and sees the headline on the underside of its paper belly outlined against the dark grey sky --

‘CHAMPION JOCKEY THROWN AT RACES' END!’
Scoffing to himself, Sherlock casts his eyes away. What else had been in those reports? Something else to complete the scene before the Races commence? The weather, the ocean, John, the riders. Yes, that - who were the other racers? A white horse - that's all the gulls say to him. Nothing in his mind supplies any names, no saddle colors that were involved in the accident.

A gun fires, drawing Sherlock back to the beach, and the horses at the starting line leap into the air, throwing sand and scattering - there are tight blurs of colors as the racers speed along the beach, hot gasps from the horses and the crowd. All ears are pinned, all hooves are pounding, all tails are whipping fast against hind legs. On the other side of the island, he knows the tide is hugging the cliffs closely, bursting to reclaim the horses.

The water surges against Sherlock’s abdomen, and he holds up his arms to avoid getting the sleeves of his coat wet as if it matters. The origami gulls have gathered in number, all crying out the famed headlines, fluttering like the paper they are in the wind.

For the first minute of the Races, Sherlock loses sight of John, and is plagued with increasing anxiety. Although these events have already transpired, and he knows John lives, even wins these Races, he’s trying to move closer to the island.

Only to find that his feet have sunk into the sand.

He’s trapped in place. Perhaps the high waves have made the sand too firm around his ankles and he fell victim to it in his idle state, but something tells him that his mind has made it so he cannot move.

The underwater rocks hug his ankles and the clumps of seaweed kiss his shoes.

A panic closes Sherlock’s throat. The ambience of the scene before him clogs his nose and mouth, the miasmic feel of heavy clouds and of the churning black water. All of it is chilling, and the horses pounding down the sand are now haunting instead of informative.

A gull flies ahead, detailing a rider’s gorey end. He can see closely, now, more so than if he had been on the cliffs, watching, and more than he should be able to by standing offshore. A creamy stallion tacked in blue flower petals screams a high, surprised shriek -- his rider slaps him and the horse presses onward. An abrupt second later, the same stallion receives another slap, but this time, the rider’s hand hits too close to long teeth, and with a snap of the stallion’s neck, his fingers are gone.

Suddenly, there is a black blur against the reds, duns, whites, and greys, its legs moving faster, flank shifting quicker than the other horses. With a lump of a rider on his back, Gladstone is a pulsing heart, beating his way between other squabbling horses and hot teeth. His neck isn't tucked like that of a practiced island pony, but stretched out far ahead like a striking cobra, head jerking up and down as he flies at a full gallop.

Flowing like water, the giant capaill sweep down the tract of sand, screaming to each other. From Sherlock’s perspective, he can see the glints of sharp weapons in racer’s hands. Another gull swiftly darts just over Sherlock’s head, and allows him to catch a glance of the deaths from these Races - nine, out of thirty-four riders.

A capall the color of wet boulders throws its head back and hits the shoulder of its rider -- just as John passes it. The capall shrieks and leaps to following John, tail snapping, all open mouth and pale gums, but it’s too slow and falls too far behind, and gets caught up in a fight with the horse that attempts to drag the injured rider off its back.
Incredibly, Gladstone perseveres, John is keeping him focused. The night-black water horse tears ahead through a gap between two bay mares who seem to be trotting in comparison.

In doing this, John has dragged himself very close to the reaching waterline, and the effects are written all over Gladstone’s figure. Where once his hooves slapped down without flinching, his legs begin to tremble slightly, and he leans closer to the ocean than he does the cliffs. He’s so far ahead that it doesn’t matter, but the danger of hitting the water and drowning John is present. Was present.

Sherlock is suddenly by the finish line, feet stuck in the sand again, a taunt strip of ribbon drawn from the cliffs to a pole sticking up in the shallows. Barreling forwards is Gladstone. John is tucked low behind the serpentine neck to minimize resistance to the air. There are gathered clumps of mane in his hand, wound neatly into charming braids. John’s lips are moving, asking Gladstone for more and more, even as all the other racers are far, far behind. The Races aren’t a close win for John at all.

Gladstone’s great chest breaks the ribbon, and John’s joyous fist is in the air, pumping out a victory as onlookers shout and clap on the cliffs. Gladstone takes another quarter of a furlong to slow down - John’s hand glides over Gladstone’s white forelock, and he gently twists one of his long ears, pulling it back and whispering into it. John dips his face lower, Gladstone’s long head dropping to keep listening to him.

There’s a problem. Down the shore on the sand, where the other racers are still battling and racing for second, the water horses have kept coming. But John is a good distance from the finish line -- two hundred feet, a paper gull cries at him, the distance displayed on its wing, a clipping from the racing reports -- more than enough distance for the other horses to slow, even if they were running full speed at the actual finish line.

The water rises to Sherlock’s pectorals, and now it’s far too high for the shallows. He lifts his arms higher, wondering if he can drown in this pseudo-reality. The cold nudges around his body and raises the hair on the back of his neck.

John is pulling Gladstone off to the side to make way for the other riders, coming in fast, pushing his heels into Gladstone’s lean belly and asking for a quick movement. Sweat and saltwater make Gladstone’s mane cling to his neck, and his tail to his flanks and hind legs. Even from the sea, Sherlock can tell just how much this race has affected the water horse, his head is snapping every which way, teeth bared around the metal bit in his mouth, lips wrinkled back to hiss like an eel at the pole in the water, searching for something to fight with. His eyes are white all the way around square black pupils, and John’s heels are doing nothing.

He isn’t listening to John.

And so, when the giant white mare barrels straight into him, Gladstone shrieks and throws himself back at her.

The mare has no more rider, but there is a saddle draped in bells over her back, streaks of brown-red on her pale coat and a halter covered in iron chainmail over her hallowed face -- John wretches his leg from where it’s been crushed by the heavy muscles in the mare’s neck and Gladstone’s side, face of panic, while she screams and snaps at Gladstone -- Gladstone is swinging and screeching and baying right back, clacking his teeth as she rears, a foreleg striking out, long ears pinned against her skull, John is instantly on the sand, and--

-- and everything freezes in place.

On the beach, there are horses posed as if they are still charging onwards, but they aren’t moving. Several of them only have one hoof on the earth, or are in full suspension, their jockeys poised
hunching on their shoulders. Overhead, the paper gulls are paralyzed, the wind has stopped its push-pull, and the sea’s waves have stopped their relentless shunting against the shore.

Further down, there is a man up to his calves in the foamy water, stopped in the middle of falling backwards as a capall with an alarmed rider poses before him, mouth wide open, a string of bells wound around both of its forelegs. In another place, a horse is snaking its head low to the beach at another felled rider, and yet another is escaping into the ocean, saltwater spraying around it.

The overly dramatic sound of suction.

Sherlock’s feet come free of the sand, and he wades, pushing hard against the weight of the water. It feels like he’s being pushed back. Still, he gives up on keeping his arms dry and instead uses them to push himself further to the shore. Beneath his feet, the sand shifts and the water he touches tries to drag him to the depths of the shallows.

What’s that on the mare’s flesh-- there's something there - the weak sun glares on something that is wet. All the blood on her coat. Why is Gladstone acting so ferociously?

Even next to Hope’s horse, when John shot at the man for Sherlock, the champion capall has never not listened to John. Not last night when he was screaming in the rain, either. The Races wind him up more than anything.

Sherlock shivers in the water. What do the Races do to the horses that are always wild, and who always desire the sea, when men can race anything that they can fit under them?

The sand tilts under his shoed feet, and the land begins a subtle, rumbling shake.

At once, the seabed turns over, shivering sand and dredging his feet under the sediment. Up, get up! Leaning forwards gets his freed feet into the cracks of the coral rocks where the abalone live, dislodging shells and reef-bits tucked into the crags of the stones. A breaker melts into the saltwater when he sloshes through it on his way to the shore.

The land shifts again.

Sherlock is soaking wet and standing on the beach, running his palm over Gladstone’s long face. Upon realizing what he is doing, he wrenches his hand away from the ghostly mane and nostrils that should be blowing out hot air. Right. Gladstone is yet unmoved. Sherlock’s never been able to take the time to observe every individual hair on his nose before. Nor has he ever been brave enough.

The tendons in his twisted neck are prominent and the braided reins are pulled away from his side, thrown up into the open air where John must’ve tossed them. There are tinges of pink and dusky grey to Gladstone’s black mouth. The wisps of wet hair call back to mind the night Sherlock spent running from the piebald. Or, that’s in the future, now. Strange to think about it. He wonders briefly if the very water horse was out in the ocean at this time, or if it came to eat something on land before.

Rubbing his fingers together, bits of sand and a glaze of sweat come away from Gladstone’s pelt. Considering touching Gladstone’s withers is pointless, they're too high up for him to reach, even standing on his toes.

Sherlock turns, swallowing worry for the man on the sand. If he looks at John, he knows he’ll shatter the illusion of stillness. Trusting his own mind to keep the water horses where they are, he observes the mare.

She is stunning and absolutely giant reared back like this. The flare of that splayed foreleg would be close to Sherlock’s head were he twice as tall. For now it remains high above him, like the mare’s
great long head, face veiled in chainmail.

Her hooves are plated in iron horseshoes.

Sherlock's fingers fidget by his side. Her every step was pain.

He would never dare to do this if there was any chance of danger, but... Sherlock ducks beneath Gladstone's powerful neck, held high and tight, to scan the entirety of the scene.

Gladstone and the white mare are fixed together, the mare risen up on her back legs, neck twisted like a renaissance sculpture - beautiful movement, full color, but completely immobile. Not even breath shifts her great rib cage. Because of her color, it is difficult to distinguish between her coat and the white chalk of the cliff faces beyond her, where she begins and the island ends.

There is a glint of something shiny covering the pelt on her flank, beneath the burnt emblem of the Moriarty Stockyard brand.

Sherlock is fixed on John again. He can't keep him off of his treacherous mind for more than a moment. On the ground, hands up in front of his handsome face, sand sticking on one side of his sweaty cheeks. All questions as to what happened at the conclusion of last year's Races have been swept out of his mind, and just for a second, he's too concerned for this figment of his imagination.

Somewhere in his head, he understands that he should be observing, letting the finale come to a close and watching what happens, replaying it to puzzle out what Molly thought was so suspicious (her intuition is surprisingly good). But that would include watching John get trampled.

*John threads his fingers through Sherlock's - he brings up his other hand - and pulls it up to his mouth - John's lips press lightly over the knuckle of his thumb--*

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

God, just *think*.

Cause of death for the mare - anything done to her - something, something, *something!* He'd read those reports without a care, he should've paid attention, but they were so minute that he hasn't disposed of their content to make room, there must be *something.*

Sherlock turns.

Everything is wet, here, the entire world. Horse sweat and saltwater, John's brow is covered with it - but this is much darker. Something sinister is smeared on that mare. She's white, and it stands out against her pelt. Weak light again gleams off the shiny-wet patch on her hide as he turns.

All at once, Sherlock blinks, and it comes into focus.

In island ponies, it's a sedative, a painting used to chill their hearts and relax them as the Thisby winds moan and kick up startlers. But there's no record of it ever being used on *capaill uisce.*

Struck onto the hind leg of the white mare is a mark - one written in blood. It's unclear whether it's man or beast blood, like the sheep's at the rider's parade. It's messy and the edges are wavering and unorderly, all tells that whoever did this, they did it quickly.

The beach begins to shake again - he grasps Gladstone’s mane hard for support, coming face to face with the enormous beast once again. He stares at the yellow teeth that can be seen just underneath a heavy lip.
Sediment from the cliffs crumbles down like broken brick onto the grains of yellow-brown sand… Sherlock whips around, then back, eyes wide, staring at the charmed painting.

No. Not in the Races, not in the middle of them, who would’ve reached over to charm another horse? Who would’ve risked losing an arm, just to hurt another capall? Who would risk something like this, to try out an effect of a charm never seen on capaill before? How would this happen?

A deep, disembodied voice penetrates the surroundings, vibrating inside Sherlock’s shoulders and chest, words indecipherable. Then, thunder. The ground shakes harder.

The paper gulls are starting to dislodge their paralysis. Thin feathers twitching, filaments made from the news of last year.

Beyond the champion water horse, John’s fingers are slowly curling in the sand.

Centimeters from his nose, Gladstone’s mouth begins to creak shut, and his great round eye abruptly shifts its square pupil to regard him.

Sherlock jerks.

-/-

“... Holmes? Sherlock...? Earth to Sherlock Holmes?”

Sherlock slaps Lestrade’s hand out of his face. Too close!

The officer’s grin broadens. Sherlock had only just registered that he had one. “Having a nap?”

He scowls, but secretly wonders if his mind had created such a sequence in sleep, or if it were truly fact from the racing reports last year. Perhaps the lines had blurred a bit, since his body is sore and exhausted, stiff with fatigue and dried saltwater.

The stool is very hard under his backside, and all at once the want for his bed hits him.

He gets up but groans, his clothes caked with salt. Serves him right, putting his trousers from last night back on. Beneath his buttoned coat, however, he's wearing John's small jumper, it's warmer that way. That's all. His shoes are still damp. He's been in the bakery for several hours.

Lestrade looks like he's enjoying this. Sherlock plays with the collar of his coat to shake off some of his own paralysis, to stretch.

“A murder?” He prompts.

This makes the officer’s smile drop, although his tone remains broad and almost upbeat about the whole thing. As Sherlock has long suspected, Lestrade liked the mysteries that his job occasionally provided. Thisby was full of mysteries, but so many of them had been in existence for so long that people forgot to solve them.

“That's what it looks like. The man's still got what he ate all over his face. Haven't checked for external markings under the clothes, we're waiting for photographs. Looks like something chemical, allergic reaction, maybe.” Lestrade gives him the rundown as they leave the back of the bakery. The door swings closed behind them with a quiet squeak of old hinges.
Lestrade smiles and lifts a worn hand to wave at Molly.

Sherlock fixes the front of his coat. It bulges too much in the belly, where the jumper beneath has ridden up. Hardly noticeable, it still makes him uncomfortable. Maybe it would be best not to show that. He pockets his hands. Needs to go home and shower.

“Hi, Greg. I'll see you tomorrow, Sherlock…?”

Sherlock fixes his hair to dodge the question. Product would benefit it at this moment. It doesn't look good at all - how could John stand to sit in the bakery and eat breakfast with him while he looked like this? “I'm training tomorrow. I'm supposed to be today, as well, but,” he glares at Lestrade with purpose and long enough that the man catches him, “it must wait.”

“You think I'm not supposed to be training--?” Lestrade begins.

Molly surprises Sherlock by cutting off Lestrade and asking, “Are you going with Watson?”

Sherlock hides his unease with a shrug. He shifts the length of his coat again, purposely giving a pause that suggests he doesn't care. “I suppose. If I see him.”

“He'll seek you out, you know,” Molly smiles. Just behind her, Archie is handing a paper bag to a tourist at the counter. “Oh, that man’s so gone on you. Ever since you met him, you know. I don't think-- I don't think I know of anyone more obsessed with you.”

Sherlock will cry about that later on. His heart hurts and his fingers hurt. For now, he waves his hands as a gesture of hearing her but not caring about anything she’s saying, and leaves with Lestrade on his tail.

The bakery door’s bell tinkles as they go.

-/-

Down to the quay with the tavern, Lestrade leads him. Somewhere ahead in the damp alleys is a crime scene. The wind funnels through the side streets and gathers cold from stones to bring back to the ocean on the other side of the island while some seabirds trill in the cliffsides.

In a red hat, dead, lays the man that purchased the box of tarts from Hooper’s this morning. There's still some lipstick on him.

_Besame Red, Carmine._

Beside the body is the paper box of pastries, half-crushed. He must've fallen on them as he collapsed here. And here, he definitely died. The signs all over the man, and the lack of others, indicate so. If there was another texture or color of mud or bits of grass on him, it would've been discernible that he hadn't died here. And, Lestrade was right. Some crumbs and the red jam of a tart are stuck in the hairs of his unwaxed moustache.

He’s sprawled out on his back behind the Hawkins’ Tavern, no blood, just bubbly spit pooling on the stone by his skinny cheeks on the floor and at the corners of his mouth. His clothes are rumpled, and he smells strongly of vomit when Sherlock crouches down to sniff at him. He folds down the collar of his coat to keep it from coming into full contact with the man.
 Somehow, the vomit stink is the worst thing about all of this.

 The man’s fingers are curled in agony. Lestrade also has noted this down on his small leather pad of paper that he holds in gloved hands. Always insisting on gloves. The texture of everything is lost with gloves but can reveal great things, sometimes.

 Why is this place familiar? Where was that girl in the yellow dress found again? Ah, yes, the same location, almost. Sherlock glances onto the stone street, but there is no trace of the yellow-dress-girl’s blood anywhere. Rainy Thisby has washed it away more than the clean-up team could’ve, it beat out the blood from the rocks and the gravel.

 Although this is the same location, there is no possibility of the butcher’s son having done this. For one, he’s in the police station, held in prison. For another, he would’ve killed this man the same way - stab wound to the carotid artery. The man’s an idiot and a brute, for Epona’s sake, he wouldn’t be able to use… poison.

 But the fact that both bodies are in the same place remains. There is no such thing as coincidence.

 Sherlock looks but can ultimately see nothing that would connect this man to the girl in the yellow dress. Not likely that the two were connected, then, even if the butcher's son would commission someone outside of prison to kill the man for him.

 For some reason, Moriarty’s venomous visage comes to Sherlock’s mind. He shakes his head, waving a hand to shove the image away.

 “Chemical…”

 What sort of things can someone slip a man that would result in this frothy spit, can cause the clearly agonizing signs of his last moments, and the crust and salt of sweat all over his face?

 Arsenic, mustard gas, cyanide, ricin, strychnine… Clearly it was ingested, which rules out the mustard gas and the gaseous form of cyanide - since there was no bitter-almond smell around the man’s face, or the area, no bleeding nostrils. No castor oil plants grow wildly on the island, no way for ricin to be developed from the seeds unless they were imported. That would leave records. Arsenic, cyanide, and strychnine seem to be the most obvious - but just picking one by that assumption could have disastrous results.

 The idea that he can’t solve this one immediately and without issue bothers him.

 A moron would suspect the tarts. It could be true. The wind gusts down the narrow alleyway, cold and biting at Sherlock’s exposed ears. He tucks some curly hair behind one.

 Lestrade is quiet for a long moment, everyone is. Even Donovan. Good, that last one.

 Lestrade pushes out a long sigh, “I didn’t want to be the one to say this…”

 “Mm. Not the baker. No motive.”

 “I wasn’t--”

 “You were. Molly has no motive to kill, none at all. Check his wallet if you think that’s what she wanted, nothing’s missing. Even his pocket’s still got his watch in it.”

 “She has an apprentice,” Lestrade goes on, “It could’ve been a, a mistake with the baking and--”
“What, do you think there’s a lethal amount of flour that he could’ve eaten in a single tart?” Utterly disgusting, Lestrade’s thought process is today. Sherlock tells him so and Lestrade frowns, scrubbing a hand through his silver hair, leaving it sticking out all over his head. “Draw blood, look for somewhere around… twenty or thirty milligrams of strychnine.”

But... Sherlock frowns. Doesn’t quite add up with the image of the man before them all.

“Nevermind, nope. Death by strychnine poisoning comes from asphyxiation after the constriction of neural pathways that control breathing, or from exhaustion from seizures and convulsions, so…” There weren’t any signs of the man having seized, so, cyanide was out, too. He waves his hand to clear away the symptoms that someone with arsenic poisoning might’ve gone through.

Donovan says, “So?”

“I want to see a full toxicology report,” Sherlock says, standing curtly. He wrinkles his nose, wishing for a bath now that he’s spent time around a dead body. “It was poison, clearly, but no external marks, no seizing… Tourist. Again with the tourists,” This last bit is murmured softly to himself. Overhead, grey clouds are rushing by, streaked with white. No storm coming, Thisby got rid of that this morning and last night. He thinks of John while he twists off a single leather glove and puts it in his pocket.

“ Toxicology?”

“Yes. It’ll be simple to discern who did this, and someone did do it purposefully, not the baker, you idiot, when the specific type of poison is revealed. Importation records and all of that.”

Tourists’ belongings aren’t recorded, though.

No matter. Who would bring poison with them here?

If one were going to murder another tourist, at least it should be done by water horse.

-/-

He hasn't been home since before the storm.

“Mrs Hudson?” He pushes the door. It's locked, so he takes the key from his pocket and slips inside. “Mrs Hudson?”

A bang and clatter from the downstairs kitchen. “Oh, Sherlock,” the woman exclaims, “I couldn't see Redbeard or you,” the horse is just outside, “I didn't know where you'd gone.”

“There was a capall,” he explains, suppressing a shudder and starting to remove his long coat. She always prefers him hanging it by the door when it is wet outside, “near the stable. I closed the door is--”

“Josey’s fine, dear,” she had read his mind. Sherlock sighs. “Where did you get off to?”

Is he really going to tell her? He supposes there's no harm. “The Stockyard is where I was. I apologize for not coming back earlier.”

She's just coming up the stairs now, wearing an apron covered in flour around her waist. Panic-
baking again. She's quiet, then, “Well, now Mrs Turner owes me a pretty penny.”

Sherlock has never loved a bath so much. Neither has he loved clean clothes. John’s jumper works its way beneath his duvet and into his arms instead of covering his body. He’ll return it when he needs to return it.

When he sleeps scantily that night, he dreams of the piebald and himself in an open field of marigold, and of John Watson, leaning into his ear so that their hair may brush.

*Keep still, John whispers, it sees you.*

The piebald turns into Mary, the blonde mare. Her legs shake like Beryl’s and her mane becomes silky smooth, unlike the piebald’s greasy kelp. It becomes a staredown between her and Sherlock, a dying sun alighting the golden plain. He looks to John for advice, but the man’s gone from his side.

Mary’s mouth quivers around new blood.

-/-

The whispery hairs of Redbeard’s tail flicks against Sherlock’s side as he fixes the curve of the saddle over the horse’s withers.

Musgrave reappeared sometime during the night. She lays in the expensive hay by the loft, missing half her tail and looking significantly less excited to explore the island as she usually does. She hisses at Sherlock and at Mrs Hudson for coming near her, but seems overall fine and usual.

Morning is brisk, and the island is uneasy. It feels as though Thisby has curled up into herself to shield from the all-encompassing wind, and Sherlock almost instantly, the moment he steps outside, clean and ready to meet John at the cliffs, has snot running out of his nose, so he makes sure to tuck a handkerchief into his breast pocket.

Across the road, sheep wander loose over the mossy stone walls, the ones where the dead collie once was, when Sherlock had ridden up this path only days ago. He can still see the gleam of the wet eyeball in his mind. But he chases the image away, staring out at the fields he and Redbeard pass. There is no sign of the piebald that came out of the storm, and he wonders if it’s returned in the wake, or if an unlucky man has gone and caught her. Surely, no one would try racing that giant. She’s no Mary, but she’s no Redbeard. She was horrifying, stinking like the rot of the seabeds, and taken again by the ocean.

Mary enters his mind again. The horse inexplicably is tied, in his head, to Moriarty’s face, even if it is Magnussen who rides her this year. He can picture Moriarty standing beside her, with the winning kelp and rose garland over her high twitching withers, but he can’t see the man ever climbing onto her. Moriarty doesn’t ride the horses. He only plays their sports.

Sherlock is starting to think he knows more about Moriarty than he previously thought. Richest man on the island, neck-deep in the most dangerous game.

It’s only around twenty minutes later, when he has reached the high cliffs by the racing beaches, that he starts to wonder this, John not immediately being present, is retribution for his absence several days ago.
The occurrence makes him instantly anxious and removes all vague thoughts of Hope possibly making an encore, or Moriarty buying Mary.

When he scoffs, Redbeard turns his ear back to catch the noise. Sherlock looks out at the ocean far out past the cliffs. He used to fancy he could see the mainland from this spot. Downwards are the racing beaches, with water horses shivering for the water in the wind. He watches the thrall below for several minutes, before pulling one side of the rein and turning Redbeard away from the edge of the world.

He casts a glance towards the conifer that clings to the island. By far the spot that makes him feel most lonely. Again, his favorite tree, and one of the few that grow naturally. The ones by the Stockyard are all planted for decoration.

And he’s just done a roundabout to thinking about John again.

Redbeard sighs.

Inexplicably, it’s the way the island feels today - lonely and wide and flat, cold and salt-smelling - that brings about his revelation.

Grief begins to clog his throat - he shouldn't be like this. John is only late.

This is nothing, because Sherlock felt, and continues to feel, the crushing weight of romantic attraction. He is miserable thinking about it.

“And there he is,” John’s voice is carried to Sherlock by the wind - it smoothes over the nerves on his arms and back, and seems to lie flat his hair. Away from the edges of the cliffs, Sherlock turns to watch him approach. Redbeard spots them a moment later, jerking away. For a prey animal, it must be unsettling to have the senses fail at detecting a predator that now lies within striking distance.

“Thought you might’ve been pulling another fast one over me.”

Didn’t hear him come up on that big horse at all. It's terrifying how silent they are. The only thing that gives the pair away, sound wise, as John rides him closer, is John’s hearty giggling. His biceps flex briefly under his shirt, straining the jacket he wears while he dismounts, and suddenly Sherlock's mouth feels wetter than it had a moment ago. He digs into the saddlebag on Gladstone’s haunches and removes a small blue notebook that was in his flat the night Sherlock stayed over.

“You've got quite a shout,” Sherlock finally says when John stops close by, although John didn’t shout at all. Redbeard huffs to Gladstone, who tucks his muzzle, jerking John’s grip, and clucks back, fish eyes peering over his long nose.

“Poor Redbeard,” John says, pulling on the corded reins, “I only meant to frighten you.”

At once, Sherlock adores him.

They’re sitting by the cliffs that overlook the racing beach, sans both of their horses. John has his blue notebook out, and his stopwatch. Written inside the stained yellow pages are various times, dates, horse names and small paragraphs about each one, notes on how they move, how their riders think, how much they long for the ocean. Sherlock has the quilt wrapped over his shoulders and a
thermos in his chilly grip. John hadn't thought his coat was enough, and so this silly thermos had been pushed into his hands out of the blue.

Behind them, a little ways away, Redbeard is happily grazing on the stuffy, weak Thisby grass. A lead rope keeps his halter connected to the conifer Sherlock so loves, the draping one that hangs almost over the edge of the cliff. Although the sounds of the capaill training below on the shore occasionally startle Redbeard, there’s no fear of him spooking himself and running off.

Gladstone, the massive beast, remains in the circle John has drawn for him, out of reach, but watching them. John has taken part of a piece of olive cloth and fashioned it around Gladstone’s big nostrils, so the capall may only breath John’s scent.

Silence is not a problem. Still, Sherlock finds himself longing to talk with John. “What are you writing?” He asks, although he knows it’s John’s helpful hints and reminders to himself about the competition.

As John finishes writing something, which Sherlock spots the words ‘black, curly’ from tracing his script, the light from behind the grey clouds shifts, bright enough to be casting shadows on the grass for a second, and then gone again. The salt grass is almost flattened in the wind - Sherlock grips the warm thermos tighter.

“I’ve been watching the horses on land for years, Moriarty's horses, and the other ones,” John says. “These Races are going to be different, and not just because an island horse and his master are riding.”

He was just wondering how the fiddler crabs fared when the horses were wild in the autumn, if they were ever crushed by dinner-plate hooves or if they stayed in their burrows all day. Attention drawn back to John, Sherlock frowns. “What makes you think so?”

John broadens his shoulders, just stretching his upper back a little bit, but the simple movement has Sherlock’s head spinning. Beginning to grow more irritated, the stranger and more acute his fascination and infatuation becomes, Sherlock purposefully looks away, thinking of meringue pie and the sandpipers on the other side of the beach while taking deep breaths.

John is looking at him. His cobalt eyes reflect the muddy yellow of the grass they sit upon as the wind lifts his hair back. It suddenly doesn't feel so overwhelmingly cold. It almost feels like the island has warmed, just in this spot.

Ruining the illusion, John clears his throat. “The horses that have been on land longer, they're more… complicated. You’d think they would become more placid,” John watches the ocean, “more calm. It's the opposite, really. They miss the water more.” Sherlock fingers dance around the edge of the thermos, which has begun to lose its warmth.

“Miss it,” Sherlock repeats, hungry for John’s thoughts on the water horses.

Is it hunger, or jealousy? Envy that Thisby has favored John in so many more ways than it ever had Sherlock? A mainland, over an islander?

“Homesick,” John goes on, “their want for the ocean, they're sick with it. I've had a water horse as big as Beryl get so sick he couldn't move. Only saltwater baths and seaweed wraps on his legs could get him out to the pasture. Even then, he would stand in place and watch the sky.”

When John says I, he means Moriarty.

Watching the sky, on flat, cold Thisby, only wanting to go home, captured by strange monsters
whose beliefs are unknown. “Seems lonely.”

He finally takes the time to inspect what’s in the thermos. It’s a strong-smelling herbal tea, he discovers when he opens the top just to close it again. He feels John’s eyes on him for a short while.

“So. Thisby. Weird name for an island,” John says in the weak afternoon sun.

“Is it?” He sniffs. He can’t get used to the cold today.

“The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.”

Sherlock looks at him strangely. He furrows his brow. “What are you talking about?”

John grins and looks down as if bashful. Sherlock’s heart goes heavy, and he sharply inhales the smarting air, so much so that the back of his nose aches and he can almost feel his lips crack. He licks them, and glances away to the beach. A dun mare is running back and forth along the tract of useable beach. After making a note on his paper about it, John looks back up.

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream? Shakespeare? Forbidden lovers, who must speak through a wall in secrecy? Christ, what do they teach you in these schools?”

“Can’t recall.” Sherlock answers absently, “I’ve deleted it.”

John sputters and Sherlock smiles, letting loose a deep chuckle down in his ribs. They catch each other’s eyes, and the laugh slips from Sherlock’s mouth.

After a few moments, and Sherlock sipping from the thermos of tea (because he wants his chest to feel warm, and not strangely fuzzy and cold as it does now), John clears his throat. Sherlock watches the horses.

“All these… they’re wild. They’re all new,” John nods his chin forwards, then points with his pencil down off the cliffs. “See the bay mare? And the one next to her? They’ve circles around them, but they’re restless. They don’t stop moving,” John’s mouth flattens, “They shouldn’t be down on the beach. The water’s too strong for them.” He returns the lead point to the notebook, scribbling something.

“Do all water horses truthfully run to the water?” Sherlock traces the movement of his script.

“Yeah. Can’t help it. Keep Redbeard straight,” John thrusts his pencil at the air, making a straight line in nothing, “and you may actually have a chance.”

“No water horse would do this?”

“They all have the sea in them. None of them are tamed.”

“Then how did you tame Gladstone?” Sherlock asks, watching two men carrying another one between them by his arms and legs. He imagines the man must be groaning between the two about his head, for his hair is mussed and he's missing the hat he clearly once had, but the beach is too far down below for him to actually hear anything. “He ran forwards while we raced. Mostly.”

When they had raced, the wind had thrown the smell of the ocean at them, and Gladstone had veered to the edge of the land and the grass. Sherlock scrunches his nose, thinking over the delicious power of the champion horse that had tried to overcome him, even as he sat on Redbeard, lengths behind.
John’s eyes track the journey to where the cliff overhangs below them, where the rest of the day’s casualties lie, and then, Sherlock notices, dart to the *capall* nearby. It’s a white mare whose gossamer coat seems to be no more pelt than nearly-translucent skin, not unlike many deep-sea fishes.

Sherlock looks away, because he thinks he can see something gurgle in her belly. Pale eyes sit high on a long head.

She is almost more fish than water horse. There is a wide circle around her, men dare not approach, to the disdain of the monger, who must be trying to sell for next year with no luck. The *capall* nearby do not look at the old mare for very long. Their ears are all back as hers are pricked lazily forward.

“I didn’t tame Gladstone,” John clips, watching the scrambles and mock gallops on the beach. There’s barely room to walk, and the screams of horses conquer all airspace, reducing the men on the beach to mutters or shouts. A *capall* charges through the wet sand, soft ocean spraying around her hooves. Sherlock looks, but he can’t spot Mary.

She could be further up the beach.

Sherlock shifts his eyes to fixate on one spot, watching the opaque mare. She wheezes drooling bubbles on every breath, like an overheated island pony. But the day is cold and the sand is thrown by the wind.

“Didn't tame him?” Sherlock prompts, looking into the fray. Deductions and observations jump at him in such number that he has to peer down at the cliff grass to gather his bearings.

“No water horse will ever be tamed,” John says. The wind blows his fringe back, showing off the array of colours in his hair, silver and brown and blond and grey, and he's squinting against it.

“Surely, yours is.”

“No. And if you believe he is, you’re a fool.”

Sherlock scrunches up his nose. John turns in time to catch the countenance, and laughs breezily.

“I'm not-- I'm not calling you a fool. I am sorry, I am! Only, you've lived here all your life, you should know they can't be controlled. They're wild animals.”

“They're villains,” Sherlock scoffs, facing the wind again. None of the force is broken like it might be down below, and hits in full his entire body, chilling him again. The same wind churns the waves far out at sea.

John laughs again, lower and without a tinge of malice. “They're only animals. They're not monsters.”

Sherlock doesn’t grace him with a response. John holds up his stopwatch and points out a man down on the beaches, asking, “How fast d’you think his horse is?” And it sounds like a challenge.

It's unclear why John Watson loves the water horses. Sherlock can't be sure why.

He can understand the how, the where, when, and who of anything in the world. But not this.

Can he let it be?

“What was wrong with that mare?” Sherlock asks that evening, after they spent the remainder of the
day on top of the high chalk cliffs, making observations and notes.

_He sees better from the left side, his eye is damaged beyond repair, so, you should come up from behind on the right when you make your move in the Races, about a white stallion, and That's a bit of a strange colour to wear on the beach, isn't it?_ When a man in a bright blue and gold waistcoat, a tourist come to race, made his appearance before them, asking after someone he'd lost track of. He learnt how unfriendly true people of Thisby were when Sherlock didn't even look at him (he had a gambling addiction, how pedestrian was that?).

John had been very impressed which Sherlock’s deductions about old injuries, both men’s and horse’s, which had definitely warmed the island. Sherlock, in turn, was impressed with John's knowledge of the behavior of the _capaill_.

On the cliffs, Sherlock has no clue how John trusted Gladstone to be so close to the sea. Then again, Sherlock has no clue as to why he himself trusted Redbeard to remain with Gladstone and not be frightened, but the horse was happily grinding weak grass between his molars when they came to fetch him.

Sherlock should've kept the bit in his mouth to prevent him from eating the bad, scrubby grass - but he's not that cruel. Redbeard was enjoying himself.

John, fixing the petite saddlebags on Gladstone’s back, looks over his shoulder at Sherlock, mirroring him on Redbeard. Gladstone is facing resolutely forward, cloth tied around his nose. As he breathes, the thin cotton is pulled into shadows in the shape of long, thin nostrils, and pushed back out on the exhale.

“Which mare?” John asks, before moving to the girth strap. Sherlock has always found it funny, how long the girth strap has to be for it to loop around the big bellies of the massive horses. The saddles looks like toys atop the beasts, but they are as big and real as Redbeard’s.

Sherlock scratches Redbeard’s shoulder in a spot where some mud is caked. The stallion whirls his head around and bats at his arm with his soft muzzle. “The white one. It was nearly translucent, I know you saw her. What was wrong with her?”

Sherlock pushes Redbeard’s nose away, and stuffs a foot into a stirrup, hauling himself expertly up and onto Redbeard’s back. Redbeard puffs, and Gladstone mimics it.

“Nothing,” John says, “She was old.”

“I've seen old capaill before. They don't look like that.”

John steps into the elongated stirrup, and hefts himself up with effort, swinging his leg over to fit into the stirrup of appropriate length, then leans over to fix the long one. It works wonders in place of a mounting block, even if John has short legs. He has muscular thighs, Sherlock muses.

“She was old, like I said. If you don't think she was old because you've seen old ones before, you've never seen one that's _that_ old,” He says, sitting back up and taking the reins in hand. Gladstone snaps his chin against his neck, frozen. John shifts forward to drag the cloth off of Gladstone’s nose, and the horse stretches his horribly long, serpentine neck out again, as if he had been contained this entire length of time.

“She was very old, and she missed the ocean.”

“That’s not a very good answer.”
“Hang on, I'm trying to make an analogy, here…”

“Do hurry. We’ve not got all night.”

“It's… it's like…” John huffs an irritated breath, tucking the thin cloth into his saddlebag. Gladstone sucks in heavy breaths. Redbeard snorts, ducking his head to nose at the weak Thisby grasses again. Gladstone watches him, blatantly interested. “Hm. Well, um. Huh. Analogies are harder than I thought.”

“And yet you can quote William Shakespeare off the top of your head?”

“I like Shakespeare, and- hey! I never mentioned his first name--”

“What a hopeless romantic.”

“--I never said his first name, Sherlock!”

The wind has its mortal fingers buried deep in Sherlock's hair, tussling and confusing it. Sherlock turns away. “So?”

“So!” John kicks Gladstone into walking nearer, “So, you do know who he is, and you were having me on.”

“No!” Sherlock coughs.

“You’ve gone all croaky,” John says, “Have you got yourself a cold?”

Sherlock sniffs and turns away. “Here's your thermos.”

John leans off Gladstone’s side, grinning ridiculously. The water horse turns his face just slightly, regarding his rider. “The strong-neck'd steed, being tied unto a tree, breaketh his rein, and to her straight goes he…”

“What?”

“That's some Shakespeare for you. Ta, for the thermos.”

Chapter End Notes

more hints at sabotage, more murder, more moriarty, more racing. .... sorry for such a long wait!! I always have most of the next chapter written, and then the pieces just don't fit together for another half a year :/ I got this - and this won't be abandoned! I love it tooooo much! thank you for reading <3 A VERY LONG CHAPTER!!! like... 7k..... good luck lmao
"No one will say it around Moriarty, but the lot of them think you're brave."

Perhaps John loves the capaill because they are dangerous. Not the most dangerous animal in the world, but very unpredictable.

Maybe that's why he chooses to race.

From high up on Gladstone, John says, “Come with me to the Yard.”

“Why?”

“You must be bored at home."

“What makes you think I’ll be home? I haven’t worked Redbeard at all today.” Not quite true, Redbeard ran to the cliffs earlier this morning, and he should be resting and calming still after that storm. Shaking his head to clear the memory of Redbeard’s wide, scared eyes and pounding legs, Sherlock reasons with himself. It doesn’t count as a real workout for the horse. He must be trained vigorously if the last of his hay belly is ever going to disappear before the Races.

“You can work him at the Yard. Are you coming?”

Well. They’re already on their way, aren’t they? With John, Sherlock rarely needs convincing. “On one condition,” Sherlock says, “You tell me about the mare goddess.”

John looks tense for a moment. A muscle in his jaw twitches as he presses his teeth together behind his lips. Perhaps he's stepped too far. After all, John didn't know Sherlock had seen him slip that spiral shell into his pocket the night of the festival, or that he had heard the exchange between the goddess’ costume and John.

Sherlock presses, “And you tell me,” he says, “why Moriarty seemed so smug during the storm.”

And John doesn't ever speak about Moriarty. Sherlock is curious beyond belief - he recalls the piercing gaze of the Stockyard owner in the rain. Have you changed your mind yet? And what had John been so unyielding about?

The grey sky continues an endless shift above them, clouds rolling over each other again and again. Rain may come, but there will not be another storm like the last one. Not this week, at least. The grass around them blows down in the salt winds.

Still on the unpopulated side of the island, the world around them looks flat and sparse. Thisby is
wider than it is long, and so most of the houses and towns line the western or southern edges. Tholla is an exception, with the ports by the north for horse feed and tourists, who are coached to the only fine-looking hotel on the island, in Skarmouth. It’s the direction they’re headed in now, with the early evening sun casting very weak light through few holes in the clouds.

Redbeard huffs, his breath showing in the cold. Sherlock longs for the summer again. Or perhaps just warmer weather. Then he could lose the gloves that are over his hands. He may keep the scarf and jacket, however. They feel like a shield from John’s eyes, which he would not mind on a normal day, but thinking about John looking at him has him nervous.

John has yet to answer.

“I can tell you when we get there, though I know nothing of the Mare Goddess,” He finally offers, rigidly. “If you tell me something, too. About racing. Why you’re doing it.”

That’s something Sherlock has denied to answer before, isn’t it? What, exactly, does John think has changed? He scoffs, but does not argue.

The Stockyard comes up faster than Sherlock would’ve thought, but slower than he would’ve liked. Conversation on the backs of two horses of wildly different sizes is not too efficient.

Gladstone lifts his head when they enter the grounds past the stone walls, perfectly laid and cut, where the decorative trees grow, their leaves beginning to curl brown and orange at the edges as the end of October nears. He reminds Sherlock, vaguely, of the storm petrels that come ashore before bad weather in this way, all black plumage and white flares.

They tilt their heads just as the *capaill* does now, as if searching for the rain they know to be coming, but Sherlock remains convinced that it will not storm again before the Races. A crisp wind from the inner island blows over from behind them, throwing Gladstone and Redbeard’s tails forward against their rear legs. Redbeard’s ears turn back as they follow John down the path that turns to cobblestone beneath their hooves. They cross over the road that Sherlock used to ride with the pony cart to the mill, and further towards the main red stables down the path.

Always, he is in awe of the great area that Moriarty owns. There are pastures and white fences and small, meticulously tended-to trees growing up from the fields as far back as Sherlock can see. Beyond the barriers, ordinary horses graze contentedly on island grass. Several stable hands are moving around the flats as Sherlock and John ride past them.

The man Sherlock recognizes as the companion to Moriarty in the light during the storm approaches John. The champion pulls back on the reins. The powerful air around Gladstone’s body lurches, the water horse is want to go.

“Watson, one of the boarders is in the stables. He won't leave. Been here for hours, looking for… well.” The man shrugs. A second walks by with a short new pony behind the first. Showing her off for some client, probably. “Looking for him.”

He's pointing at Sherlock, and they both frown.

John glances to him, and Sherlock shrugs. He doesn't know what this is about, and conveys the thought to John without issue. John evidently believes him, because he gives a quick nod to the stablehand, and flicks Gladstone’s reins. Redbeard does not need direction, and follows immediately. He would be a good trail-riding horse if they ever fell into that profession, or if there were any real trails about. Before entering the barn, John and Sherlock dismount. Sherlock takes the bit out of Redbeard’s mouth and loosens the bridle, letting them both hang over his face, taking hold of the
halter beneath it for the horse’s comfort.

John pulls right on Gladstone’s reins. Brute force and a bit of magic is required for this horse. John hums, and Gladstone moves, but for an instant John turns back at him, sees what he’s done with Redbeard’s bridle, and looks softly at him. Sherlock flushes, but perhaps that is the cold bite of the wind.

Strangely, there isn’t a stablehand who stares at him, like the first time he had come in here with John. Is anyone surprised by him anymore? He will have to look more scary if he is ever going to be taken seriously in the Races.

“Well, look who’s decided to come take care of his horse, finally.”

Bill Murray, the man with black hair who was there the first time Sherlock ever saw John Watson up close, is tending to the stall of a capaill uisce down the stables. He grins with that big mouth of his. “Oh, and I’ve finally run into you, Johnny!” He exclaims, almost dropping his bucket of blood. “I knew you weren’t going to be taking care of she anytime soon, so. Needs must.”

Sherlock snorts. Johnny.

John’s face looks a little pinkish. Wind, no doubt. Never embarrassment for a nickname. He leads Gladstone, thumb drawing marks into his jawline, down the aisle. The water horse pulls towards Murray’s bucket as they pass it, and John licks his hand and has to press it into Gladstone’s face just to keep him going forward into his own stall. Murray follows them.

Gladstone stares at Murray. When John moves for the lock, Gladstone tests the magic and snaps at Murray’s face, but John intercepts and presses a few fingers against Gladstone’s cheek. He is daring Gladstone to try again.

Unfazed, Murray smiles.

“I’m wrapping Gladstone’s legs,” John says, “Bill, you’ve been here for hours, if you’re going to be annoying, bring down a few bales from the loft.” John gestures towards the end of the barn, on the opposite side of Gladstone, who holds the final stall. “Sherlock, Redbeard can go in here for now, I’ll be done in a few,” he suddenly looks concerned, “You don’t mind?”

Sherlock’s nose crinkles as he furrows his brow. “Of course not. It would be stupid of me to mind you taking care of your capall.” Just being in the Stockyard, with horses bred of both the ocean and of champion land, is mesmerizing. He wonders if Moriarty really knows what he has.

Fleetingly, John is again struck with worry, implied by the lines around his eyes and over his forehead. It disappears a second later.

Redbeard happily goes into the stall where Beryl was viciously slaughtered. Although he’s very sure it was sabotage and not anything to do with the functionality of the small space, Sherlock bends and glances around for loose nails. Nothing. He stands and brushes off his coat.

“Holmes, come help me with this. I’m want to talk to you.”

Murray is pulling on some ropes and pulley systems to begin work for bringing down bales, which are connected somewhere up above the barn, in the loft. Across the barn, he has yelled for Sherlock. Usually, Sherlock would not obey such a demanding comment for his company. Murray seems harmless.

But that’s just how John had seemed at first.
He squints, examining the relationship between the two for a moment. Murray, the owner of the souvenir shop inside Skarmouth, versus John, the top stablehand in Moriarty’s Stockyard. Perhaps their relationship is only professional, and only during the autumn. Something tells Sherlock that that isn't true. This is the harrowed face and these are the hands of someone used to working with nets, but his job is to sell knick-knacks to scant tourists during the racing season.

It occurs to Sherlock that he is looking at a man who captures the _capaill uisce_. It makes sense - the scars on the hands, the clothes that he would be too poor to afford another way. He must capture them and sell them, but he's not a monger. He'd need a permanent taker for his catch.

Sherlock is almost certainly standing in the very place that houses his _capaill_. Nowhere else could a man sell water horse after water horse, and have his client still want many more. Understanding, Sherlock eases closer to where Bill Murray is pulling on the ropes. He seems to be all set with his work.

“Ah, Mister Holmes, both the beauty and the beast,” Murray greets him. He releases the ropes with a hefty sigh and claps off his hands. “I'm in awe. Whatever did you say to him to get him to do it?”

Sherlock frowns. “I don't know what you're referring to.”

“Why, Johnny Watson, of course.”

“I haven't said anything to him.” Not in a suspicious, conspiring sense like Murray implies, anyways.

Murray’s smile drops but for a moment. “Ah, I see.” And that is that.

Keeping his expression, Sherlock feels more confused than when he came to the barn, when he has come for questions to be answered, about Mary, the mare goddess, and of the ocean and John’s way of it. And Moriarty, most of all. But now that he’s thinking of all his own questions, his mind grinds to a halt at the same place as usual, the sticking place, Mary. She is not in the barn. Magnussen has his own place for her.

Murray making a clinking sound with the pulley system brings him back. What has John done that Murray thinks Sherlock made him do? Is it bad?

Does John hate him somehow for it, now? Sherlock sneaks a glance to the opposite end of the stables, but John is now coming closer. Sherlock tucks his hands into his pockets for fear of accidentally touching John as he walks closely past.

“Hop on up there, Johnny!” Murray exclaims. A mare whinnies in the stall, and he lowers his tone, “Need someone to put on the bales.”

“As long as you're doing the hard work,” John replied. His capable hands slide onto the mid-height rungs and he raises his first boot. Sherlock watches him climb the ladder and disappear into the loft.

He turns to Murray. This may be his chance to speak with someone who will actually talk about… her. God knows John will shut him down if he tries. And no one else will know that much about her, he longs for insight, even if it comes from a gossip like Murray.

He's curious, although he feels like asking brings her into the open, like asking will draw his blood.

“You come here often.”

“Yes. You trying to pick me up?”
“You talk to John.”

“Yes.”

A beat. “Tell me about Mary.”

“The horse?” Murray takes up the thick ropes again.

Sherlock nods.

Murray wraps the thick rope around his hand and pulls, bringing the bale up and over the hanging edge of the loft. “She’s as wild as they come.” He slowly lowers it with a grunt, then lets go of the rope for John to drag unseen back up, and repeats the process twice more.

“That can’t be all you know.”

“It isn’t,” Murray makes a large show of wiping the sweat off his brow after three more bales come down onto the aisle. Their conversation is very slow. “But I wouldn’t be a good gambler if I gave away all of my secrets.”

Sherlock shakes his head, not offering to help. “I am not a gambler at all. Just a rider.” Saying so still feels strange, and accompanying the acknowledgment is a nervous fluttering in the pit of his stomach as always.

“You just want to know if she’ll be the one to bite you,” Murray nods in understanding. He sighs, standing to his full height after working with the bales, and stretching his back. “I’m worried about her, too, I must admit.” His capall, boarded in the stall, stares at him. Sherlock wonders if it’s been fed today.

“I’ve asked John,” Sherlock lies, “he doesn’t know much about her.” Magnussen doesn’t seem like a threat at all, only his horse.

“He knows plenty.”

Caught, even if Murray hadn’t said anything about a lie. Ugh. Sherlock frowns. Somehow, asking John about Mary doesn’t seem like a valid option, for it’s a mystery whether or not John will sugarcoat the way he talks about her for Sherlock’s benefit.

Murray laughs, “The capaill always act like sharks in the water. Mary just acts like one whose scented blood.”

“Excited?”

“Controlled. Hungry, but not for manflesh. She's different, you know.”

Sherlock squints, listening to the stretch the leather gloves give as Murray pulls them from his pocket and then pulls on. “How so?”

“I know you’ve seen her. At the beaches, that first day, I was there, with Watson. He pulled her off of you, you would have been nothing but supper for something so big.”

“I’m aware.” But Sherlock can’t recall ever thanking John, and he wonders how big Mary is compared to the white horse from the Races last year. Was John frightened of Mary? Did he jump into the scene to help Sherlock anyways?

Murray looks like he’s done with his horse for the day, and is now hanging around the stables for
no apparent reason. His capall knocks its nose against the side of the stall quietly. Sherlock steps further away, not leaving his back to the horse.

“She thinks about us. It's noticeable, in her eyes. Big, square, black. Thinking. It's not an animal looking at you, not hungry. But it's a shark, all the same. That's not the first time you'll hear it said.

“John's a mainlander,” Murray continues, this time very quietly. He takes a step closer to Sherlock, it's not threatening, and is only for the benefit of the privacy of the conversation, “however much at heart he may be from Thisby. He will never see the capaill like we do.”

In John's voice, Sherlock hears, 'they're just animals. Not monsters,' and reviews why he thought it was such a profound thought at the moment. It's not true. The capaill are animals, but they are also monsters. The capaill are no horses. John is wrong to the islanders, and a poet to the tourists.

“And. Don’t believe anything he says,” Murray says in a low voice to him. Sherlock shies away now, eyes fixed on Murray’s hungry capall, “Everything he says makes it sound like he’s fucking the horses.”

When Sherlock baulks and snaps his head to see Murray’s face to discern whether or not he’s lying, the other man breaks out in a fit of laughter.

“Honestly! Ever heard him speak in your life?”

“I have,” Sherlock answers. ‘That's Beryl… she’s a screamer.’ He flushes.

Murray seems to find this gut-wrenchingly hilarious, because he bursts into laughter again, doubling over and holding his stomach.

“Oh, Holmes, you’re as good a bet as any. Forty-seven to one, I’d bet on you!”

Sherlock frowns, “It was forty-nine to one, last I checked.”

“When’d you last check?”

“Night of the festival.”

“Oh? Well, I hate to be the one to take your innocence,” Murray laughs and John grunts somewhere above in the cloak of the loft’s darkness, “But people have this strange tendency to, you know, die. Johnny!” Murray abruptly shouts, and Sherlock flinches, because it was so quiet, and Murray had to go and ruin it. Come to think of it, it was so nice before they showed up and Murray was there.

“Would you bet on him, Johnny?” Murray yells, and a horse neighs somewhere down the stable, resounding around the walls. It’s like the horses themselves are telling the man to shut the hell up.

“Stop calling me that,” John clips, and the sound of boots hit Sherlock’s ears a minute before feet appear on the top rungs of the ladder, John coming down from the hayloft. He drops down onto the cement, brushing down his front and seemingly unaware he’s hay in his hair.

“Fine, Jonathan,” Murray waves a dismissive hand, turning the gesture into the pocket of his brown waistcoat and checking the time on a silver pocket watch.

“John Hamish.”

“Could you fuck off?” John looks at Murray like he’d love to have a proper exchange right now, but instead glances sideways to Sherlock. John looks him up at down, and then, addressing Murray, says clinically, “I would bet on him.”

“There you have it,” Murray approves, turning back to Sherlock, who’s face has never been more heated or his chest so squirmy, “If the champion says so, it is. You’re a good bet, I believe it.”

“Don’t--” Sherlock clears his throat, because his voice has come out embarrassingly high, “Don’t you have a shop to keep?”

Murray shrugs, but that nosy grin and interested expression still lies over his countenance. “I'll let you two have your fun. I will be leaving, though, not because you told me to,” he says, pointing at Sherlock. He slips the watch back into his pocket.

There are brooms lined up all along one wall - Murray walks into them, and then struggles to right them again when a stablehand glares. “I'll just, yes,” he says, and is gone from the Stockyard.

John is wiping down the front of his muscular (tantalizing) thighs, stirring up the dust from hay. “Thank god,” he says, “I admire the man, but he's very loud. Not good to be so loud around the horses. He must've been happy to talk with you.”

Curious, Sherlock asks, “Why would he be?” Why? Does John know what Murray meant? Of course he does, but does he know that it's what they discussed?

“He thinks you're brave. No one will say it around Moriarty, but the lot of them think you're brave.”

“Them?”

“The stable hands.” It makes sense, Sherlock muses. The glares he'd been given before this day make sense as well.

“Ah,” Sherlock says.

“It's a brave thing, riding an island pony-- horse. Riding an island horse in the Races.”

Sherlock looks to John. He doesn't believe he'd be able to discern the truth behind the statement, whether or not he wanted to. He doesn't. Because John’s just called him brave, and Sherlock would never call himself that, especially when compared to John.

He isn't exactly being compared now, though, is he? John's just. Saying that. The bravest man Sherlock knows is returning the sentiment, even if Sherlock has not voiced it. He should.

Why does it matter so much that this statement is coming from John, and not anyone else?

“They’ve been talking about you, here at the Yard. Most of them think you’ve a real head on your shoulders, for doing that. Brave.”

“You think I'm brave?” Sherlock asks, in a small voice.

John smiles. In the way that makes him seem like whatever he says next will be a lie, “I think you're stupid. Maybe so stupid that others mistake it for bravery.”

Sherlock hides the sigh he wants to push out.
“I think,” John amends, “That you are more than brave. I would not have the heart to race on something so fragile.”

“Redbeard is not fragile.”

“Compared to the others, he is. He always will be. Now, will you tell me why you're racing?”

The sea-faring wind blows through the aisle of the stables, pushing away loose strands of hay that have come off in the bale jostling. The capaill in the building all seem to sigh. Not ready to turn his heart inside out so that John may read its contents, Sherlock responds, “You promised me that you would tell me about Moriarty.” Saying his name seems to carry the weight that the man will be drawn from the shadows of the stable, but no such thing occurs. Sherlock remembers when he had first seen him coming up with that big-eared mainlander, Knight.

John's eyes dart to Gladstone’s stall, and like when they were riding, a muscle in his jaw tenses as he works his teeth. A very obvious tell. Sherlock will one day tell him that he would not be good at poker, and to not take it up as a hobby.

“Go on,” Sherlock urges.

“He's angry with me,” John says. For a second Sherlock believes he means the capaill, but then it registers. Surprised, Sherlock tucks his hands into the pockets of his long coat. “Angry?” The man seems to have only two emotions, dolefulness and rage. Angry is a not-very-happy middle.

“I tried talking to him.”

Sherlock sighs, wanting to hear the full story faster. “John, we're both aware you write,” a shot in the dark based on all his notebooks and pencils in the flat, but John's eyes widen in surprise just the same, got him, “so would you please just tell me what happened?”

John sighs. John begins to walk to Gladstone’s stall. He snags a bucket hanging on the wall and carries it down the aisle of the stable, into the wind that blows his beautiful hair back. Sherlock follows diligently, though he's certain he doesn't look as good walking into the wind. Gladstone eyes his while John pulls open the first lock.

“I… remembered what you said. When I first brought you here, some time ago. Gladstone isn't mine. I want him to be, and told Moriarty so. He laughed and told me not to try my luck again. And… I told him, it was me, or it was the horse.”

Sherlock blinks.

“I've told you I tried buying Gladstone before. Five times what he's worth, but Moriarty values the horse more than he values the money I--”

“No,” Sherlock interrupts, “he values your ties to the Stockyard, more than anything.” Sherlock can see it now. It's not so much that John is a good worker, and heaven knows he hasn't been working so well lately because of race training, it's that when he is within the Stockyard, employed by him and living on his land, John is under Moriarty’s control. Even more, Moriarty has what John holds most dear - Gladstone. Sherlock begins to understand.

John already appears to know this. He glances away, purses his lips. “I… won't ride Gladstone in the Races,” he swallows, “I'll work here until it passes, and then… well, then I'll have to find some
other work, won't I?" He gives a short laugh. Nowhere on the island has steady jobs like the Yard, hardly more than one employee is needed at any establishment, except during racing season. Or maybe at the fishing docks, down in the harbor.

Sherlock clears his throat. John shakes his head, and undoes the second and third locks on Gladstone’s stall. “You should argue with him.” The water horse snorts, seawater spraying over John’s face.

He wipes it off, “What is that, now?”

“Moriarty, you should argue with Moriarty. Give him another ultimatum - if you win the Races this year, he'll let you buy Gladstone.”

John stares at him, then shakes his head, “He’ll never go for it. I will win again.”

“There are other racers this year, new ones. Think about. Think about Mary,” Sherlock insists. He makes no mention of himself because he is no real contender. John opens Gladstone’s stall and stoops low, one hand pressed to the giant creature's belly, the other in the bucket of wet sea kelp. Gladstone seems to only be held by John's hand at that single point, because he turns his long neck to look at Sherlock. No movement. Sherlock continues, “John, what else could happen?” Sherlock remains outside - he doesn't think he will ever go in.

“Immediate termination of employment?”

Sherlock scoffs, “Moriarty, he's smart, he likes to play,” he turns, leaving his back to John and Gladstone. The water horse clicks at him, responded to by Redbeard’s soft whuffing in the next stall over. “If you make it into a game,” Sherlock whips back around, thoughts flying, “he won't be able to resist.”

John looks up from his task of wrapping Gladstone’s legs with seaweed, then looks away, seemingly pained. “You sure know an awful lot about him, so suddenly.”

John is just being difficult now. “John,” Sherlock tries again. “You have leverage, surely he needs more from you than to win the Races. You've made every horse in this barn what they are.”

John Watson shakes his head again. He looks defeated. He repeats, “Wasn't even supposed to have him out today. I'm having my things out as soon as the Races are over.”

Sherlock wants to tell him to argue again. But John is stubborn. It won't work. John has to want to argue. Doesn't he want Gladstone? Sherlock would fight for Redbeard tooth and nail, but in a sense, he will never have to. Redbeard has always been his, but Gladstone. Gladstone has never been John’s, however much the champion owns his heart.

“So me a favor,” John says, gesturing behind him, “grab that other pail of kelp outside - near the hay. I've left it out for the wind, I need it now.”

Sherlock rounds the corner and spots the pail, shimmering seaweed floating in salty water inside. It smells a little rotten, but the scent could also be coming from Gladstone or another capaill at the Stockyard. As he bends, he hears Gladstone keen not just through the open stable doors, but from above. He spots the high window that only Gladstone has. Thrilled, he moves closer and ignores the pail.

It's a very high window, in Gladstone’s stall, but after a moment of looking at his feet, Sherlock resolves to stepping on the two hay bales that are stacked atop one another. Hay is poking out of all sides, and they're squishy under his feet, despite how dry their outsides look. It must've been out
during the storm - he’ll suggest that John dispose of them.

If he stands on his toes (not an issue, he used to dance en pointe), Sherlock can peer into the stall.

Gladstone has gone still, and John is crouched in the newly mucked stall, fingering bits of kelp that had been left behind of Gladstone’s leg wrapping.

“Argue with him,” Sherlock pesters.

John jerks, sees him, then relaxes. He puts his hand over his chest. “You surprised me.” He stands. Gladstone, silent, looks as though he knew Sherlock was there all along. The only thing protecting Sherlock’s face from Gladstone’s yellow teeth is the dimensions of the small window.

“John, I did not know,” Sherlock says, “that you could be so stubborn.”

John smiles. It appears hard for him to say, but he says it all the same, “I will ask him once more. For Gladstone. It won't work, but I will ask him.”

Sherlock hums, like he’d known this would be the outcome all along.

“The racing beaches. But further up - after the rocks and before the caves. Meet me there tomorrow.”

Like Pyramus and Thisbe, Sherlock responds through the wall, smiling.

“I’ll see you on the beach.”

-/-

The bath that night feels exquisite. Salt caked from his hair glides away under cucumber soap bubbles, and he’s once again smooth underhand, not stiff and covered in ocean water. Most of the rain had driven it away the night of the storm, washing it away from his skin, but the soapy water seems to do the trick in restoring Sherlock’s entire being.

Next it is his room, where he retires for the rest of the evening, perusing through the well-dusted anatomy books that stack haphazardly over his workspaces and short bed. Across the room is another workbench, and on it, slathered papers all across the wood. Half-finished notes and big blots of angry ink when a hypothesis was occasionally (always) wrong.

Again, John Watson floats to the forefront of his mind. Sherlock walks to the seat in front of the second workbench, and sits in front of the microscope. Reflected upside-down when he turns on the light is a splice or capaill bone. It had been procured from a tourist’s shop, and although he hadn’t expected it to be real, it was an authentic specimen, clearly from a casualty after the Races of one year’s past. Own A Piece Of Thisby! He remembers the package on the bottle claiming. No islander ever bought one because keeping parts of the capaill was bad luck, and usually associated with black magic.

John had said something peculiar, that night of the storm, when Gladstone had been mere heartbeats from changing into something new completely, something from the ocean. ‘The change goes all the way to their bones.’
Something about the saltwater, perhaps. Or the contents in it. Some types of fish can crawl on land, some animals regrow tails when they’ve been pulled off, but it all takes time. Transformations don’t happen in the matter of seconds, or minutes, like they do with the water horses, a change that seems so natural it’s as if Sherlock himself could shift to be just like the rest of them. Sherlock sneers to himself.

He throws a quilt over his own shoulders, vowing to continue his pointless research after the Races. If he makes it that far.

Chapter End Notes

im sorry this has taken so long...... so sorry my friends BUT the next chapter was halved off of this one because of length (wouldve been suuuuper long) and it has much more action than this one... good luck reading and tell me what you think!
Throat

Chapter Summary

Hope has a bandage over his arm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Sherlock could not find John on the cliffs in the morning light, or further up the beaches, he had come here, hoping to find him among the scuffles of the trifling islanders offering some advice.

Here, they are still at the lesser-used portion of the beach, but it is not just John that Sherlock has found. There are many people, and above all of their figures towers Gladstone, with shiny bridle and saddle that is not John’s around his face and over his withers.

On the cliffs above there is a spectacle of merchants lobbing bells or other good-luck charms to the tourists and rocks at the magpies. The birds flock and try to lift shiny things off of seller’s tables beneath the overhanging tents. Bill Murray had tried to lure Sherlock into his stall, but Sherlock was too busy trying to look for John among the mess. When he stated this, Murray gave him a sly look and then tried to trade him a few warm November cakes, his own breakfast, for use of the Ford Sherlock had driven down with to haul large items over from his shop.

Sherlock had scoffed. Murray had laughed. It was funny at the time. There was no mention of their moment alone from yesterday, or of Mary.

Hope has a large bandage over his arm.

Under his clothes, the bumps of an job done up ugly are visible to those who look closer. And he doesn’t use the hand of this arm, either, further proving that something is wrong - only, Sherlock knows the cause is a bullet wound. His boots are covered in wet sand from where he has stepped in the ocean and then again on the beaches, fighting only with half his strength.

Sherlock freezes at the rest of the sight.

The scoundrel has Gladstone’s reins in his withering grip, and is tugging the horse along the sand. He flexes the muscles in one arm more than the other, jerking the bridle when the horse stalls… Which he has not done before. Gladstone is always want to move.

What’s wrong with the water horse? These tourists circled around the show must be moved, Sherlock can hardly see.

Anger flushes through his veins, seizing his muscles and clenching his fists for him. How could someone touch the horse that is so clearly John’s and no one else’s? Where is his true rider, what’s happened to John? Confusion sets in as well, the crowd that has accumulated is ever-shifting like the sand, clearly here to watch something happen. But what? He cranes his neck to see above the few men who are taller than him, watching Hope.

Something new, that Sherlock has never seen on the champion before, has been tucked in specialized pockets and beneath his quaking bridle and saddle - charms of blue petals, scarlet cord, and iron
ringlets. Gladstone stands in place and only moves when pulled, his skin twitching like crabs scuttle beneath the surface.

Bells ring around Gladstone’s ankles, as if he were a dancer at the Scorpio festival, and his hooves wobble before each step, afraid to touch the earth each time. His ears press forward, shivering and tired as he strains against the magic of the golden chain woven close to his face.

It occurs to Sherlock that the steam pouring from the *capall’s* mouth may be from the iron bit they have shoved between his scorching teeth.

Gladstone’s long face looks like a proper horse’s, but is it that which unsettles Sherlock. He is accustomed to the water horse looking more fish than horse. His jaw is round, legs thick and even, neck muscled like a working pony. Evidently, the charms have made him more pony than ever, but they are what jerk him. Where the bells touch him, he crow-hops away as if whipped, stalling and starting, uncoordinated.

Two companions accompany Hope this time around, a seasoned racing pair, as if Hope knows that quarreling with John will end up in two bullets fired, and he's aiming to not have himself be one of the targets this time around. One of the men has only three fingers on one hand, his little and ring missing. Sherlock can see how the *capall* bite dips into his hand among a mass of shiny scar tissue, the way his other fingers are curled up. The *capall* must've nipped an important muscle while it ate his appendages.

Where is John?

Snapping out of the spectacle, Sherlock elbows his way through the tourists and islanders who have come to watch the champion be saddled by someone who isn't John. Why is this happening? Had John slipped away for a day and had Hope gone to steal Gladstone from where he was at the Stockyard?

The three of them are in work right now; both companions pull together to place a breastplate-like chain of mail over and around Gladstone's chest and withers, hard bells and iron nails sewn into the material, while Hope whispers to Gladstone from a safe distance. John is always closer to Gladstone’s face, a dance of mislaid trust between the two of them.

They all look up at Sherlock as he approaches.

But John, where Sherlock’s eyes draw to him, almost hidden, does not move from his spot beneath the overhangs of the chalk cliffs. Sherlock sees the lower half of his face, the rest hidden behind a bump in the chalk, grimacing before the rest of his eyes come into view.

Urging John to argue with his employer has gone badly. The bags beneath his eyes are deeper than the trenches just past the shallows, and his fists are clenched beneath his crossed arms. His shoulders sag heavily into the back of the cliffs. Ahead of him, the crowd is thinner and spotting, as if the people making it up know to give John a good line of sight to Hope.

It hits him all at once.

This is the outcome of what Sherlock has done. It's his fault. He remembers how Moriarty had taken a drive up to his house, Mrs Hudson’s house, in that bright red cherry car of Stamford’s. A man who could do that would have no trouble tearing away any and all to John’s freedoms, his sole source of enjoyment.

A mix of despair and dread begin to climb up the back of his throat. No. The situation must be dealt
with. He steps towards the champion rider, and stops. It’s possible he is the last person on the earth that John wants to see right now. A gust of wind brings about his selfishness, and he walks to John anyways.

A high-pitched shriek cut short by a violent rattling of bells - whipping around, Sherlock sees Gladstone rearing, but besides the gasps of the crowd and their school-of-fish-like movement backwards a collective few steps, the only important person on the beach is quiet. Gladstone lands, sending a surge of outrage through the sand that gusts over Sherlock, betraying the water horse’s displeasure.

“Ho, big fella,” Hope says.

It’s patronizing to such a professional horse, and although Gladstone’s features do not portray any feeling, the air drops thick with a heavy miasma of malcontent. It is almost hard to move. Is he the only one to feel this? There is a terrible dread crawling underneath his skin.

No, Johns shoulders are sloped lower than usual, as well, but the spectators watch on, seemingly unfazed. Evidently, none of them have ever owned a horse, because it’s obvious how uncomfortable and angry Gladstone is.

He had never imagined this much raw power was normally held at bay by John’s expert hands on the reins. Is this what the capaill possess in terms of strength? He had felt it briefly by Mary, remembers standing beside her. But it was nothing like this.

He dares closer to the champion rider, though makes a point not to look at John, as if they were two strangers watching a monger, sharing only space. The few birds by John’s feet depart as Sherlock arrives.

John’s eyes don’t move, but his mouth quirks down. “Where is your horse?” Now, he watches the sea birds land somewhere down the sand, away from the small crowd.

He takes this as an invitation to lean beside John, the chalk bumping into his back and crumbling into dust over his shoulders. Just, hopefully not his hair.

Sherlock looks at John finally. “Home. Where is yours?”

John’s blue eyes slide away to watch Gladstone. Hope has taken the reins closer to the halter. John is more bothered, it seems, by the scene before him than Sherlock’s lack of a filter.

“It's unprecedented,” the finger-lacking man says loudly in response to something Hope has mentioned, “how can a man hope to win even once?” He tightens the leather cord around Gladstone’s breastplate. The horse keens.

“He's not from here,” says the man at Gladstone’s lead with the thin hair.

“Mainlander!”

“And,” Hope says, grinning with those yellow teeth which match all capaill, “he's one of them. Have you seen his eyes? Or the way he moves around the horses, like he knows them? He looks like the capaill himself.” At this, a few of the locals in the crowd eye John, as if this were a realistic probability. After all, if the capaill can change from terrestrial to marine, why couldn’t they use the same magic to transform into John? The more wary tourists appear to give it no thought. The locals are much more superstitious.

Sherlock expects John knows the horses because he works with them, as Hope clearly has yet to do.
The picture of Hope slacking off at Moriarty’s Stockyard while John does all the hard work makes him dislike Hope even more than he had before. He sniffs, aggravated.

“You're holding him too high,” John says, breaking his silence. Against the cliff he is leaning, one shoulder pushing into the chalk and crumbly bits littering over his jacket.

After a moment of confusion, Sherlock can see it. Up where the man’s hand is clutching Gladstone’s halter, not the reins. On Redbeard, Sherlock would keep his hand lower than that, and Redbeard doesn’t require that much force to be moved, and doesn't have teeth that would maim him rather than lip at him in a friendly manner. He imagines Redbeard taken from him.

Hope looks at John. “Watson thinks I don't know how to ride a pony.”

“I think you know how to ride a pony well enough, I don't think you remember how to ride a capall,” John snaps back. His words aren’t so carefully chosen anymore - the way Gladstone throws his head and the way his feet dance with the bells tied crudely around his ankles, it all must be affecting him. “It's been too long.” It has likely only been days at most. Does Hope intend to race even with a busted arm?

Hope laughs cruelly, “What, Watson? Is this,” He gestures to Sherlock, “really better than your usual ride? So much so that you’ve forgotten how simple-minded they are to control? I'll admit, that one looks like he needs a whip.”

Half the crowd smiles and laughs.

John says nothing and Sherlock flushes.

Sherlock wonders if the silence is because John gets these comments a lot, and then berates himself for wondering. The way Hope is talking about Sherlock without addressing him, though he stands right by John, clearly not invisible, makes Sherlock feel very small. So, he shuts the feeling off altogether.

John looks furious that Hope has mentioned Sherlock at all.

Gladstone knocks his face in a seemingly friendly manner against Hope’s shoulder. Hope presses back, rubbing his soft nostrils, perhaps thinking the water horse is fond of him.

Though he silently leans back against the rock, John is thinking. Sherlock can see it in the shadows under his eyes. Perhaps Hope has forgotten how his last companion died, shot by John in defense of Sherlock and taken over the cliffs on the other side of the island.

John is still and silent. Then, “Why don't you put Gladstone down, and come over here? I'd love to have a chat with you.”

Sherlock glances away, tucking his chin to hide a smirk. It's terrible that John's been put in this position, to have his heart led away by someone he hates, but he's still very funny.

Hope’s grin is as sickening as ever, “You have your ride, I have mine.” Well. Sherlock looks back. Now he's just overusing that line.

Gladstone presses his long face against Hope again, this time harder. Hope pushes him back again.

Gladstone’s withers twitch and shiver. Sherlock had never forgotten for a second that he was there, but now, Hope seems as though he has.
Gladstone’s mouth wrinkles back, revealing flat teeth. He pushes against Hope’s shoulder again.

Hope turns away from the monster, the horse that is no horse, and jibes once more at John, unable to resist another smart comment to make John look foolish in front of the crowd. Anger rumbles low in Sherlock’s belly.

“It’s all that horse,” Hope snarls, looking at John but speaking to his companion, “Nothing to do with the rider.”

“Jefferson,” John warns, pushing off the cliffs.

Hope’s point turns moot when Gladstone’s sinewy neck snaps towards him, and when his yellow teeth tear out Hope’s throat.

The birds are suspended in the air, Hope’s expression melts in a single point of an instant, people freeze, and then—

Never for a second is there stillness now - John has leapt into action, he’d seen the way Gladstone moved before it happened, and his bare heels dig into the sand like Gladstone’s massive hooves as he sprints towards his horse - Hope collapses, a bloody hand around his throat, gasping, and the crowd splits like the Red Sea.

Just like Mary, Gladstone is in one place until he isn’t - he occupies several instances of space at a time, screaming higher than the fleeing crowd, and rearing up. John snags the reins and pulls down hard, but Gladstone jerks up and snaps the leather bands apart.

Unconvinced, John reaches, and Gladstone snaps at his hands, bells rattling loudly and face curving outward like a fish’s. The horse’s eyes never shift from the ocean, and his legs shudder and rattle the bells even louder.

Someone shoves into his shoulder as they run, shattering Sherlock’s frozen state. He can’t help—John’s too powerful and so is Gladstone, the champion begins to break free of the binding magic that holds him, shrieking in excitement. The sand sprays as Gladstone pulls back from John’s grip again, dancing and eyeing the shallows. Hope’s companions leap back, shadows all across their faces from the clouds, half their focus on Hope and the other half on the horse, arms up in front of them like they could defend themselves.

Exclamations are screamed out, and everyone is looking at John and Gladstone - the ones that haven’t left. They should’ve all left, Sherlock should have left, but—

Shocked, nerves thrilled by the danger, Sherlock throws himself away from the cliff and runs across the open sand as Gladstone spins frantically, shaking like a dog to free himself of the bells, to Hope’s fallen body near the surf. Sherlock collapses himself, hardly out of reach of Gladstone’s angry rearing.

Breathing heavily, he watches Hope’s face, a horrible betrayal of the tremendous pain he’s in, the great gouge out of the side of his neck.

Hope is dying on the sand, he’s bleeding out, the waves are lapping around him, reaching for the water horse.

He needs to know.

Gladstone is screaming, and so are the bells around his ankles— the ocean’s wind blankets them all, making hard sounds to the great capall, urging him to come home. But Sherlock needs to know. He
does not let himself be taken by this song. Hope is working his lip, trying to speak. Sherlock can see chewing tobacco dark in his mouth.

“Hope,” he says, hands over the man’s face, “tell me. What we spoke of before, on the cliffs. You must tell me.”

The man gurgles, but Sherlock knows him capable of speech. Time is running out—

“Whose Races are they? Who doesn't want me riding?”

Something begins to dawn on him. Of course. Hope is clever, somewhat, but ultimately as stupid as everyone else on this island. He is malicious but would never cross his path with Sherlock’s if manageable on his own.

Why had this never occurred to him before? What’s the matter with him?

Above Gladstone’s high shrieks, Sherlock demands, “Who sent you to the cliffs?”

Another gurgle.

Whoever is trying to hurt Sherlock may be after John as well.

Sherlock remembers his mind palace, the giant white horse with the Stockyard emblem burned into her hide, and the bloody mark all over her pelt. The attack against Beryl that had been meant for the night-black Gladstone. Sabotage against John is not an option.

Sherlock presses his ungloved hand down on Hope’s wound, hard, crushing like Gladstone against his neck. His pain is nothing. In Hope’s wide eyes there is an immense fear that may be mirrored back in Sherlock’s. “You're dying, but there's still time to hurt you.” He needs to know.

Gladstone circles and screams behind them, high keening for the ocean in front of them — someone in the last of the crowd shouts, the champion horse shrieks again. He tastes sand and salt, Hope is dying—

Sherlock releases and spits, “Tell me!”

Hope coughs, struggles, then, with a last breath through torn airways and pipes--

“Moriarty!”

Sherlock jerks off of him.

Hope is dead on the sand, blood over his face and clothes.

Just a moment ago he had been alive. Just a handful of seconds is all it took for the entire scene of the beach to shift, for the white clouds to turn grey, and for the sea to change to choppy black, the water is reaching for the body.

The man with the missing fingers is shaking on the beach by the water’s edge. The sea laps at his back with every small surge, and the gulls are crying out again above like nothing has happened and no time has passed.

Sherlock looks over his shoulder to the cliffs. He’s panting even if he didn’t run more than ten meters across the sand.

Gladstone seems still, though his eyes are wild in his head, searching all around. He is bound by the
bells around him, by the flowers that someone has put into his striking white mane. Unused to any charms, his pelt shakes and quivers violently. He is both afraid and hurt, and besides the pink around his mouth, he does not look like he killed a man anymore.

Sherlock sits back on his heels, watching John, and the scene around.

John’s hands are stained with red like Gladstone’s grey mouth, and it takes a ragged heartbeat before it registers that it is Hope’s blood and not John’s. Shoulders sagging, John tentatively brushes Gladstone’s forelock away from his fish eyes. Sherlock imagines the champion striking out to sever his wrist from his arm, but the beast does no such thing, his front-facing ears warring forwards, pricked to catch each sound from its focal point.

“Gladstone,” John doesn't shout, but Gladstone’s ears press forward like he had. His shivers stop long enough for John to slowly work the harness of nails off of him, pulling at the leather straps with iron clips. It drops to the sand.

The other one of Hope’s ‘friends’ has left the beach, terrified, and struggles up the sandy path back to the cliffs -- the missing-fingers-man remains stunned, holding his own throat as if imagining how close that had been to being him on the sand beside Sherlock’s knees. He’s clearly in shock. The smell overcomes Sherlock, heavy blood, and the miasma of malcontent, and the rotting kelp on the rocks further down the shore.

Moriarty, Sherlock thinks, as he watches John with Gladstone, the shaking horse and solid rider.

Moriarty.

The man himself is there.

Moriarty.

Following the Hope’s friend up the beach with his eyes, Sherlock starts, blinking rapidly, jerking back a little with surprise.

There he stands, up on the very edges for the high cliffs, where the grass and soil bumps up. The pale yellow stems tremble with the wind blowing inward towards him. Moriarty. It’s hard to make out, but it’s him.

How long has he been standing, waiting there, and watching? Did he have a reaction, a reaction to — Sherlock looks down, staring at Hope’s lifeless body and the sand, rippled and messy from the quick departure of the crowd.

Now that Gladstone is still - shivering, but still - there are more men on the cliff sides next to Moriarty. Sherlock sees him wave a hand, and the barn workers descend the steep, sandy dune down to the cove where all this action had taken place. Sherlock sees one man carrying a stretcher, headed towards them.

He stands, knees shaky for a split second, then fixes his collar, smearing it with blood, sniffing the salt while he watches the barn workers arrange Hope’s body onto the white stretcher, just a piece of cloth between two boards. He had no family on the island anymore, his wife and children moved away, no one else besides the police may have come to collect him for the morgue. He will be buried on the middle of the island, in the old cemetery by the rocks, where sweetgrass doesn’t grow and no one ever visits. Sort of sad. But he was an ass.

Drifting almost effortlessly closer to John, Sherlock watches the giant champion horse, the lines of his face all smoothed and simple. More of the barn workers and stablehands, against the push of the
wind, have pails and baskets full of charms. One passes too close to Gladstone, and the horse kicks out a hind leg feebly. John coos, as if to a baby or prized pet. Sherlock looks up above, but can’t see Moriarty from this angle. Has he ever seen that man on a beach at all? The cold wind buffets them, throwing open Sherlock’s jacket and blowing Gladstone’s scratchy white mane over his withers. He idles steps behind the black horse’s rider, eyeing the horse.

“I found the shell at the rider’s parade, on the night of the Scorpio Festival. You asked about her yesterday, the mare goddess.”

John’s voice, sweet and unexpected, is soft against the wind. Even after all of this, he has still chosen to talk to Sherlock. “Found, or was it given?”

Clearly startled, John glances at Sherlock out of the corner of his eye, keeping the rest of his body angled towards the capall before him. The capall that has just ripped out a man’s throat— Sherlock steps back. “How…” John starts.

“I’m very clever.” Sherlock keeps his voice very quiet, as if shy of the wind, to match John’s volume, neither of them wants to risk spooking Gladstone.

John snorts. “You are very clever,” a special thrill leaps through Sherlock’s body even in the cold, “But you are also an eavesdrop. How long have you been spying on me?”

Ah, right. John so just as clever as Sherlock is his own way. Sherlock says, “Since the start. Obviously.”

“Yes, obviously. How much did you hear?”

Very aware of Gladstone’s presence and the blood on his still quivering muzzle, Sherlock plays dumb. John is fantastic when he’s clarifying something. He pulls higher on the broken reins, and Gladstone’s face turns, mouth closed, one eye regarding Sherlock. “Of what?”

“You know. The mare goddess and I.” John’s voice keeps low, hushed, like they are being watched. The barn workers move all around the beach. Sherlock now sees what they are doing, sticking flowers into the chalk cliffs, sprinkling iron shavings and blessed papers into the shallow water. The flying seagulls harshly cry out as they ride the wind above, then move as a flock somewhere back out of sight and towards Skarmouth. They surely feel the sand thrown at their faces just as much as Sherlock and John do on the sand, cold biting at their hands.

Sherlock glances across the sand - Moriarty is coming down the dunes.

Sherlock tries to remember. “I saw you talking, nothing more,” he lies.

“Liar,” John says, “though it’s true. I’d’ve kept the shell if I hadn’t already made my wish.”

Something is begging Sherlock to ask that question, the one that oversteps this line drawn before him in the sand. What did you wish for? He keeps quiet. John meets his eyes for a moment, a lighter wash of blue tide, and they then slip away, focusing instead on the figure walking towards them both.

Sherlock does not have much time until Moriarty is in earshot. “Are you okay?” He asks quietly.

“What?”

"Are you okay?"
"Why are you talking about this?"

"With Hope?"

"Sherlock, darling," John says, “I did tell him I wouldn’t hesitate.”

There is no time to let his heart thrill at a little pet name, even if it is mocking him, because the shark has arrived.

Moriarty comes to stand a meter or so from Gladstone. It would be no challenge for the horse to leap and crush him, but John pets the stripe on his face, and all air of hurt seems to fade. “Mr Moriarty,” John greets. A pause. “I’m sorry about Hope.” John squints against the wind, his jacket collar blown over his shoulder.

Moriarty doesn’t look at them, only fiddles with the fingers of his gloves. “A terrible stablehand. I don’t think he’ll be very much missed. Family all at the mainland...

“John, I’d like you to bring that horse back. He could use a cleaning. Especially around the...” Moriarty squints, and wets his bottom lip, “mouth. That filly Elementary needs her exercise as well. Tell someone to do it before you’re off.” Now he turns to regard Sherlock.

John pauses. A fight wages over his expression, somewhere between arguing and acquiescing. His grip tightens low on Gladstone’s pulled-over, snapped reins. Then, he does something peculiar, glancing between Sherlock and Moriarty, sizing each other up, as if apprehensive about leaving them alone together. But the rest of the beach is crawling with quiet workers. If John thought anything might happen, he wouldn’t leave. Would he? No. Of course not. All of these thoughts slip by Sherlock’s mind in the fraction of a second.

John nods, finally, and pulls the giant horse away from Sherlock and across the beach, where Gladstone’s heavy plated hooves sink into the substrate, to lead him up the sandy dunes. The fact that the Stockyard owner had had enough power over John still to send him away, a man now not under his employ, without a debate sends a powerful sense of frustration and brevity through Sherlock’s arms and head. It occurs to Sherlock that he and John haven’t made any plans to meet again.

“Mister Sherlock.”

Now comes his chance. John is not here anymore to advise him against talking to the man who owns half the Island. “Mister Moriarty. I’ve been meaning to have a conversation with you.”

The terns are not the same as they had been on that day. And though John has just left his view over the sides of he grassy cliffs, Sherlock fixes his collar and prepares for a talk that he had not had before. His anxiety is through the roof. Nothing to lose.

“What could you gain from a conversation with me, Sherlock Holmes? We’ve hardly ever spoken before,” Moriarty drawls. Then he smiles like a barn cat. “The Great Sherlock Holmes, solving all the mysteries of the island. Don’t look at me like that. I know all about your hobbies. I’m the most powerful man on the island.”

Sherlock ignores the bait. “I’ve come to bargain.”

“Bargain? You have no money. What could I want from you?”

This is peculiar, because the line of questioning implies that Moriarty already knows what Sherlock desires, and that Sherlock is the one in the dark.
“Beryl. She almost died in your keep.”

“If you want the dead horse, you’ll have to go fishing.” At this rate, the Ford will rust before he ever gets back to it.

Sherlock comes to stand beside him. Moriarty is gazing down at his own hands, pulling at his gloves. They resemble Sherlock’s, although they are not the same, and now Moriarty reaches into his pocket. Sherlock then turns out towards the ocean, watching the waves fall and retreat. “You know what I want.”

Moriarty finishes his fiddling with the gloves, drawing a silver case of cigarettes out of the pocket. “Everything is at a price, Mister Sherlock.” A naked formality, giving him a title, Sherlock is sure. “You know what I am willing to give.”

Moriarty smiles again, eyes downcast to pull another, thinner case from his pocket. How benign he had seemed at first. Never more, Sherlock sees the intelligence behind those dark eyes. It rivals his own. It is too bad that Moriarty is insane. He might have, once, been someone to talk to. “I’ll have you stop lurking around my Yard.”

“That’s not all you want.”

“Well,” Moriarty says. He offers a cigarette to Sherlock, and he accepts. Moriarty even lights it for him. They both watch the ocean while Moriarty removes a cigar from the thinner case, and draws the entire thing along his tongue, wetting it, before sticking it between his teeth and lighting it. The paper crinkles and oranges. He makes eye contact with Sherlock as he take a long drag and blows out dark smoke.

Disgusting. It almost makes Sherlock want to stop smoking.

“Well,” Moriarty says again, “the things I want from you are not appropriate to speak of on this beach. But that’s not me, that’s what Magnussen would say, the dear tool. I only ever wanted to talk with you.”

Sherlock’s top lip curls a tad. Moriarty smirks, moving his feet a bit to stretch. He pulls the cigar from his mouth. “Now you’re getting comfortable,” he says.

“You know what I want,” Sherlock repeats. The cigarette feels tantalizing down his lungs. He drags hard from it and extinguishes a solid half. He taps the ash down, the wind carries it away. It’s a very good cigarette.

More smoke. “Johnny.”

No. Moriarty wants John. Sherlock wants John to be free. But, he nods. Perhaps he can play off this for a moment.

Becoming distracted again, Moriarty faces the wind, blowing back his dark hair, and squinting into it, shielding the cigar with his hands. “We play the same game, you and I.”

“Do we.”

“You are selfish, wanting a man,” Moriarty says. Sherlock bites his tongue. “We could be so good together. We could talk.”

“Moriarty. This is unpleasant for you as it is for I.”
"On the contrary," Moriarty shifts closer until they are shoulder to shoulder, just two men on the sand, facing the water that bushes along the sand, lapping at Hope’s blood. “This is very pleasant. But I won’t keep you long. You’ll have big things to do this evening. Lestrade’s photographs have developed...”

No more subject change. “What do you want for it?”

Moriarty is uncharacteristically quiet for a moment.

Perhaps Sherlock has ripped the barter too wide, given his enemy too many advantages.

Now, Moriarty knows Sherlock would do almost anything to achieve the ends.

He blows more smoke, and the wind immediately buffers it away.

They are both very smart men, even Sherlock can see just how stupid Moriarty plays to please the visiting mongers. He doesn’t really care about the enormous wealth he’s acquired - what he cares about is the power that wealth has over the people on Thisby. This conversation will be short because Moriarty can see through him, as if he is nothing but salty air.

“My condition is this: you will not race, if I allow Johnny to buy that horse from me if he wins. I know what you desire, and I know what he desires.”

He spits that horse like it is an ordinary one, but the more vital part of the statement is that Moriarty has it in his head that he knows what John wants. Sherlock wonders if it has anything to do with his wish, but it is probably Gladstone that Moriarty has in mind.

“Yes,” Sherlock responds. He is ready to give up everything he has worked towards.

“You won’t race?”

Sherlock focuses on the water.

Silence among the barn people sprinkling flowers - the terns peep above, relentless with their mating games even though a man has just died.

Then, the Stockyard owner asks, almost peacefully, “What’s the matter with you?”

Moriarty looks at him. Sherlock never imagined they’d act civil to one another. But there are witnesses around, he supposes. He watches the stablehands scatter manure and bells and flower charms over the high cliffs here. He recalls what John said about making the new capaill think that they’re going to meet a formidable opponent if they come up here. It seems they are making any water horse coming up think that they will meet more Island charms, even if they can taste Hope’s washed-out blood.

Moriarty continues, low snake-voice, “What’s the matter? What has gotten into your funny little brain?”

Sherlock chokes on smoke. Something.

“You won’t race. Because of him. Only because of him. Can one man be worth the whole island, Mister Holmes?”

Sherlock says, “Yes.”

Since Sherlock adores him, yes.
Moriarty’s cat-smile lengthens. “I’d never thought I’d live to see the day.” Smoke, a wider smile, like the stretching mouths of the capaill. “Incredible.”

Sherlock remains silent, hands in pockets, staring into the shimmering surface of the dark water as the wind blows his hair back.

Some days, the ocean is real and blue, teeming with green and the sand that the light shows. But this late morning it is all choppy black. It feels like he’s gone on a quest to the arctic to find the North Pole; where all compasses point true, and he looks around, expecting to see the jagged starts of ice. Nothing but cliffs and more black water, and a bit of red sand that is being licked away by the sea.

“You will race. I want to see it. I want to see you go against John Watson. Since he is worth the island, I want to see your face,” Moriarty says, “when he dies.”

Now, he turns to regard Moriarty, who watches his men pour around the beach, one is searching for signs of capaill that have recently come ashore, while the rest are sticking flowers in the crevices of the rocks that make the cliffs. The whole panel of this beach looks like it's been set up for a memorial, with the pale blue and red cords, the bells that remind him of Mary tinkling in the wind. The men who carried Hope away have disappeared completely, though their footprints denting the sand remain, blown slowly into flatness by the wind.

“And believe me, Sherlock,” the dead eyes connect with his, “he will. One man can only tempt fate so many times. Sometimes,” he crushes the cigar’s end between his fingers, and tilts his head, “sometimes, fate snaps.”

Coming from him, the statement seems much more ominous than it had when Sherlock had himself thought so.

The man drops the cigar, and crushes it into the sand.

Moriarty reaches out, and slips his hand to Sherlock's wrist, giving it a firm squeeze that Moriarty allows to linger. Disgust rises in Sherlock's throat, then he begins to taste it on the back of his tongue. Moriarty pulls away, and turns around.

“I will see you on the beaches, Sherlock.”

He walks away, posh shoes dipping the sand as he climbs elegantly back up the hill and out of the cove.

--

Sherlock gets home and throws the slide from under his microscope against the opposite wall, hard. He half-expected things to fall off and for his room to echo his anger, but the slide is much too light. So encased in his anger, he picks up the chair from beneath his workspace, raises it over his shoulder, and then puts it gently back on the ground. There’s no point in destroying Mrs Hudson’s house.

‘You will not race,’ Moriarty had said, ‘if I allow Johnny to buy that horse…’
What could that man gain from him not wanting to race? He couldn’t consider Sherlock actual competition.

What could he gain from sending Hope to the cliffs? To try and discourage him, again, from racing? Any way put, it’s clear Moriarty doesn’t want him to step foot on that beach come racing day. Or, it was. After their conversation today, the madman seems to have changed his mind, stating he wants Sherlock to watch John die.

What’s the point of that?

And what does Moriarty know? Sherlock thinks, that I can’t name myself?

Like the mare goddess, John has a way with the sea. Sherlock tries, but there is no way John was in the costume on the night of the Scorpio Festival. Not the right body, height, anything. Sherlock thinks of the shell he had seen John slip into that jacket pocket. Why does it bother him so much, that thought always chasing him around? John had already made his wish. Damn it. What had it been for? For Gladstone? To win the Races again?

A thought strikes him - John and him are both to race, against each other. When the moment for action comes, will one hesitate to save the other? Could it kill Sherlock, if he did so? It could. For all these days, he hasn’t once considered what racing against John will actually entail.

The rider pauses in the middle of the room, hands to his face. He should wash these, there’s caked blood chipping around his nail beds and in the faint lines of his hands.

It’s barely noon.

The rusting Ford is out front, nearly kaput as always, as Redbeard and Josephine graze in the pasture around the house. The grass here is short, as though the salt-throwing winds are beating sprouts into submission.

Redbeard gets a workout. The clasp of leather reins, none of those iron-beads, rub over and under and between the dry skin on Sherlock's hands. He can hear Josey’s whinnies as the pair of them race around the fencing, leaping over the broken pieces from the piebald.

Five days until the Races.

Sherlock needs to get the hell away from all these treeless fields. Maybe, maybe he can see what Mycroft was talking about, the damn horses.

“Always following me around,” Sherlock remarks quietly to Redbeard, who now shuffles in his stall, using a hoof to play in the sawdust over the flooring. Musgrave, the cat without more than a stub of a tail, winds around Sherlock’s legs as he walks over the cement flooring. It’s not as clean as the stables at the Stockyard, and it’s littered with hay and dust and indents and cracks where it has worn thin. Somehow, it's infinitely better.

As the light fades while he is inside the two-stall stable that leans up against the side of the house, he means to latch the door shut, making sure there is no sliver of outside, and so there will be no jigsaw piebald at his heels.

A burst of wind rushes to meet his face as he shuts it, blurring the grass into lines outside the fence, where it hasn’t been eaten by Josey.

No, he cannot see what Mycroft could not see past. Thisby is beautiful. The fish stink, but they shimmer with a ripeness that cannot come from mainland fish. Even the horses are beautiful, their
iridescence, their songs, meant to be listened to from under the water, their forward-facing fish eyes. Even the murderous ones, the dark ones, the man-killers. It’s possible Sherlock’s biggest enemy will not be a horse that he does not know. It could be Lestrade’s horse, or Mary.

It could be Gladstone.

-/-

Just like that night when he signed up for the Races, began all of this by putting his name on the blackboard, Skarmouth is alive.

So used to the bare, flat land and rocks and pastures made of hard dirt and dry grass, Sherlock feels strange even thinking about walking on town stone. But, here he is again, watching teenagers knock down the paper lanterns strung up all across street lamps and telephone wires down the streets. The waves of bicycles pile up on every wall that isn’t already taken by someone smoking, or, occasionally, vomiting from too much drink.

The drummers throb on, the life force of the village, and how do they keep at this music so long and hard, for so many days in a row? They must have very strong arms.

Girls in bells run by while Sherlock parks the Ford. No use in risking Redbeard here - gamblers will do anything to even slightly raise their odds. The car needs to stop and start as people run in between the vehicles in the street, feet hitting the ground in tune with the music. This is nothing like the festival, but it is still very overwhelming, and so when he parks the Ford our back of Hawkins Tavern, Sherlock takes a moment to himself to pray that it will turn back on when he wants to leave.

He pushes the door open, hitting someone’s bike, and then closes and locks the Ford, striding confidently toward the pub. He tries to convince himself he knows what he’s doing - look at the odds, watch the other riders and the way they move and drink, look at who the gamblers are betting on. Go home.

Wasn’t it John that had implied that the Races are not all about which horse is fastest? He’s smart, he’ll know what to do, and Sherlock has laid trust in him. He smells burning garbage out back, and remembers the dumpster behind the pub where the girl in the yellow dress had been found (though not where she had been murdered).

It pulls his mind all the way back to the man who had been frothing at the mouth when he died, the man who had come into Hooper’s for tarts while John and Sherlock ate inside. No, no time for that, Sherlock can only handle one thing at a time, the mystery will have to keep him up at night. Perhaps he can catch Lestrade around tonight or tomorrow and weedle out any new details of the case, he’ll have to know what got into his system…

Enough with the murder. If he can’t come close in these Races, studying well to do so, then there is no chance he’ll afford the cost of living to keep actually solving Thisby’s problems.

Men and several women are smoking heavily outside the pub entrance, spitting out wads of chewing tobacco, or doing otherwise gross things. He can tell each of them have already gone through more than a pack this evening, and they eye him like they know him when he walks in. They likely do -
everyone knows everyone’s business on Thisby, and with entering the Races with Redbeard, Sherlock’s become more obviously outcast than he had been before.

He strides in the open door, gets a good whiff of whiskey and booze and vomit and sweat, and the further he manages his way to the back past roaring men, the warmer it becomes with the heat of bodies and space heaters that he knows Janine keeps behind the counter. It’s all oppressive, not unlike Gladstone on the beach this morning, air heavy and hot… He stands at the bar, cold hands in his long jacket pockets, staring up at the blackboard with the racing odds. He hardly gets to study it at all before someone’s voice cuts in.

“Sit down, boy. Ye’re making me nervous.”

Sherlock looks to his left.

The man who’s spoken lives on the island but was not born here. His hair is tousled and long, half of it pulled back into some sort of tie that's been too stretched out to be functional anymore. The worn, oversized green flannel hangs down his stocky frame, and his dirty hands clutch around his sixth… no, seventh glass of hard liquor. And he's calling Sherlock a boy. Sherlock frowns, and tries to ignore him. Who’s behind John in the odds? Let’s see…

The man vies for his attention again, “Can’t stand all night.”

“You were born on the mainland where your family ran a failing dairy farm, you ran away from it for Thisby and its danger and you left the rest of your many siblings to do all of your hard work for you. You’ve no right to be telling me what to do and what not to do.”

“Oh, ye’re the clever one, then!” The man laughs.

Startled by such a genuine reaction, Sherlock gleans over the man again, still frowning. The clever one? Has John been talking about him? His heart leaps.

“The one with the pony.”

Ah. “Horse,” Sherlock says.

“They say you're trying to study these capaill.”

He rolls his eyes. He is trying very hard, if the bones in his room have anything to do with it, but he's unsure why the man cares.

“I grew up in Scotland. F’ll of fantasies of these wild horses, the kelpies. They trick you into riding them,” the man extinguishes the end of his cigarette, pushing the ember into the table wood, “and they drown you. And then we come to learn of Thisby.”

“The fantasies,” Sherlock says, “not real?”

A land-going, lake-dwelling relative of the capaill uisce. It could be proven that these horses weren't strictly native to Thisby, that they had descendants, things that were like them, elsewhere, though perhaps not exactly the same. It could be proven that it was not all magic Sherlock is salivating, thinking about the taxonomy.

Except. *Tricking you*, like the man had just said, was very different than *hunting you*, like Thisby’s horses. Tricks remind him of Mary, hunting reminds him of Gladstone.

The silver-eyed man looks at him. “Ye're very interested.”
“It's very interesting. A relative of the water horses could be revolutionary in their studies. Now. The fantasies. You don't think they're just legends.

The man removes another pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, and slips the end of one between his teeth, holding it there. He lights it with the quick strike of a match, and Sherlock breathes in the smoke. “The boys, we would all say we saw them, down by the cricks. To scare our sisters. Everyone was told never to go to the water alone, a lot like here. But they would be near the water always, nothin’ seasonal like here. There was a farm,” he said, “up on the hill. An older man, a sculptor, lived there - never made anything except horses out of wood. We all knew he'd seen the kelpies, but he never said anything to anyone in the town.

“Me and the lads, we would go fishing alone in the streams. You could see the colts, sometime, in a body o’ water that small, which never settl’d with me, always made me think. Your capaill,” instead of sounding like ‘copple’, his accent makes the word sound more like ‘cop-leh’, “are very big, like the ocean. The kelpies on land are smaller, they're tricksters. In the kelpies, they change in the water, but I've seen the capaill in the rain, they'll change anywhere--”

Sherlock cuts him off, “You're rambling.”

There's a bout of ruckus by the door, Sherlock does not turn to see why. Undeniably, it's some sort of brawl or argument over horses.

The Scottish man scoffs, “‘Course I ‘mm. Always am.” He pays his tab and gets up to stand, leaving Sherlock with taxonomy to think about. There was more he could've learned, but it's just as well. The Scottish man is very recognizable, long hair and gruff voice and beard. Sherlock will find him another night, perhaps after the Races.

Another loud shout by the door, indecipherable language. Sherlock grumbles to himself, and sits finally, putting elbows up on the bar and drawing a notebook out of his coat where it was kept. He didn’t bring his newspaper with the cuttings of when John was trampled in the Races, people might think he was obsessed with the champion. Or something like that.

Instead, Sherlock sets to work on copying down the list over his head. He has it memorized and put up in his mind palace, but something about having information down on clean creamy paper is incredibly pleasing to him, and aides his research.

Last year, and every year past, Sherlock had never taken part of the festivities, or even ventured far into town because of all the excitement.

Everyone in Skarmouth is always delighted in the last week leading up to the Races. They have a different tone from each other, these nights of excitement versus the stale morning of the Races. People are ready for the thrill, but they’re not ready for death. They'll encounter both in less than week’s time.

So will Sherlock.

“Hey.”

Two ales in tall, foaming glasses, dripping with condensation are placed at the surface of the wooden bar beside him. “Oh,” He looks up, surprised. “John,” he marvels.

With a bit of an auburn five o’ clock shadow going on down his neck and over his cheeks, John’s blue eyes, dark in the pub’s shadows, stare down at him.

“I was almost afraid I’d never see you again after leaving you with my employer. Saw you talking
with your friend there,” John nods towards the man lingering by the door, grinning a bit wolfishly while he pulls the stool out from beneath the overhanging bar. He seems to decide against this, a bit of a shift in his gaze, and pushes the stool away again.


“Was he bothering you?” Now the eye towards the Scottish man looks a little more dangerous.

“No,” Sherlock says, “no more than anyone else does, anyways. And I wasn't waiting for anyone, so you can sit down.” That was obviously what was troubling John. Sherlock’s eyes drop to the glasses by John’s strong, weathered hands. He’s more drooling at those than at the beers.

John laughs, “Hey, you'd best watch yourself, these are both for me.”

“I don't--“

“Just having you on, here you go. I prefer scotch, anyways.”

What he'd meant to say was, I don't drink, or I’m driving but if John's offering him things, Sherlock will accept. Once John pushes the glass to him, slosh running over the edges, Sherlock drags the glass closer, and lifts it. It's a dark brew, whatever it is. Smells very strongly, too.

In all, it reminds him of the very pub they are now in. Dark in the low light, smelling of sweat and men and beer and heavy vodka that is more like moonshine than anything regulated. Someone bangs on a table and someone roars a bargain or a bet at the first. Things like this go on all around the loud room.

“Imported?” He asks.

John pulls the stool out again and sits down, feet on the low bar. Sherlock’s reach the floor. As John sits, his skin brushes by Sherlock's, elbow on the bar. John’s arms are hairy, but his skin is smooth like polished sea glass. Shivers run all through him.

Without missing a beat, John winks. “Only the best for the new rider.”

Winks.

Sherlock’s face is very, very hot. John clearly isn't flirting with him. Not like that. Sherlock would just like him to. He's allowing his wants to color a conversation that should remain objective.

Smirking, Sherlock asks, “Do you give this treatment to all the other new riders? The beer, the appointments on the cliffs?”

“There are no others,” John says. He lifts his glass and takes a long swallow, then sets it down with a noise against the wooden bar. “Only you.” He wipes his upper lip with the back of his hand. Sherlock can hear the stubble and skin when John scratches his cheek.

Now that Sherlock's said that, and John said that in response, he's flustered. Sherlock tries, “I--”

John’s gaze, glancing him up and down as if sizing him up for a meal, stops him from speaking anymore. His mouth moves a little, but he says nothing else.

Finally, John smiles broadly, as if glad he managed to shut him up. He takes another drink from his beer, which, with his strong arms and the low light of the pub and the shadows and music from drums outside, make for a very manly picture. “Do you take the treatment from all the other
champions?”

Ah. Now it’s just a game.

Sherlock looks into his own glass, failing to entirely suppress a smile. “Only the winners from five years in a row, so I’ve a very limited selection.”

“Ha! What about six years?”

“Are you really planning on winning again?”

“Well, I’ve never planned on it, per se, it always seems to happen. No matter the bets.”

“Your odds are very high,” Sherlock says, a touch of bitterness behind his voice. It's not directed at John, and is resigned in its manner. No hope of winning, but he'll die trying. He glances up to the black chalkboard above them both. From down here, he can barely see John's name, tilted way up at the top. Sherlock closes his notebook.

Then, his. 46 to 1. Jefferson Hope was killed at the beach today by the horse John will ride in one week’s time, and his name is crossed out on the list, along with his capall’s name. There are several others like that. Murray was correct, people do have a tendency to die.

“Your odds are high,” Sherlock repeats, “and so are your spirits.” He pauses, and then lies, “I take it the talk with Moriarty went well?”

John’s eyes widen a little, and then go back to the way they’d been before, relaxed from the drink. Inevitably, he is thinking of how he was fired and then, Sherlock presumes, re-hired with the incentive of Gladstone as a prize. Only, John has no knowledge that it was Sherlock who bargained for him.

"Yes. I'll buy Gladstone if I win. I should thank you for encouraging me.”

Sherlock smiles. “Exciting. But where will you keep him?” He neglects to ask why, if John’s talk went so well, was Hope on his horse. Doing that would only expose his influence, and irritate John and, maybe, make him think twice about interacting with Sherlock again, which Sherlock cannot afford.

“I’ve owned a small house on the west end, it’s got a stable. When you race for that much, you can buy most anything. I live close to Gladstone, though. No use walking two miles in the cold just for work. Figured I would use the place when I retired.”

“If you ever did,” Sherlock quips, delighted when John smiles. Sherlock’s eyes drop back down but there is no time to turn back to the board with the odds. Great eyes with long lashes are peering over at him.

Janine is looking at him from behind the bar, and she's not the only waitress or bartender around, but she suddenly has eyes only for him. And then John beside him. She finishes up the order she's attending to, and Sherlock is too slow to come up with a plan to leave, because the next moment she smiles at the dumbstruck drunk and slips away from him with a tip. Towards them she comes.

This is going to be a wonderful interaction.

“Sherlock, love,” she crows, crossing her arms over the counter and making sure her breasts are settled on top of them for any man to look at. Sherlock never breaks sour eye contact. “You sure picked a helluva night to come out.”
It's exactly what she said when Sherlock had come in to put his and Redbeard’s name on the blackboard. Undermining him then had been irritating, but now that John’s right next to him, leaning back in his stool and seeming tense, it's nakedly embarrassing.

“Every night this week is going to be just as this one.”

“Picked a helluva season, then. This year's going to be fast,” she says. She looks at John very prettily, which Sherlock distinctly does not like. “Oh, you picked a helluva boy, too. Five-time champion of the Scorpio Races, what a man.” No doubt that she had overheard their conversation is in Sherlock's mind, he rolls his eyes, but still feels his cheeks heat as if he were in the bright sun.

John leans a little more forward, drink in hand.

There's nothing Sherlock can insult her directly for. Best to insult her judgement, then. Sherlock turns up his nose, spitting, “You sure picked one, too. Dandruff, ginger cat he will like more than you, and…” he looks at the sawdust on the floor, “…a history of erectile dysfunction. Nah, maybe not that good.”

She laughs, still sounding very pretty. It's all for John’s benefit. “We all good, then?” She gently touches his arm. He looks down with distaste.

Sherlock gives her a tight smile, pushing his glass up to his lips and taking a small sip. “Absolutely.” Very aware one is not meant to sip beer.

“Can I get you anything?” Janine says to John. Stop talking to him.

John says, “A whiskey. And a scotch. Thanks.”

Janine grins, her lipstick and hair as perfect as ever (which Sherlock silently compares to his own - product in, he should be fine), and turns around to the many bottles by the mirrors in the back.

John tilts his head to the right, nodding to Sherlock with a big, meltingly-fat smile on his face. “Don't worry. I'm not a drunkard unlike some of the men on this island, I want you to try a couple fingers of scotch. Do you...?” He points a short finger to the back of the bar.

“Do you mean to get me drunk, Mister Watson?” Sherlock plays. “She’s the owner.”

“Perhaps a bit tipsy. Maybe then I'll get you to open up.” A pregnant pause, Sherlock’s cheeks start to color. John stumbles, losing his composure for the first time in awhile, because his face has dropped. He coughs, “About the Races. About why you're racing.”

Sherlock relaxes. The ease of their conversation returns.

But as all good things, it comes to a swift end.

Someone sits right next to Sherlock, and he whips around, just about to snap out about how many more empty seats there are left that are not near him, when he sees who it is.

He still snaps, “Look how many places there are to put your fat bottom, Lestrade.” Lestrade isn't even fat. Damn. He could've made a poke about his wife leaving him again. It would've been more effective. An eye twitches.

Lestrade signals with a hand for a beer from Janine, which she delivers happily and takes his money.

“'We've got the toxicology reports back,’” Geoff says.
"Lestrade," Sherlock warns. Now is not the time. He's talking to John.

"It's aconitine," Lestrade notes, “thought you’d want to know.”

Sherlock frowns, an interest quickly becoming overbearing. “No, what? Aconitine. That doesn't make any…” Any sense. It makes no sense at all.

“Sherlock?” John interjects.

Sherlock waves a hand dismissively, “John, this is Jeremy Lestrade.”

“DI Greg Lestrade, Mr Watson.”

He furrows his brow. There are so many other ways to have done it, what's the point of using something so… simple?

Is it really that simple?

A squeeze upon his palm. When he looks down, it appears that John has slid his hand across the stained wood of the counter and over the edge of Sherlock’s hand, giving him a brief snippet of calm, and then followed by a large amount of anxiety of such a gesture in such a place. He glances about the tavern, to John, and back to Lestrade, who stares at their hands before making surprised eye contact again.

“Aconitine. It's not artificially synthesized - it's a natural component. There are so many more effective toxins, even as blatant as anthrax, why would someone choose aconitine?”

“I'm telling you,” Lestrade takes a large swig from his mug, and licks his lips, “maybe it was an accident.”

“You don't just accidentally--”

“Could've been.”

Lestrade is so frustrating. Sherlock takes a deep breath, smells all the different sorts of whiskey that Janine keeps behind the bar, the different polishes of the shoes in the room, and waves it all away with his free hand, dismissing it. “Aconitine is the main toxin the monkshood flower. Wolfsbane is another name for it. But it doesn't grow here, it's not native. A gardener cannot accidentally harvest and eat it because it does not grow here. And it tastes - horrible, he would've known he was eating something bad, but he finished the bite anyways.”

“Small enough dosage, maybe he wouldn't have noticed it. Tarts at Hooper's are usually very sweet.”

“It could've covered the bitterness, but perhaps it wasn't--”

Above the clatter of someone shouting bets for the Races at another person, Lestrade says, “Had to have been eaten. There weren't any marks on the body.”

Sherlock looks at him, and the rest of the light in the pub falls away. “You examined the body? More than a toxicology report?”

“Family needs a funeral on the mainland. He's already on his own ferry.”

They've shipped the body away. No, no, no. “You didn't - you didn't look correctly.” There's something wrong about this picture. Something isn't adding up. He needs to solve this. “The body’s
Where would someone on the island get monkshood? Enough of a dosage to kill a man could be smuggled into even a hollow ring on a woman’s finger, and coming from the mainland with a man just to kill him would make sense if one wanted to be rid of him, but why all the theatrics?

“Why the lipstick?”

Sherlock looks up. It's John that has spoken. “What?”

“The man who died,” he nods to Sherlock. Lestrade seems irritated, and focuses an alcohol-induced glare at Sherlock, as if Sherlock had been the one to tell John about the murder. “I was with you in the bakery yesterday morning, Sherlock. I do look at the papers, I listen to the news, Mr Lestrade,” he defends Sherlock a bit with that, which makes him feel better. He continues, “There was red all over his face.”

“Must’ve been snogging someone before breakfast,” Lestrade says, waving down a bartender for another drink.

Sherlock finally removes his hand from John’s grip, warm and clammy now, and pinches his brow and closes his eyes against an oncoming migraine attributed to all the noise around him. Perhaps he took too hard of a fall on the beach that night of the storm. “He puts it on himself, there's nothing to be had there.”

Surprised, but not put off, John remarks, “He should've been better at taking it off. Don't you think he could've looked in a mirror before going out in public?” He slides his hands away from Sherlock, back to his own glass of scotch.

Sherlock stops.

Yes.

He would've.

“Oh,” Sherlock blinks.

Things begin to shift into place.

“Anyways,” Lestrade says. Someone jostles him from behind, sending him hunched over the bar for a moment, but it's over in less than a second. A by-product of being in a crowded, rowdy area with lots of drunk men. In a tone a bit more irked than before, he goes on, “Doesn't seem to matter who put the lipstick on who,” he scoffs, “Who puts lipstick on before breakfast, anyways?”

“Exactly.”

John looks at him. “Sherlock?”

“No, exactly, Lestrade. Who puts it on before breakfast?”

Confused, Lestrade supplies, “Women?”

“But he's not a woman, doesn’t even want to be one, he just likes to dress like one occasionally. That's all - he wouldn't put lipstick on before going to Hooper’s. Before going to Hooper’s, he would've taken it off. A shower would’ve gotten rid of it, so he didn’t shower the night before or that morning.”
“What’re you saying, exactly?” Lestrade asks, voice gruff from drink. John is watching his face and listening intently, ever the loyal, invested companion.

“Dresses in women’s clothing, puts on makeup late at night, Lestrade, there are subcultures on this island that even you aren’t aware of, the horses aren’t the only thing people come to Thisby for,” Sherlock begins to rattle on, gaining speed now, “we’ve a wonderful subterranean community. The man was ill, not only did he have lipstick, he had a rash by his mouth, or he was covering something by the side of his lips,” Sherlock makes a frantic gesture to his bottom lip, and John watches him do it.

“Wait, a rash? Now,” Lestrade says, “I thought it was just the shadows of the photograph, but there did seem to be something there.”

Thrilled, Sherlock continues, “But the lipstick wasn’t a purposeful cover. I doubt it was a rash at all, but perhaps a sore of some sort, indicating a weakened or sick immune system. If he was ill,” he says decisively, “there would be much less poison required to kill him.”

There!

John is slowly nodding, “And he would’ve forgotten the lipstick entirely if he was feeling off. Feverish.”

Lestrade looks at the pair of them, and Sherlock’s heart races with the thrill of the deductions. “You still haven’t solved it, Sherlock, who’s done it?”

“Someone with access to the mainland regularly enough to buy the monkshood, but they need a reason to kill a sick man. Lestrade, I need the man’s visitation file. He didn’t visit the Stockyard,” Sherlock turns to confirm with John, who nods, incredibly invested, “and he isn’t a monger. Not a gambler either, he only came for the community of Thisby. He would’ve marked ‘pleasure’ in his file, and although he is the same way at home on the mainland, he evidently irritated someone local.”

“Customs has those files - can I give them to you tomorrow?”

“There’s a ferry that leaves in the morning,” John interjects, “the killer could leave Thisby, or could’ve left already.”

“No, he’s local,” Sherlock says. “He wouldn’t leave. He’s likely a fisherman, or someone with a job in the import ships or stores.”

Lestrade pauses, “What local would have monkshood on hand? If the perpetrator was angry at the victim, he would’ve acted out fairly quickly. That’s how it usually happens.”

Hm. “Older cultures usedaconite for hunting, lacing the tips of arrows or spears for paralyzing the animals. Drowned countless whales that way.”

“They’d have to be fairly wealthy for that,” Lestrade says. They all go quiet for a moment. No one wants to suggest his name. Anyone nearby could overhear.

John laughs.

Sherlock looks at him. “What?”

“Well, the only man who spear fishes on the island is my employer, out on those fancy boats of his in the summer and spring. But you never know what the fishermen on those boats are doing,” Sherlock is almost convinced it is Moriarty, until John goes on, “I’ve heard rumors of whaling, during the
“Lestrade,” Sherlock instructs, dazzled by John’s insight, “do some research on what whaling could be going on by the coves and the southeast end of the Island, there’s bound to be something illegal going on there. John,” here, another pause, because he’s still absolutely floored by what John has done. He almost worried he’d have to revisit some of his old allies on the island, those in the community the victim was seemingly a part of, and ask what might’ve been going on. “Absolutely brilliant.”

John smiles. Sherlock focuses on his eyes instead of Lestrade’s case, and now he’s sure he’s being embarrassing and staring dreamily into them. He’s so smart. So in tune with island rumors.

Lestrade looks pissed. “So, now I’ve got to do full investigative reports on the fishermen of the island? It’ll take days. And you know how rumors are with those men, if they hear of me looking into their highly lucrative side business, they’ll hide all evidence.”

“Make it seem routine. Like you’re checking what nets they’re using and such.”

“The lot still won’t believe me.”

Men roar and crash their drinks together somewhere in the pub as Lestrade pushes himself away from the counter.

Chapter End Notes

Happy new year!! Tune in for the next chapter where we may or may not get some classic John and Sherlock running around at night tryna catch a criminal...
Chapter Summary

A grip.
“John,” Sherlock starts, but John’s fingers tighten on the fabric of his coat.
John hushes him, low and under his breath, more of an exhale than a real noise.
The sound of the hallway-foyer door.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lestrade sighs, sliding a few coins onto the counter beside his few empty glasses. He puts a fist next to his mouth, holding in a belch, stomach tight. He isn’t drunk, just drank too much too quickly, though he certainly couldn’t serve as an officer at the moment.

“I’ll have to conduct all of these reports in the morning. Sherlock, and over the next few days,” he adds. Sherlock finally looks away from John, back to being fascinated with his case. “The pictures and the toxicology reports are back at the station, in the notary’s office. I’ll bring them to you first thing in the morning.”

Sherlock is already planning on retrieving them tonight. It’s entirely plausible that he will not live another week, what with the Races, and he longs to solve the confusing case before then. If he can get the photographs and report, there will be a higher chance of finding clues as to who could be the poisoner.

He waves a hand, pretending to cooperate, at least for another few minutes, until after Lestrade leaves. Best to not let him in on the plan. Lestrade is always against a few things, one being Sherlock running around in Skarmouth or Tholla after dark, and two being Sherlock sneaking into his offices. After dark, or in the daytime. Anytime, really.

“Watson,” Lestrade says, extending a hand behind Sherlock’s back, “it was good to meet you.”

“And you, Inspector.” John shakes it. Sherlock has the sense that they both knew the other, but had never met. Both were fairly well-known figures around Thisby. A name without a face on a very small, cold island.

A ruckus across the bar, someone spills a drink, and more ice cold glasses of whisky and scotches are handed out by a waitress in a thinning dress. Sherlock rolls his eyes.

“I’ll drop them off at Mrs Hudson’s for you tomorrow, Sherlock. And please,” he sighed heavily, pushing aside the bands of his jacket to settle his hands upon his hips, “don’t let me in if you’re not dressed. Donovan keeps giving me shit.”

Sherlock sneers, “I never let you in. You always walk in like your authority has an extended meaning that you may waltz onto any private property.” How dare Lestrade mention Sherlock’s private habits when John’s just over his shoulder, likely laughing at him? He frowns further.

“Then don’t let Mrs Hudson let me in this time. Ta, boys.” Lestrade touches his forehead, and waves
a hand at the pair of them. A few men bump into him on the way back to the door, and Lestrade only gives them space, exasperated. Half of his weariness is likely from his interactions with Sherlock tonight.

He turns back to John as Lestrade is swallowed into the crowd of drunken townsfolk, contrasted heavily in the overhead lights. The bags under his eyes don’t seem too bad, but that stubble over his neck looks itchy. And handsome. And a bit red, because John has been methodically scratching at some of it throughout the night. Now, Sherlock hears his nails rasp over his skin and hair.

“Do you know any of the fishermen?” Sherlock asks.

John sets down his drink, upper lip wet. “Not any personally, but some of the lot at the Yard know some fishermen.” He rubs his chin.

“Would any of the Yard be willing to talk?”

John shakes his head, and a man with his group pass behind him to get to the bar, though John isn’t jostled while the men call out for Janine’s bartending attention.

Somewhere outside, Sherlock can hear the drummers and the fiddlers playing loud, bounding Scorpio rhythms. He tried placing their whereabouts in his mental map of Skarmouth, but the noise is drowned out by the men in the tavern, and it becomes impossible to tell.

“None of them will be at the Yard now, mind a few who don’t drink. Barely five days until the Races, all these festivities? And give up fishermen for what— nothing? No one’s going to give something up for nothing.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, settling an elbow on the bar. He fingers the side of his notebook, scratching his nail on the spine. “Lestrade won’t get very far with his investigation. I do so hate admitting it, but he was correct in his assumption that the fishermen will refuse to speak with him.”

“They do tend to clam up, yeah.” John downs the rest of his whiskey. He motions to Sherlock, “Try your scotch.”

“I am not finished with the beer.”

“Like I said, not trying to get you drunk. It’s alright if you don’t finish it all. Especially if you don’t usually drink.” At Sherlock’s surprised expression, John laughs, “Oh, please. You make the biggest faces when you’re sipping that pint.”

How observant this John is.

Evermore, Sherlock scowls. John is very funny, but the murder case presses insistently on his mind. Aconitine. A completely natural component, however small an amount, slipped into a box of tarts, made fresh at Molly’s shop, perhaps while John and Sherlock sat that morning by the window. What could’ve happened while they were so close? Sherlock is entirely convinced it isn’t Molly. She wouldn’t even know what to do with poison, much less have a reason to poison some random customer.

Who goes undetected, just like that? Unnoticed, no attention taken, as they slip in and out of a bright bakery? Right in front of Sherlock Holmes, no less.

John looks back to the bar, face alight with a thought process.
Sherlock quirks his lips, eyeing the rider. He glances down, then back.

“Want to go see the dead man’s photographs?”

“Oh, god, yes.”

-/-

Sherlock makes an icky face when they get up, compelled to really try the scotch like John insisted. After a second, he tips the glass up and swallows the rest, liquid burning the back of his throat, and the warmth traveling to his stomach and flushing out through red cheeks.

The champion looks astonished, but then laughs very loudly. “Come on,” He says, “Let’s have at it.”

The hulk of the officer’s building, Scotland, praises the carved, fading wooden sign outside of it, stands out against the traditional wood and brick architecture surrounding it. The tourists come here for an authentic sea-township experience, and Thisby has put on as much ‘authenticity’ as it can, but even an officer’s station cannot be turned completely back in time. It’s made of bricks, and very old steel, with an overarching plaque describing the first detectives that set foot on Thisby.

There are large knockers over the front doors, and high windows set into the framework.

In the night, it’s the most solid shape in town, and all of the lights inside are dark. The sun has long since set, and the pinks and oranges have faded from the sky, settling into faint stars. The plated shingles on the roof of the building almost never blow off from the wind, and now, they look almost impenetrable.

Sherlock knows this is not the case.

Sherlock and John walk by, ignoring the few half-drunk stragglers on this side of town, sure to be picked off by a capaill should any come ashore and wander into the town centre, but though the night is cold and breezy, it’s not as seasick as rainy nights. Smelling the ocean on the breeze, and watching John’s calm demeanor, Sherlock feels vaguely, at least, reassured.

He makes it seem like they are meant to be hanging around outside the building, and when no one is in sight, Sherlock waves a hand to John. “Keep a lookout,” he says. He turns his back on the cobblestone streets and works open his long, black woven coat. The wind buffets them both, chilling to their bones, raising gooseflesh.

Wood lines the bottom of the building, beneath the layers of brick, nails haphazardly sticking out, and rotting fibre at the edges. Splinters catch on his shoe, the toll that constant rain and weather have had on an old building. Like the sea was itself raised to rot, the wood crumbles when Sherlock gives it an experimental kick.

John watches him pull out the lock picks from his pocket. He raises his brow, surprised, the back of his head illuminated by a streetlamp across the way. “Are we not supposed to be here?” He asks, as if suddenly aware they’re breaking and entering. This late notice must be from his whiskey.

“No, but act like we are, and nothing will happen.”

John turns back around, crossing his arms and tucking his fingers against his waistcoat. “This is
illegal,” he comments. Still, he watches out, as Sherlock instructed.

“A bit. Anderson is too much of a lazy moron to be on duty this late, and Donovan only ever locks the second latch,” Sherlock explains, putting his second pick between his teeth, and using both hands to work on unlatching the door. He feels for the inside, lifts up and tempts, and then there is a click as he twists the long metal pick. Pulling out the picks, he replaces them to his pocket and allows John to work open the door, half-rotted wooden bottom giving out a fight, catching on stone, before it scrapes the street pavement and grants them passage.

“And you’re sure we’re not about to be arrested?” John clarifies, but he’s already shifting through the old doorway. This sneaking-about excitement has him on high alert, though it’s different than usual - there are no capaill for him here, it’s only humans they must avoid, and his hearing is pricked for any sound that could come from the station.

Sherlock says quietly, “Worst case scenario, we get restrained and put in the drunk cells until morning. I never get charged,” he smirks, “My intellect is far too valuable.”

“You’re a cocky shit.”

John’s footsteps are a bit heavier than Sherlock’s as they enter, but that is more of an indicator of the fact that John had more to drink than Sherlock did, rather than anything else. They should be sure no common thief will follow. Craning to look over his shoulder, Sherlock casts a glance behind him to check if they were seen. There’s no one outside besides a lonely man somewhere down the street, hands tucked into his pockets against the cold. Sherlock closes the heavy door behind them, shivers, and allows his eyes to adjust to the pitch black inside the offices.

Vague light of the streetlamps enters the foyer through the high windows, casting yellow over the desks in front, small name plaques, and showing off the location of a hallway door behind them. Sherlock waves a hand, getting John’s attention. He steps onto the patterned rug. “This way,” he instructs lightly, glancing at the familiar picture on the wall.

Obviously, no one is in the big building, but attracting the unwanted attentions of people outside wouldn’t be very clever. Just as well, an officer could come back at any time, hauling in some drunkard and flicking on every light in the place. That would not work out so perfectly for Sherlock and John. Quicker would be better.

They push through the next door, which squeaks on its hinges, a sign of how old the entire town is, even the most ‘modern’ of its structures. Inside the corridor hang more pictures, and the last door on the left is the notary’s room. Sherlock frowns, thinking of Anderson and his sea wish.

“Inspector Lestrade said they were in the notary’s office, the photos,” John reminds him.

Sherlock nods. He takes John’s jacket elbow and they hurry down the empty hallway, even the faintest of noises echoing against the blank corners. In here, they needn’t be scared of any capaill, the walls are too thick and they never go close to the buildings, if they can manage. All Sherlock has to worry about is them getting caught.

They pass rooms, some doors open, others closed to their eyes, full of dusty crates, or desks and lamps and paperwork. The break room’s door is open, an unused stove and few tables sitting together in darkness, with an old newspaper edition atop a curved chair. Sherlock vividly remembers purposefully irritating Lestrade in all of these rooms, even the holding cells somewhere around the back of the building.

The door to the notary’s office is locked. Sherlock scowls, releases John, and has to pick it again.
John watches down the hallway towards the foyer, the both of them quiet in case they should be caught. When the pick catches, Sherlock twists the old brass handle and opens the door. The noise hardly matters, outside there are still drummers crashing and kicking down the streets. There’s even a few drunken singers.

The notary’s office - Sherlock hasn’t been here in awhile. Since the festival, and the rider’s parade, he hasn’t wanted to see Anderson, and before, it only served as a reminder that he wasn’t going to be receiving any letters from Mycroft.

He pictures the smirking notary now, in front of the slotted wooden cubbies behind the desks and up along the walls, each labeled with a carved address of one side of the island. Skarmouth, one says, Tholla, Tholla ‘skirts, boast a few more, some half-filled with letters to go out to homes or people or businesses. The old wallpaper, flowers and birds, is peeling near the floorboards. The entire station needs to be redone.

John sees his hesitation. “Where would the photographs be?” He says quietly, bringing about Sherlock’s attention. He blinks.

“Check the cabinets,” He says, studying the blackness further in the room, “below the desks. I’ll check the back.” The shadows behind the slots are very dark, and with no windows, Sherlock is going to have to take great, painstaking care to find the right files. If they’re even back there. More dusty crates are sat on top of Anderson’s work bench, mountains of unsorted mail. Maybe…

No. Move on.

Sherlock moves the board for him and John, and they get behind the barrier of the dark desk, avoiding Anderson’s till, eyes sweeping for stray files. John bends to pull open the cabinets under the counter, and Sherlock watches him begin to rifle through a few files.

His heart warms, even in the frigid office space. With hardly any prompting, John is in here, performing illegal searches with him, fully knowing who he was and what they were doing and why. His loyalty is unmatched. A faint smile befalls his face, before he slips behind the compartment windows for mail, and starts opening boxes along the walls.

He kneels, pulling the cover off of one box and setting it aside with a small tap against the flooring, setting himself upon the papers and handwritten folders within. Scowling, he puts the lid back on the first box, because it only held correspondence that dealt with officers themselves, though he does pocket a few of Anderson’s overdue notices, just for fun.

Closer up front, to the door, he can hear the sound of John shuffling through papers, but by the continuous sound of it, he hasn’t found anything of note.

Stop. Was that the sound of something walking in, of a door creeping open? No. It is only the fiddles playing loudly outside, beyond the walls of the notary’s office. Still, his ears strain for more noise. As much as it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to be caught here, he still wouldn’t like it very much. It would damper their case.

Hm. Their case? He’s beginning to go quite mad. John is a magnificent conductor. Perfectly directing Sherlock’s thoughts, almost all the time.

Next box — older cases, ones that have been solved, a few by him, but several that go back to the first few years of Skarmouth’s existence, a very long time ago. There’s no organization system here, which is frightfully annoying. The photos he’s looking for wouldn’t be in the dark room still, would they? As John reminded him near moments ago, Lestrade did say they would be in the notary’s
office.

As an afterthought, Sherlock stands and checks his own compartment, the location memorized, but there is nothing there, and he frowns again.

A grip.

Someone snags his shoulder, dragging him back around the slots and down to his knees with rigid strength and a bump. It’s John — his dark blue eyes focused on the door, which is visible through the wooden compartments, just the faintest gleam in his eyes from the very faint light coming from the hallway windows. They are situated between the compartments and many of the boxes, some open and apart from Sherlock’s efforts.

“John,” Sherlock starts, but John’s fingers tighten on the fabric of his coat.

John hushes him, low and under his breath, more of an exhale than a real noise.

The sound of the hallway-foyer door.

Sherlock hadn’t heard them come in at all. He glances to John, grateful, but John isn’t looking back at him.

John’s hand slips down Sherlock’s shoulder so that he is instead holding his upper arm, very close now, Sherlock’s other side presses to the wall. He’s absolutely trapped between John and the office wall.

A moment passes.

The hallway light does not flicker on, but footsteps are heard coming down it, the sound of door handles being tried.

John shifts even closer, “Whoever it is, he isn’t meant to be here.” His voice is very low and nearly inaudible, and Sherlock can smell the whiskey just as much as he can smell the dust and old wood oil and shoe polish down here in the corner. “Or they would’ve turned on the lights.”

John is absolutely correct and fantastic, and Sherlock had been thinking the same thing. Although it’s not a good time for warm feelings to rush through his belly, they do. It must be the proximity, and the alcohol in his blood, thinning and twisting it.

It’s really all he has, these brief moments of touching contact. John offering his arm while they watched Beryl step into the ocean for the last time, John taking his hand during the storm, at the pub. Now, with John’s capable fingers gripping his arm tightly, Sherlock stays down, listening to quiet footsteps.

Whoever has broken in has no torch to illuminate their way, and Sherlock momentarily berates himself for not locking the door after their own entrance. It would’ve made the intruder’s work much harder, given him and John more of a time to hide, to find the documents and get out. The way the figure sneaks around the corners of the offices makes it clear that it is not a person who knows the layout of the building.

The possibility of being found by someone who was distinctly not an officer hadn’t been foreseen by him. Damn.

What are they looking for?
Sherlock hardly breathes, as quiet as he’d been when the piebald had stuck her long neck through his barn door. He can feel John’s breath ghosting over one side of his face, both of their gazes locked on the open door.

He should’ve closed it. He should’ve locked all the doors they traveled through.

The stranger enters the open notary door.

It’s a tall man. There’s a scarf pulled up over his mouth and nose, and once, Sherlock could’ve been fooled into thinking it was protection from the temperature, but inside the station, Sherlock knows it’s for a semblance of disguise.

His hair is fair, tucked beneath the cap and hood he wears, and his clothes, all dark, are crumpled after having been exposed to the cold and wind.

He walks right into the room, clearly unsure where to step. Each movement is calculated, careful, and considerate, and he doesn’t touch anything he doesn’t intend to take. Sherlock glances to the till, the only one in the entire station, meant for keeping coins exchanged for stamps or sent packages or pickups of magazines.

But the man doesn’t go for the till. He steps right behind the counter, and crouches, just as John had. Sherlock can see him through the mail compartments, it’s a wonder they haven’t been spotted. Then again, it’s unlikely the man expected anyone to be in here at all. The officers of Thisby have a reputation of leaving and getting drunk. Lestrade’s time at the pub this evening hadn’t helped that image.

The burglar knocks over a few wooden boxes under the counter, shuffling through papers John already shuffled through. He’s not just taking anything, he’s looking for something. Stuck halfway against the wall, he glances at John, and they exchange a look of understanding.

There’s something in particular this man wants to find.

A quiet few minutes go by, Sherlock and John barely breathing, the pair focused completely on the unknowing man. Should Sherlock tackle him now, while he can, demand why he’s here? Or should he wait until the man finds what he’s looking for, and allow that to color his decision? If he’s just after an overdue notice that couldn’t wait until the office was open tomorrow, it wouldn’t be worth it, but the amount of trouble the figure has gone to would be astounding for such a small reward.

Finally, the man lifts the cover on a new box, and seizes a particular police file.

Sherlock can see the name of the dead tourist man printed on its side. Wayne Redding. He widens his eyes, so shocked that he does nothing while the culprit stands.

He allows the man to barely leave the room with his prize, feels John relax beside him, and turns, “That’s our file, John.”

John’s body tenses again, his hand on Sherlock’s arm flexes. “What?”

But Sherlock is already standing, stepping around the compartments and ready for pursuit. He rounds John, right behind him as usual, and the crates he’d tossed around, and hurries out of the notary’s office. Down the hallway, he can see the man leaving through the front door.

He runs down the corridor, skewing the carpet, and into the front entrance, where the door is just closing. Chances are the man won’t break into a run as soon as he’s left the building, not wanting to attract attention, and so they have just enough time to stop him.
The man could be fast, however.

He throws open the door, glancing around in the streetlamps for their culprit. There, disappearing halfway behind the corner of a building. Sherlock runs, sees the man hunched and headed down the alley, kicking old cans and spooking a lurking cat, who hisses.

“Stop!” Sherlock shouts, “You have the file on the poisoned tourist!”

Shocked, the man whips around, eyes finding Sherlock in the dimness of the alleyway. Light pours in from behind him, the opening of another street where cars and people are passing by in festivity, all unaware of the scene just meters away.

Everything about this figure is difficult to discern. The clothes are too big for him, or not his own, his hands, uncovered, and rough and strong, so a manual laborer, and Sherlock can’t tell whether he’s a fisherman or not because he can’t see these things up close, only from lengths away, in the dark.

His gaze darts beyond Sherlock, where they hear the sound of John approaching, and then freezing when he sees the man at the other end of the alley.

Sherlock extends a hand, “Breaking and entering, theft, obstruction of justice, and,” the figure steps forward, so Sherlock adds, “And assault, if you come any closer. Just some of the charges you’ll face, unless you hand me. That. File.” He moves closer, “Now.”

The figure approaches quickly, disliking the threat, several steps hard and short, but stops a length away, his black eyes snaking to the man off to Sherlock’s side. John had stepped fast towards the figure’s path, and had slowed, pacing it off as if he was going for a stroll just in the moment, as the unknown man stopped.

John’s hands are clasped behind his back, and he looks nearly military. He drops them to his sides, then reflexively crosses them again.

Although the night is brisk and the wind spits at them, lifting hair and possibly small dogs away, John’s sleeves are rolled up to the elbow, where his fists are wedged beneath, straining his arms and raising cords of sun-touched muscle.

Sherlock takes this all in during an instant. He declines to move.

The sound of drums, crashing through a close-by alleyway. John turns, surprised at the sudden sound, and this is when the culprit bolts, a streak of black through small crowds of colorful people and bicycles.

“John!” Sherlock exclaims, and they burst into movement, sprinting to cover the man’s tracks and pouring into the lively street, leaping through oncoming cars.

Sherlock takes the lead, swerving past a group of young women in bright costumes, and vaulting over a wall of bikes leaned up against a low barrier. A car horn sounds, “Sorry!” He hears John exclaim after it.

Racing ahead is the figure, who takes a split down a narrow alley across the quay. Sherlock follows the turn, the streetlights sharp blurs on the pavement he quickly covers. This man is fast, but so is Sherlock.

Heart in his ears, beating as quickly as the tide comes after the capaill, he rounds another corner after the figure, who is just disappearing behind another turn. Damn Skarmouth and all her twists! A woman rounds the corner, and Sherlock nearly shoves into her, she shrieks, and from behind him
again, he hears John shout an apology to her.

But John is dropping further away.

His feet skid over wet pavement, but he catches his balance, crushing paper cups and bakery or deli packaging as he pursues the shadow of the man down a back alley. If he knew where this damn man was headed, he could cut him off!

The figure makes a mistake, taking a turn that heads towards the edge of Skarmouth, and Sherlock follows him at high speed. Here, he can trap him against the cliffs and ocean, and corner him with the threat of capaill and a cursed sea, and the wind throws his hair back as he sprints

They hit the open street, the quay opens up before them, a big gouge out of the island, high as the cliffs, lined with cement and rusted iron railing. Bicycles stack up in between the railing slats, half locked, half unlocked, all pushed up against each other.

Hitting the railing, the man turns to look at him, straight in the eyes. He backs up as Sherlock stalks forward, and hears the sound of John approaching, sees the culprit’s eyes flicker behind him, gauging how he’ll be able to outmaneuver the both of them at once. It becomes more panicked as John spreads away from Sherlock, blocking off an escape route, stalking like a lion.

The wind blows over them all, bringing the scent of ale and ocean water.

“The papers,” Sherlock pants, “Hand me the file. And we can be done,” he lies. Obviously, this man has some connection with the murder of the tourist man, or else he would’ve stolen more, or anything else, from the station. Even the till had been up for grabs, and not to mention running, wanting these reports, instead of doing what a weak thief would do and return them as soon as confronted.

Inconceivably, the man holds his position, backed up against the iron, hitting bicycles with the back of his legs. “Not today, Sherlock Holmes,” He says, definite, and he throws the papers into the wind over the quay, and he takes off down the street at full speed.

The papers flutter downwards, like origami gulls, towards the water.

“No!” Sherlock hits the railing and stops, hearing the figure get away and John give a short chase, his arm reaching towards the papers.

It’s the man or the evidence. He looks, but the figure is already disappearing.

In the light of the streetlamps and paper lanterns, with his arm outstretched, Sherlock can see the photographs fly down, all black and greyscale shadows, they are invaluable, he cannot lose them, and he makes a split-second decision before they even touch the water at the bottom of the quay, before the wind takes them.

Planting his shoe on the railing, he hefts himself over the side of cement and into the funnel of the quay. It’s a long drop, meant to size up to the length of the cliffs, and not really meant for docking boats so much as letting tourists see them as they pass further inland, but then he hits deep water.

He sinks into the black, it has barely hit him, what he’s done and where he is, and he surfaces, gasping. The night is all around him, but above, the lights of the town twinkle. It was as if he was hurling himself off the cliffs by the beaches. This isn’t a sea wish so carelessly thrown over the edges of the island, the runner wants this evidence destroyed, and Sherlock cannot allow it to happen.

No time to wonder, his evidence will sink.
“Sherlock!”

Where are the papers? There! He snags a waterlogged paper, and another, and another. The photographs, printed on heavier stock, are floating, too, though wet. Each movement is sounded with the slush of water as he splashes frantically to find all of his evidence.

Swimming with one arm, holding the surviving files above his head, he slowly strokes, wet and weighed down by the heavity of his coat and clothing, to the side of the quay, striking his other hand out to grasp whatever he can of the high cement wall when his feet touch pebbles and sand. It’s shallower by the sides, so can wade, but it doesn’t help the fact that he’s still chest-deep in the sea. It’s good to be tall, sometimes.

“Sherlock!” He hears John exclaim again, invigorated now that he’s spotted his figure down in the water. “What the hell are you thinking? Get out of the tide!”

“John!” Sherlock calls, lifting his head. The salt is in his eyes, and he squints, seeing the light but no John. “The ladder?”

Footsteps, then John shouts from a little further down the street, away from the open line of the ocean. It’s all black to Sherlock. “Over here! Follow my voice!”

The water sluices at him, this funnel is filled with packages and tin cans, and something oily layering over the surface of the water, rotting pieces of shipwreck wood slung up against the sides of the quay, water lapping at them. Sherlock wades deeper, losing his footing half a dozen times, calling out to John again and again, feeling the cement wall blindly.

All the while, he becomes more and more aware of the threat building up in his head. Each moment he remains in the water could be his last. The adrenaline has worn off and it’s hard to swim in all these clothes now, hard not see a shoulder or an ear in every small wave that beats against him. How very stupid did he have to be for—

“There, stop! Climb up!” John’s voice is right above him, and Sherlock fits the papers between his teeth, all sticking together with oils and water, disgusting. Slapping the side of the quay repeatedly, his hands find the first few iron rungs of the stepladder, built into this wall when the cracking cement was first poured, and climbs up, heavy clothes trying to drag him back. Each step he takes, the further he goes from the water, the more his mind settles. Near the end, one weak link creaks violently and gives out beneath his foot, and he slips, hands scratched on the cement, listening for the splash of the rung hit the water. It doesn’t come, the waves are picking up. He holds himself to the climb and touches the top.

Finally, strong hands from above find purchase on the fabric over his shoulders, and they drag him up and over the edge. He spits out the papers onto pavement, sure they won’t blow away because they are weighted down just as much as he is by wetness. He hauls himself onto the street completely, using the nearby railing to push up.

Dry ground. Oh, how beautiful it is.

“Oh, god, you’re an idiot,” comes John’s voice, and Sherlock peers up from the ground through wet hair smeared across his face. He pushes it back, squinting at the rider, who bends.

“Got the papers, though.” Sherlock brandishes them, waterlogged and inky as they may be. He puts his cheek back down on the pavement, just lying in the middle of the street, soaking wet, on his belly. Nevermind how many people over the years have thrown up on the streets, probably in this exact spot.
“You are the most insane man I’ve ever met.” Incredulous, John laughs, high and strained and full of adrenaline. He kneels down, handling the papers away from Sherlock.

Sherlock feels the grin plaster over his face, too, matching John’s in genuine feeling, if not in volume, through the cold. He is beset by shivers, sucking in past his teeth.


“Hypothermia could still get me,” Sherlock says.

John works off his jacket. “Take off your coat,” He says, “It’ll only make you colder. Here,” he helps Sherlock sit up. “Are you alright?” Hm. Sherlock doesn’t actually need the help sitting up, he’s exhausted, panting and cold, but not injured. He lets John help him up anyways, gentle hands coaxing over his shoulders as they sit in the yellow-cast semi-circle of a streetlamp, water snaking off Sherlock’s skin and into the cracks in the roadway.

A particularly brutal wind chooses this moment to slice through Skarmouth, whipping up the water in the quay and making it slap against the cement walls. Sherlock shivers hard.

He completely fails to take off his wet coat, irritated. The material is old and worn, but won’t shrink because of some seawater. It will have the be air dried after Sherlock washes it later, lest it shrink. John pulls the sleeves off and flings the clothing half a meter away, draping his heavy jacket over Sherlock’s shoulders, an instant barrier from the wind, if not the cold.

“Come on, icicle,” John soothes quietly, standing. The drums have faded into background noise, faraway, probably halfway across town. “We’d best get you back to that old sheep farm of yours.”

“I live next d-door,” Sherlock pauses, catches his teeth chattering from the cold, “to the sheep farm.”

“Right, well, I’m sure your girlfriend will never forgive me if I don’t make sure you get back home in one, unfrozen, piece.”

Sherlock wonders if this was John’s plan all along, even from the bar. He can say as much as he wants to that he didn’t plan on getting Sherlock drunk, but maybe he did plan on it, and also planned on claiming he was just being neighborly, helping Sherlock get home.

He’s just listing out the reasons John would possibly do something like this, when he registers what John has said. It’s possible he was put off because of the cold. Down the way, the drummers are still drumming, more drunk than earlier in the night, somewhere in the alleyways of Skarmouth.

John offers his hand. Sherlock lifts his own away from the protection of John’s stained, salt-caked jacket, and takes it, allowing John to haul him to his feet in that unexpectedly strong way he has about him. “Girlfriend?” He says, puzzled.

“Hm?” John hums, stopping to pick up Sherlock’s soaking coat. He squeezes it, too much material to wring, and water pours from it.

“Girlfriend…” Sherlock says, sniffing past his running nose, “Not really my area.”

John blinks, half his face cast in shadow from the lamp above them, hair all askew and cheeks flushed from running against the wind. “Oh. So,” he looks away, trying to wring the coat again, before continuing conversationally. "A...?"
“No.” Sherlock says quietly.

The wind picks up again, hunching against Sherlock’s figure and throwing the paper lanterns strung above for a spin. It even makes the streetlamp creak, how strong it is. Sherlock can feel the gritty air in his bones.

John glances away from him, staring up at the lamp. “Come on, I’ll bring you home.” He tucks the coat under his arm, seemingly unconcerned with how cold and wet it may make his side. “Are you alright?” John asks again, putting an arm close to Sherlock’s back to act as a guide.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock assures through quaking teeth. Ugh. They start down the alleyways they had run through only a handful of minutes before, scenting the sea on the oncoming winds. Was it this cold before?

“I parked out back of Hawkins’ Tavern,” Sherlock says, sniffing again.

“Bike or car?”

“Car.”

”Good. I’ll drive.”

Chapter End Notes

running around crime-solving as promised... I didn’t know for the longest time how I was actually going to deliver on this, but we made it! Hope you enjoyed some classic Dynamiqué.
Smoke and Doors

Chapter Summary

“Oh, Sherlock, it's so nice you've found someone!”

Sherlock’s knee jerks, just shy of hitting the underside of the table.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Ford is just how Sherlock left it hardly two hours ago, rusted and broken as it’s ever been, but when it registers that John is coming with him, a cold shiver of shock runs through him. This is embarrassing. John could surely afford a very nice car, like Father Stamford’s if he wanted. The good thing about this situation is that John doesn’t have any interest in status cars.

When they walk up, a group of teenagers that had been knocking down paper lanterns make a break for the alleys, shouting in some old island dialect Sherlock doesn’t care about. John pushes past an old bike so they can cut through the empty cobblestone road.

Prickling his skin is the cold, driving needles to his bones, icier as the wind blows, funneling through Skarmouth streets and buffeting them both and throwing John’s hair. It muffles his voice.

“Now, I’ll warn you, I don’t have my license, and I’m sort of bad at driving.”

Sherlock sniffs, and clutches the wet papers in his grasp with more conviction, still gently enough to not let the flimsy material rip. “I don’t have my license.” He wonders if the pen will smear in his grasp, and holds them even gentler.

“Didn’t you drive here?”

Sherlock hums, which makes John laugh.

They climb into the car, after Sherlock has opened the finicky driver’s side for John. Sometimes the handle does not click in enough to pop open, and then he enters the passenger’s. It’s a very low car, Mrs Hudson’s husband used to own it as something muscly and showy for his cartel members. It’s funny how all Sherlock uses it for now is the shopping and in place of Redbeard on cold or dangerous nights.

It really isn’t that old of a car, the model is only a few years past its prime, but for most of the car’s life it has been beaten and empty of gas and left for the cold and the salt to eat, frozen then thawed, chipping away paint near the trunk and windows and leaving the metal for the oxygen to react with. That tends to make cars fussy, and the Ford is the fussiest.

John ducks into the open door after Sherlock has settled into his seat, wincing lightly at a spring that bites into his back, more evidence of Musgrave making this place her own home without proper permission. He scans quickly, but John’s seat appears to have no hard or hurtful parts sticking out of the cushions.
It smells like the fur of a cat in here, and hay, which Sherlock thinks is better than the outside salt. Unfortunately, it’s also completely freezing, and in the light of the Hawkin’s Tavern back alleyway, where two bodies were found in only the last several days, Sherlock thinks he may be turning blue. It must be his imagination. His clothes all stick to him, except for John’s jacket. It’s the one Sherlock had first seen him in the tavern with, back when he had begun all of this and signed up for the Races, and when had pulled that pony cart with Redbeard past the Stockyard where John was running Gladstone, and when John had stood up on that rock and had beaten Hope down.

Sherlock hasn’t thought of Hope very much. The idea that John is riding on a man-killer’s back has not been wasted on Sherlock’s vast intellect, but there’s nothing to say for worrying. Hope, as John would likely put it, had gotten what was coming to him.

John adjusts the rear view mirror for his height, then sits up near the top of the seat. Sherlock points out an adjuster beneath the seat. John says something like I’m not that much shorter than you, but he is and adjusts the seat manually.

The champion rider tries the keys once, then twice. Sherlock has to reach over to set them just in the right spot for the engine to go off, and the vehicle sputters to life just as it had on Sherlock’s trip into town.

Shifting the gear with a clack-clack, John turns his head to look behind the car, stopping to let a few tourists on rented, bright bicycles through, and then shifts again to pull onto the road. The tires bump over protruding cobbled stones on the Skarmouth roads, clearly needing replacement, but smooth out as the road turns to dirt and gravel, and then to dirt altogether.

He cranks the lever to close the cracked window on his side. It’s freezing. The car growls angrily beneath them.

“The body of the man was found out back of Hawkin’s Tavern, but there was another body in the same place, a girl, found several days prior. I concluded the woman was methodically stabbed by the butcher’s son in their shop, bled out like the corpse of an animal, and then she was brought to the back of the tavern,” Sherlock says, rattling off quickly. “The butcher’s son had no comments on what he’d done.”

“Jesus,” John rasps, gazing ahead after glancing at Sherlock. “I knew Hank was in custody, but I didn’t read the paper.”

Sherlock talks right over him, “The idea that it is mere coincidence that two bodies should arrive in the same place within such a short period of time remains preposterous, although the butcher’s son— Hank? Stupid name— Although Hank remains in officer custody and will for many years. And he was arrested before the man was poisoned.”

“Yeah,” John said, “We watched him come in at Hooper’s.”

"You remembered him."

"Yeah. You looked at him," John says, as if this explanation is enough. "He was ill, vaguely, but alive, and aconitine poisoning works through the body relatively quickly."

“Exactly,” Sherlock hums. How he wishes these papers were dry, then he could read through what Lestrade and Anderson have written instead of making assumptions as to what level of poison was running through his blood, or what else could’ve been ingested that morning besides the tarts. No, even better would’ve been keeping the body for more than a day or two so that he could’ve performed the autopsy himself.
“You think it could’ve been in something else he had that morning?” John reads his mind.

Sherlock bites his lip, unable to read the papers.

The headlights illuminate the low stone walls as they begin to form on either side of the one-track road, caging in sheep but keeping nothing effectively out. They pass one area very close to the outskirts of the town, where rocks have tumbled down from formation out into the road where something has knocked them over.

John registers this, too, and begins to eye the darkness off the path more suspiciously.

Sherlock shoves the papers onto the dashboard, spreading them out to prevent more bleeding of the ink. The developed photographs are fine, it seems, but there’s no light in the car to see them by.

He squints at them anyways, held in frozen fingertips, until they hit another bump in the road, and Sherlock looks to John. John shakes his head, you don’t want to know. Sherlock believes him, and turns his head to watch out the front window. If a capall uisce stands in the middle of the road somewhere down it, will the lights scare them away? What do they do if they’re confronted with cars?

Curious, but unwilling to risk John’s life for some experiment that he’ll never live to record, he stays quiet.

John is quiet, too, and the car rumbles underneath them, heating system just beginning to give the car some substance other than icicles.

It’s all quiet.

They drive for a few more minutes. Sherlock watches the orange of the sky above Skarmouth’s nightlights grow further away through the rearview mirror.

If he thinks about it, there’s no real reason John had to accompany Sherlock in the car. Of course, he’s not about to point that out and say anything about it. Instead, he asks, “You didn’t happen to recognize the runner?”

“Hm?” John’s eyes are on the road, reflecting the weak yellow headlights that only pierce several feet ahead in the dark. At least there’s no fog, the car would hardly go anywhere. “No. Do you think I would have? And you were lengths ahead of me, I could barely even recognize you.” Sherlock snorts. John would recognize him anywhere, he’s sure of it.

“Someone must haveaconitine — powder, plants, enough evidence to convict if there is a motive found. Somewhere on this island, like the whalers. There should be a connection between the Stockyard and the docks somewhere. How often do you meet with any fishermen?”

“Whenever we go out to swim the capaill-blooded colts and fillies.”

Sherlock stares at him.

Feeling Sherlock’s eyes, John explains, “Some of the horses at the Yard have capaill blood in them, from some stallion or mare that liked one particular island pony and didn’t want to eat them. The traits are old and diluted, so you’ll get normal horses that are bred after that, but somewhere down the line, you’ll come up with a horse that has long ears, or forward-facing eyes, or rubs off their mane, or who’s only calm around charms or a certain kind of flower. Then you’ll get the fillies who love to scream, or the colts with long flat legs who like to swim. The magic in the blood is stronger the further from the source that you get.
“So, then you find you can’t exercise the half-bloods all in the pastures with the island ponies, and
since they’re too small to be ridden as exercise, we swim them.

"It’s fine, mostly, if I take them up by the caverns and the cove.” John glances out his window,
totally dark, then back to the dash again, turning the wheel with a squeak as they round a gentle turn
around another sheep farm wall. It seems as though he is hiding something in his eyes. “But, once, I
have been there when it has gone badly.”

Sherlock still stares.

John snatches a glance at him, then focuses his eyes back on the road. He’s not bad at driving at all,
Sherlock decides, watching for a second the way his leg muscles work when pressing the Ford for
more speed, the same way he presses Gladstone.

“I’m telling you all my trade secrets, aren’t I? You didn’t think all those mainland mongers came to
the Yard just for island ponies?” John grins, and Sherlock thinks of the mainlander that he’d met,
Henry Knight, and his big ears, “They may be fast, but those half-bloods are faster.”

It has occurred to Sherlock that the Yard made its vast amount of profit and wealth by illegal or
immoral or unseen means, be it gambling in the Races or rigging them or, more recently, whaling,
but never in this way. Within him, the scientist is crashing and kicking, spouting all things about
compatible genetic codes, viable offspring, how species are defined, etc. He would love some DNA
samples, but recalls that one of Moriarty’s terms had been to stop going round to the Stockyard.
Maybe John could be persuaded. In the name of science.

Contemplative, Sherlock turns his face away to look out the window, at the darkness and the grass
rolling by.

The success of the Yard rides almost entirely on John as it did on the capaill.

Another familiar sheep farm, more crumbled walls. The car shakes. “These your sheep?” John asks.

“My neighbor’s. I don’t have sheep,” he replies, before seeing John’s grin, only visible because his
face is half lit from the headlights out the windshield, sending sharp shadows past his nose and below
his eyes. Ah, yes, he’s already told John off for thinking he lived on a sheep farm that day where
John had shot the mill worker and Hope.

Using that memory, John pulls close to the edge of road, bumping the car up just a bit onto the grass
as he brakes to a halt. If they kept driving, the road would stop a half a kilometer ahead into field and
rock outcroppings, just before the drop of steep cliffs. Sherlock has driven out there, wearing jockey
goggles he has never used to keep his eyes open against the wind and salt thrown up from down on
the jagged, unforgiving rocks.

When the tide comes up, like at all points on the island, the ocean reaches several meters above the
bottom of the cliffs, like it is straining for the people on land.

John half-turns the keys and removes them from their place, attempting to click his handle open.
Sherlock watches him work and struggle with it for a minute before the champion succeeds, and
opens the door.

Hm.

“There’s a woman living here with me,” Sherlock begins, ignoring John’s surprised, almost
suspective eyes—
“A woman?”

“Her name is Mrs Hudson, don’t expect anything from her, she’s very difficult when I come home late.” He pops the door handle definitively, and is assaulted with cold wind when he steps out of the car. Instantly, all the heat that had formed with two living breathing bodies in the car is swept away. The papers ruffle as he retrieves them, pulling John’s jacket tight over his hunched shoulders.

The driver’s side snaps closed, John getting out. “I haven’t brought anything for her,” John worries, coming around the vehicle to close Sherlock’s door for him. His fingers are freezing. Will they need to be removed? "Some - wine?"

John had never come past the gate before. In the dark, Sherlock sees the few squares of light where Mrs Hudson’s old house is, all screen shutters and shingles laid flat by the wind, a great hulking shape with a stuck out thumb, the stalls for Redbeard and Josey, who have both been turned in for the night. Mrs Hudson must still be awake, another light where the kitchen is has flickered on against the night.

He hums, the wind blowing it all away. What will John think of the house?

Will he like it, considering he lives in a tiny flat near a barn? How clean is his room? Why does he think John will even see his room? No, best to restrict John to common areas that Mrs Hudson has reign over.

Sherlock is automatically assuming John will come in with him. He doesn’t bother asking if John would like to, just tries to open the latched gate with his damn quivering hands.

John says, “Here, let me,” and a moment later, the gate creaks, pushed by cold air and now free, “There.”

He lets Sherlock through and pockets the key to the Ford in pants that are several years old and have seen less muddy days. They’re also wet, over John’s knees and more importantly his thighs, sticking to the muscle and shaping it. After a second it registers that John must’ve gotten wet when hauling Sherlock over the edge of the quay and sitting beside him, but John has said nothing about the chill. For most of the last twenty years, working at the Stockyard, John has likely said nothing about many things that bother him.

He hears the engine of the ancient Ford rattling to sleep as they quicken through the yard and towards the house. Sherlock’s feet feel clumsy and uneven, even over familiar ground. He has a mild fantasy of John lifting him up and carrying him home, but lets the thought flicker out.

More air blows over the windswept grasses, and Sherlock is irked that he has chosen to live on the windier side of the island, where currents sweep in from all sides, mostly the west. It’s a beautiful view of the sunset in summer, but isn’t worth the cold.

He pulls John’s jacket tighter over his shoulders, lengthening his cold strides. The liquor he had consumed no longer warms his gut.

Why does the house have to be so far back from the gate? A high whinny sluices through the dark, soothing over Sherlock’s ears. Redbeard is awake, too, and must’ve heard the Ford pull up down below.

“Come on, icicle,” John says, and Sherlock feels the ghost of a hand press his lower back, a gentle push out of his stall.

This reality may be better than his brief fantasy of a moment ago.
Redbeard doesn’t whinny anymore, and Sherlock holds the papers tight as they briskly hurry towards the old hulk of the house in the dark, and John has grabbed his sopping coat. Sherlock has no clue how he’ll dry that without the help of the machines in the laundry room, but the fabric would shrink to use them.

Finally, they hit the middle of the pasture, where Mrs Hudson’s house is. Sherlock tries the handle, but it’s locked. He raps quickly on the wood.

A moment later, after glancing at him in surprise through the window, Mrs Hudson opens the door, a washing apron over her blouse and grey pants, and a rag in her hand. She baulks at the two of them, and with some motherly fretting, she lets them inside. It’s warm and smells like orange meringue pie, but the freezing wet clothes muffle away all of Sherlock’s heat. He can hear the buzzing of the mainland radio drifting through all the rooms.

“Oh, dear, what happened to you? And who’s—?”

“Hi, I’m sorry,” John shakes her hand, which hasn’t been extended for a greeting but more of a surprised gesture to herself, “but could I duck into your loo for a moment?”

Unable to say much else beyond more surprise, Mrs Hudson makes a movement to motion down the hall and into the next room over, “There’s one off the room with the water boiler,” she says.

“Thank you.” John moves away and is gone in a second.

Mrs Hudson watches him go and then turns back to Sherlock, who is shivering even in the raised temperature of the house. She shuts and locks the door.

“Sherlock, it’s so early, did you know I was still up? Oh, I can duck back into my room for the pair of you, I won’t bother you at all—”

“What-?”

“I mean that, I have no problems, what you do is your business, sweetheart, I just didn’t think I’d ever meet one—”

“What?”

Mrs Hudson goes on, as if him and John are two young boys who need to be corralled during playtime, “—as long as you’re not making a ruckus in the sitting room—”

“Dear god, Mrs Hudson,” He snaps as menacingly as he can, but the shivering reduces his tone to mere annoyance, “I haven’t brought— him here for anything.” John had more correctly followed him home, like a lost puppy! God, he could come back from the loo any time and find his landlady talking about— about that! With them! Together!

Mrs Hudson stares, then she puffs out her chest, the buttons on her purple blouse shining in the lamplight.

“And just what am I supposed to think when you bring a man home with you when you’re coming back from the tavern?” She exclaims, hardly doing the job defending herself, “You can call me crazy all you like, I don’t think it’s a very big stretch to leap to.”

Finally, Sherlock drops the bomb. “This man is John Watson, Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock hushes, pressed for time before John makes another reappearance. His eyes dart to the bathroom hall even
Mrs Hudson doesn’t seem to mind this at all, and digests it so quickly and easily that Sherlock is disappointed. He thought that the surprise of a champion in her house would buy him a moment of quiet until John came back.

“Well,” She puts her hands on her hips, the washing towel held in one, “no wonder you’ve never brought anyone home, if your standards are that high, that explains why he’s so handsome, I—”

“Oh, Epona, Mrs Hudson—”

“—see now why all those racing reports say so!”

“Mrs Hudson!”

“I should fix up some tea,” she says. “A real champion, in my house!”

Just in the nick of time, she stops and John emerges from the loo, holding a hand towel, apparently all that he could find in the little room. “Sorry, he’s just, he’s absolutely freezing,” he says by way of explanation to Mrs Hudson, who waves, starstruck. John bunches the towel in a fist-sized wad and stepping close, pressing it against the back of Sherlock’s neck. Warm relief is immediate, and Mrs Hudson makes eyes at them in reference to her earlier stance.

John continues to the small woman, talking to her but focusing on Sherlock’s collar, “He jumped into the quay after evidence papers, does he often do that? I’m sorry, I’m John Watson.”

“In October? Oh, not in October. I’m Martha Hudson, but you can call me Mrs Hudson, Doctor Watson. He did once try to climb—” but Sherlock has stopped listening to Mrs Hudson because John is sweeping over the back of his neck with the warm towel. He can feel the ridges of the edges of the towel against his skin, gooseflesh being soothed softly away. He blinks.

“John,” Sherlock warns. It’s best not to make a scene in front of his landlady, a gentle reminder.

But John’s hand snaps away as if it’s been burnt, the towel balancing delicately on Sherlock’s shoulder. “Yes, I should really be going,” John explains, and their conversations begin to lap over each other.

“No, I—”

“Really shouldn’t have been out—”

“—really fine to stay—”

“—so late at the pub - what?”

A beat.

Mrs Hudson cuts in,

“Aren’t you going to make him walk home in the dark? In October - really, Sherlock?” She erupts, as upset as if John Watson were her own son and Sherlock were trying to kill him. Sherlock reaches up to scrub the towel over the wet back of his head. Were the wind chill any lower, he’s sure his hair would be glazed with ice.

“No, I’m— John.” Sherlock sends a glance to the champion rider.
The have a quick word caught like a tightrope between their eyes. *She’s difficult*, Sherlock thinks at him, *help*.

John steps in, an absolute hero and recovering from his earlier miff, “Actually, Mrs Hudson, Sherlock said it was alright if I spent the night here? I did fish him out of the quay.”

“He did fish me out of the quay,” Sherlock agrees through his chattering teeth. A tingling builds up, and he turns his head and sneezes. If he gets ill, he doesn’t know what he’ll do.

“Oh, dear, we should get you a towel,” Mrs Hudson makes her usual flouncing gestures, hands up, and off to the kitchen again.

John looks at him. After a quiet second, he pulls the evidence papers from Sherlock’s frozen grasp.

“I should have been quicker,” Sherlock says, battling the urge to sit on the cushions of the sofa in his wet clothes. “If I had foreseen what he was going—”

“Then you would still be soaking, but even more angry at yourself.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Oh, you’re seething.”

“No.”

“I think I see steam, right there, pouring off your shoulder.” John fights a smile.

Sherlock sighs, feigning exasperation.

“Yoo-hoo, boys,” Mrs Hudson calls, drawing their attentions and eyes to the kitchen, where she has popped out from behind the door frame, “I’ve got the kettle on, Doctor Watson, what do you take in your tea?”

“Nothing,” John answers, smiling politely, “Thank you.”

“And if you could, the closet round the corner has the bath towels,” she continues, but Sherlock is already striding into the hallway himself. Everyone in this household is so slow. He throws open the door in annoyance, snagging the first thick red towel he sees, the one with Mrs Hudson’s initials embroidered onto the corner fold.

In the sitting room he hears John and his landlady chatting about… whatever ordinary people chat about. The weather, he supposes, or Mrs Hudson is fawning over John’s racing record. Sherlock doesn’t care, so long as Mrs Hudson doesn’t break out some sort of old photo album she must keep under lock and key (not that it couldn’t be picked). He needs to change this horrible clothes.

Upstairs, he pulls the lights on, unsurprised that his room looks as though a hurricane has barreled through it. Across from the door lay dozens of books, haphazardly piled into stacks or castles of encyclopedias. He steps in, shuts the door, and makes his way shakily to the closet, sifting through for his warmest things. Or, should he look for his most attractive items of clothing, his *vetements*, since John is here—?

He scoffs.

Classy.

Finally, he pulls out an old shirt and his dressing gown, changing quickly and continuously drying
his hair with the towel. He’ll finish styling it in a moment, he thinks as he pulls on a comfortable pair of trousers instead of some horrible jumper. John has, after all, seen him in much worse. He frowns. But also much better.

His wet clothes are delivered to the laundry room, where he’ll do them later. His soaking coat he hangs over the bathtub, deciding to scrub out the salt later. It’s hand-wash only, and one of his prized possessions. John’s jacket he puts carefully down over the back of his chair, a leering touch, and then he pulls himself away.

There’s been enough impressing John, who is dazzled by his deductions as ever. Sherlock has ceased to care, for the moment, about his looks, as the memory of the evidence being in his house surfaces, the head of a water horse rising from black water.

When he’s satisfied with the way his hair sits, salty and wind-blown as it is, he leaves all the upstairs lights on and returns to the sitting room, sofa and chairs empty, but drifting with voices carried over from the bright kitchen. He frowns, wondering if Mrs Hudson is talking of him, and stalks over.

John is standing close to the radiator by the stove, laying out the wet papers while Mrs Hudson talks at him, rather than to him, in a constant spiel about… something or other. The radio is still on, tuned to some hearty late-night music from the mainland stations, fuzzy in some necessary parts of the song.

Neither of them has noticed he came in behind them. To draw attention, Sherlock sweeps across the room, snags a photograph from where John has methodically tried to dry them, and crosses back to sit on a kitchen chair. It’s not very soft, made of wood instead of plush cushion, and so it makes his back ache. He studies the damp photograph anyways.

A full sheet of heavy, glossy paper. It’s a shot of the man’s body, lying just as how Sherlock had seen it the other day. On his back, arms outstretched, box of tarts open and cast just slightly to his side. He squints, and there are crumbs over his lips, along with that Carmine shade of lipstick, not that it would be noticeable from the black and white print, barely covering some shiny sore. He’ll need the close up of the face, but to do that he must get up.

“—and so I told him, that lot’s not going anywhere, and he should really buy those teacups while he had the chance—”

“John, the photographs,” Sherlock says without looking up.

A few footsteps, and the rest of the photographs appear on the table in front of him.

John even pulls out a kitchen chair with a scrape against the old floorboards and sits beside him. “Do you see anything?”

“I see everything.”

“Oh, he says that all the time, John,” Mrs Hudson says over the radio, “Can’t get offended, John.” Ugh, she repeats his name every two seconds. Is she really so excited for him to be here?

John hums and Sherlock sees his smile in his peripheral, the rise in his cheeks and the cobalt and gold reflected by the kitchen lamp in his eyes. He swaps the full-body shot for the one of the man’s face. There’s that sore again.

“Looks like a blister,” John’s finger touches the spot where Sherlock is focused. He blinks, and glances at the champion. “Could just be a cold sore. Suggests a poor immune system, ill, less poison to kill him.”
Mrs Hudson says some nonsense about them getting along well over a murder, and goes on about her baking.

Sherlock says bluntly, “We’ve been over that.”

“The toxicology says he only had around a concentration of point oh-two-eight milligrams in his system, per kilogram.”

“Average weight of an adult male is about eighty-two kilograms, that’s under three grams of aconitine. Two point two-six-eight to be numerically exact,” Sherlock snaps, “He was administered a dose enough to kill a healthy adult male, meaning it wasn’t common knowledge that he was ill.” He picks up the next photograph, a more recently developed one and mostly unharmed by the seawater, a shot of the man’s stomach contents. “Or the poisoner wanted to be sure the dose was enough to be fatal.”

Among the shine of lab light against the abdominal wall and part of the stomach lining, there is a small amount of half-digested food. Without asking, just as impatient, John stands to retrieve the rest of the papers, all half-dry.

They spend another half hour going over the papers, but they contain nothing Sherlock didn’t infer already. Normal dose of poison, so the poisoner didn’t know the man was ill, and was knowledgeable enough to know the fatal dose. In the meantime, Mrs Hudson has been finishing her pie-baking and is humming along to mainland radio.

He pushes back his chair, and John wearily rubs over his eyes.

Ah. He must be tired, not antsy like Sherlock. Sherlock hadn’t been paying much attention, too busy with the reports. He glances up, and Mrs Hudson has set dishes on the table.

Oh, no. His stomach drops.

“Mrs—” He begins, but she’s already ahead of him.

“I just was thinking you boys might be a bit hungry,” She says, setting down the expertly-painted teapot on the centre of the table. No, no! “Sherlock, I made you a plate, and John,” she sets a gentle hand on his shoulder, very motherly, “It’d be wonderful if you could try this meringue. Sherlock picked up the shopping earlier this week, so he’s not all bad.”

“Ah, thank you.”

Don’t sit down! But she sits anyways.

Sulking, Sherlock holds the sheet of paper closer to his face, decidedly not touching anything put in front of him, no matter how nice it smells. He is busy, and cold.

But he finds his mind unoccupied.

“Though, he never lets me dust his things.”

Sherlock quickly answers, “The dust lets me know what is there and who has been in my things. Namely, at what rate per day you snoop.”

Mrs Hudson waves a hand, calling him silly.

The dust is more a symbol of what’s not there. Dust settles in places where people don’t go, or where
he shoves things to avoid dealing with them, but keeps. For whatever godforsaken reason. Sentimentality, he suspects with disgust.

His gaze slides across the table to John.

Perhaps a few neglected things could use some dusting.

Sherlock is promptly interrupted by his landlady, who has since been chattering.

“I was just telling Sherlock, it's so nice he's found someone.”

Sherlock’s knee jerks, just shy of hitting the underside of the table. He pretends to be sifting through papers and very attentive, so he is spared from speaking. After he spent such a time telling her that wasn’t what was going on, she treats him like this?

Unfortunately, John isn’t chewing, so the man sputters with a fork in his hand, to Sherlock’s disdain, “We’re not—”

“Oh, don’t worry, dear, we’ve all kinds here on Thisby.”

“I’ve lived here for more than two decades, I know—”

“Mrs Turner’s granddaughter, you know, married—”

“John doesn’t need a history lesson, Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock interrupts, continuing to stab at his papers.

Mrs Hudson frets, “Oh, we can all do with reminders. More tea, John? It’s herbal, won’t keep you up.” It isn’t every night they sit together at a table at a reasonable-ish time in the evening to eat. It isn’t every night that Sherlock eats at all, he becomes too fascinated with whatever tail of a case he has caught for days on end. They’re both night owls, he and his landlady, one stuck in the excitement of his life and the other passed over with hers with the execution of her husband. This interaction is solidifying his resolve to never, never have John come again.

“I haven’t gone to the Races in years and years,” Mrs Hudson goes on, filling all the blank space with mindless conversation, “but I know last year was tough. We both read what happened to you —” Sherlock throws a paper to the table particularly brutally— “—but you seem so fine to me.”

John clears his throat, “Your, ah, your—”

“Sherlock.”

John smiles, “Yes, your Sherlock, he’s managed to convince me how my lingering injury was only psychosomatic.”

“It was,” Sherlock punctuates. No matter how dry he is, it feels as though his robe still clings to him with the cold.

“He’s managed to convince me it was.”

“It was. No convincing needed.”

“It was a bit of a surprise, actually.”

“Wasn’t.”
He’s a good boy,” Mrs Hudson taps Sherlock on the cheek, and Sherlock does not move, instead staring at another paper with no intention of reading. “You know, the pickpockets in Skarmouth are all afraid of him, he loves his cases, and those murders are right up his street.” She is up now and starting to wash a dish she used for baking, some weird circular, sticky piece. “John, if you’ll be needing it, do you mind the sofa? The spare’s all cluttered.”

“Of course I’ll be needing it.” John looks to Sherlock as if to confirm they aren’t involved in what Mrs Hudson is insinuating, but Sherlock pretends to be aloof and oblivious.

Despite efforts, it is still impossible to be warm. As if she’s read his mind, motherly as always, Mrs Hudson pipes up, setting down her clean baking dish on the countertop. “I can get the fire going for you boys,” she offers, and slips away.

She is hardly gone for a second when John turns to Sherlock. This time, Sherlock pretends to be invested for a few seconds more, and then sets the autopsy paper down, leaning back in his chair.

John is drawn to the photographs and papers, right where Sherlock has spread them all in what is disarray but he’ll call a method if John should ask. For a moment, Sherlock watches John sift through the reports, observing the always-present bags under his eyes and the way he has not shaved in approximately three and a half days, and the auburn color of his facial hair. John scratches at it now, the rasp of short nails over stubble, scrutinizing a photo.

Coming dangerously close to being caught staring, Sherlock leans further back and steeples his hands beneath his chin, closing his eyes. The chair is uncomfortable, but he blocks it out.

“Do they have the things from his pockets?” John sounds from beside him.

He listens as John flips another photograph over, this one damp and heavy still. “They’ve sent the body back to the mainland,” He answers.

“Sherlock,” John says from behind him as he sorts through all of John’s clothes mentally, “the envelope, here by his pocket. There’s another one.”

Now he flashes open his eyes. “What?”

John glances to him, then leans closer to turn the photograph so Sherlock can see, the scent of sleep heavy on him.

Just there, the corner of a faded envelope, and a seal that he cannot make out from the poor quality, save for a glossy, trademarked M. Sticking out of the man’s coat. “On my doorstep. Found it today.”

John stands suddenly, and dips his hand into his trouser pocket, but Sherlock can see there’s nothing in there. He looks back at Sherlock, a sudden darkness to his eyes. “My… jacket, do you have my jacket?” Sherlock jumps, swirls out of the kitchen and quickly leaps the staircase, taking them two at a time. John is fast behind him, past Mrs Hudson in the sitting room who shouts at Sherlock for flipping up the corners of the carpets from beside the hearth.

Rushing into his room, Sherlock snags and throws the jacket from his chair for John to hold while he digs through the pockets, removing a few cursory bits of property like a key and a notebook and pen, then, aha!

A yellowed envelope, torn open at the top, and stamped with a red, wax seal over the fold. This, he carefully pulls from John’s pocket.

The image on it sets itself into Sherlock’s eyes.
It’s the Stockyard’s emblem.

The same half-head of a horse, half a cursive M that had been burned onto the white mare’s hide is here, a symbol meant to draw up pictures of cultural wealth and power. Sherlock is so engrossed in studying the paper and its origins that he nearly forgets it may have contents. The top is torn, where John must’ve pulled it open.

John has hung onto the photograph, shifts the jacket in his grasp and points at the man’s pockets.

“Look at that. Exactly the same seal.” It does seem so.

From inside, small, brackish and shriveled seeds tumble. A few fall to his floor. Sherlock holds them between his fingers, squinting at their shape and color. Suddenly, the fact that he holds this envelope without gloves is incriminating. He replaces the seeds and holds it up to his nose and takes a long sniff.

“Wolfsbane seeds,” he marvels.

“Uh-huh, thought that was what they were. It was there when I got back, after Hope. I meant to find you before the tavern to tell you.”

John was absolutely right. Sherlock tells him so and John seems to glow a bit brighter in the above lights. Still, he appears perplexed, an expression that is never far from his face.

“But why would they give them to me?”

Sherlock glances to the champion, then to the jacket in John’s arms. “If the victim had an identical envelope with identical contents before he was killed, you are likely the target of the next poisoning. But it would’ve been done in the tavern tonight.”

“And if the contents of the envelope are different?” John leads Sherlock’s thought process, providing him a steady railway to cover.

“Then it’s a deliberate clue.”

“What sort of murderer leaves a clue?”

“The kind that likes to boast,” Sherlock says, “the kind that thinks it’s all a game. The kind that wants to be caught.”

“And the seal,” John insists, seemingly excited with being helpful, “It’s Moriarty’s.”

Sherlock half-smiles. “Yes. It is.” He goes silent as he spins around his room to another desk. This one full of equipment and old books, and he swings a large magnifying glass over a lamp, sticking the envelope between. Here, he can see how thick the paper is, and the seeds as a shadow inside. No writing. “No note,” Sherlock says, and John says something positive behind his shoulder.

“Wasn’t one this morning.”

He examines the seal. Thick, blood red crimson wax in a pressed circle, the profile of a horse with the brand $M$. A very dangerous image. “You’re absolutely sure there was no note?”

“Nothing. This is Moriarty’s seal, isn’t it? Is it enough to convict him?”

Sherlock shakes his head immediately, running the pads of his fingers over the paper under the lamp.“No. This was left for you purposefully. He’ll have had ample time to construct a solid alibi for
If, Sherlock has just said, if it was him. There’s hardly any doubt this is the work of Moriarty, somehow, but there’s nothing to show for it. He can seem it now, Lestrade what he’s found, Lestrade having just enough evidence to detain the Stockyard’s owner, then Moriarty with that spider’s grin telling the island’s police force that he has had nothing to do with Thisby’s stroke of misfortune. That he was somewhere else, with someone else, halfway across the island. Of course it wasn’t me.

Sherlock wrinkles his nose. “With only the envelope, we won’t catch him.”

“If it was him,” John parrots at him. “Anyone can steal a seal.”

“John, in all the years you’ve worked for him, has Moriarty ever been known to leave his rooms unlocked?”

John frowns. “Never. I’ve tried the handles.”

Sherlock smiles at this, because the impression he gets is John trying to find a way to wheedle Gladstone away from the Stockyard.

“Lestrade will have his pocket contents at the station, if anywhere.” A thought strikes him, and he looks at the paper again, studying its density through flushing anger.

John catches this and raises his brows, crossing his arms. “Unless the file thief stole that first…?” He leads slowly.

“We were in the notary’s office, the mail room. Last room. If there was more evidence it would’ve been held in Lestrade’s office, but no doors besides ours was opened, do you remember?” Sherlock puts a hand to his temple. No, no other doors besides the hallway was heard opening when they were hiding from the thief. “It’s possible whoever sent the runner did not know about the envelope.” It is also possible that the envelope wasn’t on Thisby anymore. Or was in a bin somewhere. He would have to go through the station’s bins if he couldn’t find it—

He whips his head to the side, and sneezes suddenly into the crook of his elbow. His mind has been wiped clean of all the possibilities, and now the cold and stuffy-headedness has begun to set into him again. Frustrated, he scowls at John, who grins softly at him.

“Why don’t you get the envelope from Inspector Lestrade tomorrow?” John suggests, setting down his jacket back onto Sherlock’s desk and picking up the things Sherlock tore out of it. “You don’t want to go breaking into the station twice in one night. He’s got to be at home in bed by now, you saw how much he drank. Even you drank a bit.”

“You drank more.” Sherlock accuses him. As much as his heart races for all the new possibilities that John’s letter has instilled in his mind, the cold is beginning to weigh on him. But he deduces that John, while tired, would still break into the station with him at a heartbeat’s notice. Twice in one night.

“Yeah, and we’re both tired. You should get to bed. I should, too.” John says the next sentence with a bit of withheld misery, “Big auction tomorrow morning.”

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Through the floorboards, Sherlock can hear John talking to Mrs Hudson downstairs, the words all muffled. In his mind he runs through lists of things they could be discussing, but the conversation ends shortly.

He lifts his head from the floor and dusts off the chest of his dressing gown.

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His dreams consist of the way the sun looks when it hits the chalk cliffs, blinding him. The day is clear until it isn’t. The sea turns black then red. Capaill are all running to him, but he isn’t racing, and the capaill don’t have riders. These aren’t the Races. This is a hunt.

He can’t move. He sees Jefferson Hope’s spectacles in the bonfire of the rider’s parade, so reflective that they burn twin holes through his front, the same feeling he gets from Moriarty’s cloying stare. Hope’s throat is oozing blood.

At once, Sherlock is standing back in the ocean with the waves crashing up against him and the rocks and kelp pulling at his feet, desperately watching the Races from the water. Water horses shriek and crash over each other like the waves, all rolling thick like smoke over the sand. But he’s not in his mind palace, and he can’t remove himself from the sea—

The grey capall usice rises up from the water beside him like death himself, shark nostrils flared against the air and mouth long enough to reach its eyes. It’s the beast that pulled him under the ocean that day he took Redbeard to the racing beaches, it’s the horse that John killed.

There, in its nose now, Sherlock can see the red berries, the nightlock. They spill out and flood the water around him, leeching away his life as John took the capall’s.

You know nothing, he hears from the horse. It’s time to make another wish, it says like the mare goddess. The ocean knows your name, Sherlock Holmes.

The stallion pulls him under.

-/-

The pistol neatly fits into his hand, just the way it had the day he stole it from Lestrade. The metal rubs his palm in a very different way than the violin’s bow does - where the violin is flowing, curving wood, the pistol is all unforgiving, hard lines.

Sherlock imagines the shape of the bullet that will explode from the barrel, imagines the shape it would make in a capall’s skull, the bursting shapes of blood and bone all spewing into its brain. Destroying it and the way they turn into the sea.
No, no. Don’t go creeping around the house with a pistol, he thinks while already heading down the stairs. How many times has Mrs Hudson told him off about sneaking around like that? Too many to count during each racing season. One would think he could get over the childish habit of having nightmares over so many years.

Water, water, he needs a glass. Setting the metal down carefully onto the countertop as to not wake Mrs Hudson in the rooms down the hall, Sherlock goes about opening a cabinet with shaking hands. He finds a clean glass and rushes to the tap.

“Sherlock?”

Turning around, Sherlock spots him and baulks. John Watson, there on his sofa across the room from the flickering hearth. A duvet is half over John’s lap, a pillow behind his back as he sits up. His clattering through the cupboards must have woken the sleeping champion. He had most forgotten he was here.

“I apologize,” Says Sherlock instantly.

John waves a hand. The movement is a little reminiscent of a drunkard, he’s so tired. After all, it is the middle of night. “‘S’your house.”

It’s not his house. That’s entirely the reason he began racing, entirely the reason Moriarty wants him to watch John die on the sand.

Sherlock wants to crumple. He wants to allow himself that. But John's here now. And Mrs Hudson is asleep down the hall. He feels as quivery as two brass bells wrapped in a twist of scarlet cord - something to keep the water horses on land, something that moves. But the bells are fragile and the cord can break.

Finally, he sighs out, “No.” He puts down the glass, careful to extend his little finger so it doesn't make more than a tap against the countertop. He sniffs, because his nose is runny, and immediately wishes he didn't, because it makes him sound weak.

John pushes himself up with some trouble. He's sitting on the sofa now, looking bleary-eyed at Sherlock.

There's a few moments.

John looks confused.

Sherlock wants to retreat.

John shifts on the sofa, letting his legs tip over the side and feet pushed to the ground. Once there, he reclines into the back cushions. He hesitates, then… pats the space next to him. It's almost invisible in the dark. Sherlock wouldn't believe it was meant for him to see if John didn't catch his eye a brief moment later, and repeat the motion, with his whole hand, softly, instead of a few fingers. A soft thump of the cushion.

Sherlock is lacking something in his hands to fiddle with nervously. He misses the glass as he forces his arms to his side, feeling like a statue carved from wood as he crosses the room.

It's his own furniture (almost?) but he's anxious about sitting down. John flips the duvet back so that it's all on his lap as Sherlock sits on the space John indicated. He's too close, isn't he? He should move.
He's rooted to the spot.

John looks at him. It's awkward because they're sitting next to each other. Sherlock pretends there is a stray fiber on the seam of the sofa and rubs it lightly with a finger, avoiding John's searching eyes. They're dark blue in the night-cast shadows of the small sitting room.

Damn. Now John knows he's avoiding him, because Sherlock looked away again. Sherlock is pitiful.

“Can you… explain?” John's voice is soft. Sherlock bites into his tongue. Hard.

Sherlock has to put effort into keeping himself still. He wants to squirm under the scrutiny, the force of John's full attention. How many times has he wished for this? And now that he has John, watching him, listening to him, fully and only him, he feels pressure.

“It's not my house,” Sherlock snips, quick and efficient, ripping off a plaster, “Simple.”

“Missus Hudson isn't your mother.”

Sherlock snorts.

“Or your housekeeper?”

Sherlock’s shoulders shake with uncomfortable, restrained laughter. He looks over and John is smiling nicely at him, and it makes Sherlock's heart flutter and carnivorous butterflies try and eat the lining of his stomach. “No, no. Not my housekeeper. She's very adamant about that. It's her house. Well. I rent use of it. Well.” Sherlock shifts. His feet are cold. “It's complicated.”

Quietly, John says, “Shall I ask about it?”

Sherlock nods.

“How complicated is it?”

“How very.”

John grins. He still looks tired, the grin is lopsided and silly, and Sherlock's heart is still stuttering, giving him horrendous palpitations that threaten to cut off his electric beating forever.

“My brother - he moved to the mainland - sent the rent and board money in the monthly post. For years. He was very exact, paying for the month he sent it during, and the next, paying it forwards,” Sherlock remembers this, definitely. Mycroft sent checks that Sherlock couldn't cash. “The payments stopped a few months ago. I despise my brother,” Sherlock says, because it's necessary to stretch that point and define it sharply, “But he would not drop off the face of the earth for no reason.”

“And where do the Races factor in all of this? Surely you've money saved, from all these payments.”

Sherlock sucks in a deep breath. He sputters, “My feet are cold,” and flexes his bare toes.

John stares at him.

And then John draws his legs up and twists on the sofa, the cushioned armrest must be hitting his back. He stretches his legs out and Sherlock wonders if he's getting kicked off rather than helped.

But wonderful John pulls the duvet off of himself, and instead reaches out. His arms aren't long enough to touch Sherlock, but… Sherlock can (hesitantly) take a hint, now. Drawing another deep
breath and sighing it out, he pushes himself up from the sofa, and gets close to John, who drops a leg off in invitation. Sherlock sits carefully between the vee of his thighs, not facing the other man.

The sitting room disappears. It's as though the sofa is the only thing in existence. He wouldn't be surprised if that was truth.

John hitches the leg back up, bent, and it cages Sherlock in. Perhaps it’s the nightmare that has softened Sherlock so.

There's a sensation crawling over his sides. He lifts his elbows, silently yet nervously acquiescing. Next, John’s arms wind carefully around his stomach. Face hot, Sherlock glances down to watch the trembling fingers lace together over his navel, and pull him back.

Trembling. John's breathing is… fast. It hadn't occurred that John was taking a risk. When this sinks in, that John is also nervous, Sherlock relaxes a tremendous amount. He gives in, shifts backwards.

Sherlock’s back is against John’s surprisingly soft front… He's having a difficult time stopping his eyes from getting teary again. Or from drooping. He sags, head tipping back and eyes closing. With John's arms still comfortably around him, John trying to resettle the duvet over Sherlock's body, namely his feet, Sherlock goes on.

“He couldn't… send extra. It wasn't because he didn't have money. He had plenty of that, the bastard.” John laughs, and Sherlock can feel it. He strives to catalog every point of contact between the two of them, John's powerful upper arms, used to holding beasts ten times his size, tucked delicately beneath Sherlock’s arms. John's knees resting against Sherlock, on both sides, keeping him where he is. John’s stomach slotted against Sherlock's lower back. John's chin, ducking forwards to rest over Sherlock's slumped shoulder. The last one is a new development. John's soft breath is ghosting over one of Sherlock's ears.

He feels lax, repulsively so. He can't bear to think of an argument to any of this.

He lets himself be repulsive, sinks deeper into John's comfort. His mouth runs on, still low in volume, hardly a rumble.

“Thought I would fall back on old habits. Wouldn't find a way to cash the money, or, in the event that I did, I would make a proper choice. Proper, can you believe it? Which is preposterous, because he's well aware that most users would rather live homeless and have the high than have a house and not.”

At the word ‘users’, John tenses. Sherlock can feel it everywhere. He frowns, flexing his feet a little bit to stuff them further underneath the duvet.

“Seriously, you?”

“Once upon a time,” Muses Sherlock. John, ever the good man, clearly disapproves. Thankfully, he doesn't berate him. Sherlock hums gratefully as John's body steadily loses its tense edge. He’s become quite comfortable.

“And you don't… use anything, anymore?”

“And I don't use anything anymore.” Sherlock's voice is not above a whisper. John whuffs a warm sigh over Sherlock, sending shivers over Sherlock's frame. “I promise.” An unnecessary and partially romantic addition.

John goes back to the Races, “Why first place? Why not second, or third? A mainland ferry doesn't
Beneath the cover of the duvet, because Sherlock is feeling brave, and because nothing is real in the nighttime, Sherlock tentatively settles his hands over John's. He can't hold them in this position, not really, but being able to cover both completely with his own palms is satisfying, because every part of John is warmer than every part of Sherlock. John's skin is sunlight embodied. The man is sighing against the shell of Sherlock's ear.

"Missus Hudson sells teapots. At that Murray’s place. That tourist trap he calls a shop."

John chuckles. Sherlock wants to press his face into John's neck and listen to that sound again, feel the words vibrate. He can't, like this. And he won't. Just because... this is happening, it... doesn't mean anything else. Sherlock swallows. No. He can't think that right now. He can do that later.

He cracks open his eyes, just a little, to look around the sitting room. The shadows are in the right places for the moon to still be up and bright outside. Sherlock theoretically has plenty of time to enjoy this position, all the intimate comfort it brings.

There is no nightmarish water horse waiting for him, blood draining from cracked femur bones and flat teeth.

“It's only the teapots. For her. And me, my rent. ‘S... paid until September next year. She borrowed money from Moriarty to buy this house, like every other moron on Thisby. She has payments to make. Teapots aren't enough for that.”

“What're you saying?”

“She can't afford to keep me around. I could take every job on the island, John, and I couldn't make the payments for her.”

Silence.

Then, laughter.

“My god, you're an idiot.”

Sherlock's eyes fly open. He tries turning his head to shoot John a glare, can't do it well.

John pulls him back into position. Sherlock can feel John's heart against his back. He wishes he could listen for nothing else the rest of his life. “Sherlock Holmes, that woman adores you. I've barely met her, and I know it for a fact. She would never kick you out.”

“But--”

“Nope. She loves you, completely and wholeheartedly. No idea what you did to deserve that--” Sherlock scoffs quietly, “--but... she does.”

Sherlock makes a negative noise in his throat. It works better than shaking his head 'no'. Shaking his head would dislodge John on his shoulder, and he couldn't imagine ever doing such a thing. “Moriarty would seize the house back. Then where would she go?”

John parses this.
His fingers wiggle on Sherlock's stomach. It tickles, and Sherlock tries not to let it disrupt his experience.

“You want to win the Races to find your brother and buy this house for your landlady?”

When put it like that, it makes him sound like some kind of… good person. Sherlock scowls.

“For the sake of closure and morbid curiosity, I want to know what happened to my brother. I would not be shocked to find him dead in a city rubbish skip somewhere. My landlady deserves the house for putting up with me for all these years, and I want to beat Moriarty at his own foolish game, you, and the Races. That's all there is to it.”

John pulls back his face, Sherlock can feel John's nose in his hair. It's not unpleasant.

“Yeah,” He mutters, “I'm sure that that's all there is to it.”

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Sherlock's arse is pushed into the cradle of John's hips. The pillows over the sofa crush his curls against the side of his head, and against his back he can feel a rhythm of warm air blowing over his shirt.

Just how did he end up like this? His heart begins to beat harder, and carefully he wills his breathing to slow. Every muscle and joint is warm and unused now, so it is with great care that he must shift.

Something terribly dangerous doesn’t want to be extracted from such an embrace, but Sherlock manages it anyhow. John stirs at several points and so he has to pause, senses dulled by sleep and nightmares, and then he’s out. He needs to look like he’s been up for hours and has forgotten all about John’s hands on his navel. This aloofness will save him from further conversation, and John’s hesitation will stop the champion from asking at all. John is a tentative man in these affairs.

There is no time to think about John’s soft hands over his skin, the way Sherlock has fitted so nicely against him, the fact that he would love nothing more than being able to do it all again and again. But the time has come and gone, much like the flashing, quick way that John had pressed his lips against Sherlock’s hand the night of the storm - it was a mere comfort, something the situation demanded, and something that will not be repeated again.

A glance to John. He is half beneath the duvet he had pulled aside for Sherlock during the night, laying on his side where Sherlock has slipped away, his hair a disaster and with half his face creased from the pillow. Sherlock’s chest absolutely swells, and this is when he must turn away. Up for hours, remember, forgotten all about this, remember.

Heading up the stairs, Sherlock makes his strides purposeful, staying quiet and avoiding the creaky stair. It takes him several long minutes to achieve the look he is after, a capable man with good hair. This last part takes the longest as his curls refuse to stay in place without a lot of product to work against the salt still half-caked in them. They require much care.

Now, what to wear over this shirt? Nothing pressed, it’s cloudy today and may rain, but his favorite heavy long coat is still upstairs drying. Maybe Mrs Hudson can help him with it.

He dashes about his room, simultaneously putting on his coat while snatching John’s from off his
desk chair. Why did John leave it upstairs last night? It couldn’t be to dry. Sherlock was wet while he had it on, but the jacket itself is almost untouched.

Although each of his moves is planned very carefully, Sherlock acts as though they are not. He rushes at the sofa when he reaches the bottom of the stairs, and throws John’s jacket at the man’s sleeping body, who startles instantly, arms curling around something that isn’t there.

“How, John!” He insists, whirling into the kitchen, suddenly unable to look at bleary-eyed John, sitting up so similarly to the way he had in the middle of the night. He shoves the forgotten pistol into one of the drawers. “We have much to do today!”

Now where are the keys to the Ford? John needs to go back to the Stockyard, and the Ford is the easiest way there, barring the fact that it sometimes doesn’t start at all. What will they do if that happens? Surely John could borrow Redbeard, but where would Redbeard go after John has reached Moriarty’s land? At once, he is very uncomfortable with the idea of letting Redbeard anywhere near the Stockyard, even if Sherlock was somehow with them. It will have to be the Ford.

Mrs Hudson is awake, it seems, for the window above the kitchen sink is open. The sky is already grey, and a breeze with low humidity floats in past the faded yellow curtains. There are also new dishes in the aluminum kitchen sink, and when Sherlock consciously takes a breath he sees two breakfast plates on the counter. The breeze will have made them cool, and Sherlock cannot stomach anything to eat at the moment. Peculiar that Sherlock’s quiet ransack of the kitchen last night had woken John, but Mrs Hudson’s cooking hadn’t woken John at all.

He keeps up his demanding nature of the morning, “Keys, Mrs Hudson!” Mrs Hudson’s voice comes back at him from her room across the hall, muffled by the sound of the closed door.

“I put them outside! No hope in you putting them where they belong!” He won’t even begin to shout back that it wasn’t his fault John left them where he did.

“John,” Sherlock says, pressed, without looking at the champion. Clearly thinking there is some urgency, John sits and pulls his arms through the sleeves of his jacket, crinkling the old, abused fabric.

John clears his throat, “Give me a moment,” he says just as acutely as Sherlock has, and puts on his shoes, brushing off the thighs of his pants. His voice is so rough from sleep it sends shivers all down Sherlock’s back.

Sherlock quirks his mouth. “Auction today,” He states.

This seems to visibly deflate John. His shoulders sag nearly imperceptibly. “Right,” He says before Sherlock can say much else. Perhaps John thought they would go after the envelope from the dead man’s pocket together, in the same way they had last night. Alas, John is still under the command of Moriarty. His skin prickles with guilt.

More irked by his own sharp manner of speaking than anything John or Mrs Hudson have done, Sherlock flings open the door with no regard for John behind him.

As they round the stable entrance, Musgrave appears. Her stump of a bedraggled, half-eaten tail holds out stiffly behind her.

He has always been irked by that cat. It’s filthy. She should be kept in the barn where it belongs.
Still, though they exist within the same spaces, they aren’t very close. Sherlock feels as though they both trust each other.

“Poor thing,” says veterinarian John, bending, “it’s very recent.”

Crouching there, John’s jacket bunches at his shoulders, framing dark slots against his sandy-grey hair, messy from his night against the back of the sofa. Sherlock can read that his back is aching from the way his feet poise beneath them.

He snaps back to attention. John is looking at him, while Musgrave, stupid thing, butts her head against John’s fingers, hoping for a pity-scratch.

“Piebald,” Sherlock says very quickly, shaking his head and blinking.

“What?” Too fast.

“The piebald,” Sherlock clarifies. He nods to the stable entrance, clasping his hands behind his back, “it came here first. Musgrave must’ve been nearly caught, she drew it away, and I rode into Skarmouth. It found me anyways, evidently.”

“You rode all the way to Skarmouth the night of the storm? In the dark?”

“Mm.”

Ducking his head and giving Musgrave a few scratches behind her ear, John laughs.

Sherlock’s brows knit together, and he stops trying to read John’s familiarity with cats. “What’s funny?”

“You ride to Skarmouth before storms in the middle of the night, you’re riding an island horse in the Races, and you jump into the quay after some papers, all at the end of October. You’re serious, you don’t know what’s funny?”

Sherlock frowns. “I have never understood island humor.”

“Bull,” John says. Sherlock finds him very funny. But John’s isn’t really island humor, it’s a shade darker. He recalls the jokes John had made over Hope and the chestnut water horse’s fates.

They spend a few minutes half-heartedly saying words to each other while Sherlock touches Redbeard’s face. The horse cranes against his hand. While John sits on a bale of hay by the floor, where Sherlock had peeked behind to see the piebald nights ago, John starts telling him about the Stockyard’s business. Sherlock listens to this intently, searching for anything that mentions Moriarty’s name. Their discovery last night only confirms his involvement in everything on the island and Sherlock is itching to get ahold of the envelope that had been in the dead tourist man’s pocket.

He barely adds to the conversation. “A shame there is no exportation.”

“Imagine what mainlanders would pay for island capaill they could take back home. A shame they would never arrive.”

“John, don’t say you believe in pirates.”

“No, I mean, the ocean would get them. Leaving it, I mean.”

Sherlock throws him a questioning look.
“Do you know the story of Persephone?”

“The myth.”

“No, the horse. She was a capall they shipped to the mainland, before all the laws and regulations. It’s said that the moment the ferry left Scorpio waters, she withered away. Her bones turned to dust in her pelt, and her hide flaked away. The only thing left of her on the ferry was her harness of bells,” John says. The wind blows his hair back as it funnels in through the stable door, and he squints into it as the screen door clacks against the panels of the house. “She belonged to Thisby and to the Scorpio Sea. They all do. Anywhere else, they do not belong. They’re ours.”

They’re ours, the voice of Sherlock’s mother says into his ear, carried by the wind. The capaill are ours, and they belong here, just like you, bumblebee.

But another voice echoes through Sherlock’s head simultaneously. John, saying how Gladstone had never belonged to him, had also never belonged to Moriarty, how they all belonged to Thisby.

“Where did you hear this story?” Sherlock asks flatly.

“Mike told it to me when I came here. I did say he helped me quite a bit when I immigrated, to be honest, I think he does it with everyone.”

“He’s never mentioned it to me.”

Finally doing what they came here for, Sherlock delicately plucks the Ford keys off of the ring on the wall. If Mrs Hudson had left them alone where John had put them, they wouldn’t have had to come out and see the cat.

John says, “You wouldn’t be the one to mention it to, would you?”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and John smiles at him, following when Sherlock returns to the house again, leaving the door open for John. He strides into the downstairs kitchen, aiming for the closet. John’s footsteps follow his on the stairs.

He hears the chair squeal over the floor when John sits down at the kitchen table. He must thank Epona for the fact that Mrs Hudson cleared it of all experiments before they arrived last night. Otherwise, John might think him too peculiar to associate with. Sherlock hums, passing by an ugly pea-green suit coat that used to be Mycroft’s. It’s much too big for him. He decides on a black jacket, taking extra long debilitating his choices so that John can eat the plate Mrs Hudson made for him without guilt of holding him up.

The ride back to Skarmouth is uneventful. The clouds show no shadows on the grass or road, and whatever animal they had driven over last night has been cleared away, by human or otherwise.

They speak, but neither mentions the events of last night in the sitting room.

-/-

“Meet me at the cliffs by Skarmouth?”

“When?”
“Tomorrow afternoon. You can bring your photographs to study,” John smiles, a need to impress. Sherlock remembers it will be the first time he’s seen Gladstone since the horse tore out Hope’s throat. What can he do to make time pass faster? To be closer to their cliff meeting?

They reach the Stockyard. Over the meadow, Sherlock can see the shape of the mill past the pony fences. There are white wooden boxes filled with new flowers, new posters and signs for directions. It must be Thursday, the day of the youngstock auction. The grass is green and has been freshly watered to look as healthy as possible, and even the barns seem to be shinier than usual, flags flying traditional Thisby colors. Only Sherlock is aware that Moriarty cares nothing about the island’s culture, and everything about the power he has over it.

Foals in ribbons and fillies in flowers are led by stablehands, and rich mainland mongers mill about. A few cross the road in front of him, and Sherlock can see imprints of affairs and pocket watches over all of them. Klemp, the man Sherlock had seen the night of the storm, leads a wicked brown mare with white socks into the main paddock with a riding crop.

The wind beats the grasses down, blowing away a man’s hat. Though overcast, the morning is warm, and the rich sounds of hustled activity and horses fills the atmosphere. New jumps and mounts are flooded over the freshly-mucked pastures, long, decorative planted grasses and more flowerbeds shine in weak sun.

In the mid-morning light, Sherlock watches John’s back while he walks away from the Ford, his mostly-clean-but-not-really jacket over him, fitting and framing him against the pale clouds perfectly. Sherlock watches him disappear into the stables in last night’s clothes, aware John’s mind has already turned completely to the events of today’s job.

And although John is still in sight, Sherlock misses him.

This should’ve been a warning sign.

It was only a soft balm to his mind, to put a name to the feeling.

-/-

The house is so boring.

There’s no rumble of traffic like there is in Skarmouth, or the bleating of sheep by the farms - that’s only distant here. No bicycles or tourists around. Sherlock could go changing back into his dressing gown and pajamas to sleep, but he’s too lazy, and the gown is more for being dramatic. He doesn’t have a proper audience to be dramatic for.

He lazes around the rest of the morning, fixing tea when Mrs Hudson leaves to visit Mrs Turner next door. He watches her all the way until she’s out of sight with the Ford, and then raids the fridge.

She’s gotten rid of all his fish scales and toad legs.

Snapping the door closed, Sherlock throws himself into the sofa, falling into cushions that are not nearly as comfortable to be on top of as the man that lay here just hours ago. He could turn on the radio, study his photographs and the evidence that that blasted man from last night had tried so hard to be rid of. He tries. doesn’t feel right to go and obtain the other wolfsbane envelope without John, who is the reason for the discovery at all.
He decides to do none of these things and sulk instead, throwing himself into the sofa and scowling.

It’s then that the small book clicks.

It’s not one of Mrs Hudson’s freehand recipe books - it’s John’s blue notebook, where he keeps his racing notes. There it is, right on the coffee table beside the sofa, closed and unassuming. It has secrets inside.

Sherlock blinks, and sits up.

He hadn’t known that John had it with him when he came here, or when he went to the tavern last night, but it makes sense, sort of. He may have been recording Mary’s sprinting times, or something akin to that, or just everyday barn life at the Stockyard. Maybe even some thoughts of his about the Races.

Here is where the small notebook gives Sherlock pause. Surely, John wouldn’t leave it here if it was imperative that Sherlock not read it…? So, there can’t be anything terribly incriminating in it. Perhaps, even, by leaving it here on the kitchen counter, John is implying Sherlock should read it. Or is that too much of a thought process to give to John? No, no. He’s very smart, if he wanted Sherlock to read it, and assumed Sherlock would snoop, then he’d leave it somewhere Sherlock could find it.

But it could just be an accident.

Sherlock’s mouth quirks down.

If he went through it, what could he hope to accomplish? Cheat off of John’s notes, find the strategies John has that are incomplete or barely half of an idea? Or even John’s thoughts on what had happened to Beryl, on who could’ve cut her. That should be the only thing that interests Sherlock. What is he hoping to find?

John must have set it here late last night, somewhere between the time Sherlock had gone upstairs and come down after his nightmare. Was he writing in it? What would be worth recording? Or perhaps he was reviewing his notes on opponents horses, on their racing habits, testing himself on them all to better his understanding.

John is gone.

John left his book.

John is gone, and so he won’t see you looking through the book that he left.

Sherlock has never been particularly good at self-control. When he tried quitting cigarettes a few months back, it only took one day of feeling his cravings before he went back to his expensive habits. Now, he must smoke in secret around the back of the stable for fear of Mrs Hudson seeing him.

A furtive look around the sitting room - she would surely snap at him for looking through John’s things. But again, he wouldn’t have left it here if it was so terrible a thing for Sherlock to look at. She’s gone, he remembers.

The pages flutter open, soft and wispy.

There are pages that Sherlock knows are years old, small tables and racing notes about horses that have long since returned to the ocean. He moves forward, past these and to recent events.
He’s magnetic, book-John has written in print, small and doctorly in black ink. Each time we cross, I feel myself drawn closer with an invisible thread.

Sherlock looks, but a name is mentioned nowhere on the page.

I have no reasoning for doing what I did for hi—

Sherlock shuts the book. Impossible. Is John talking about him? Well, he thinks, he closed it too soon to know; he should read on. He skips back a few pages, aware his invasion of privacy is becoming more deeply involved than just a fast glance.

He knew everything about me, somehow he knew everything about me. He knew I was from the mainland and about Harry and he said my limp was psychosomatic, so he didn’t get everything right. Just by looking at dad’s old watch.

It’s mad. I think he might be mad.

Sherlock scoffs. But he reads on.

I think he might be mad. He was certainly arrogant and really quite rude and he looks about 12 and he’s clearly a bit public school and, yes, I definitely think he might be mad but he was also strangely likeable. He was charming. It really was all just a bit strange.

About 12? Really!

John has made their entire first encounter seem like some sort of romantic adventure.

A later entry, dated the day after the storm.

Okay, so he did get it all right. He stayed last night - I didn’t sleep a second.

John goes on to recount the events of the hidden capall and Gladstone’s screaming, in a way that makes John himself sound much less heroic than what he had really been, and Sherlock much more. He’s managed to convince me.

He flips a few pages forward, over hard lines and a few scrapped sketches or tables or lists.

There are several lines about racers, all truths that John had mentioned to Sherlock before. Altum, runs mostly straight, Comfort, sea-mad...

Then, a page on racers. Questions surround the name of a racer that Sherlock had almost forgotten about.

The one on Mary.

He has been so preoccupied with Moriarty, with the murder cases that share no connection but must be somehow related, with John and Redbeard that he had not remembered Magnussen, who would be down on the racing beaches with him in only a few days.

Magnussen, who would have no reason to be at the Yard and cut apart Beryl, despite John’s written questions around that passage.

It wouldn’t be his style, either. The sharks, horse and rider, are more venomous than brutal. They would like to unwind the carefully stitched fabric of Thisby rather than snap the commanding string.

He closes the book, and sets it down on the coffee table again. Last night he had berated Mrs
Hudson for snoopin' through his things, and here he sits, doin' the same to John Watson.

What had he been lookin' for?

At once, he knows.

He had been lookin' for evidence that he has had as much of a profound impact on John's life as John had had on his. Peculiar.

It's such strange magic, Sherlock thinks, how John Watson has been steadily consumin' his life, beginnin' at the moment they met.

At the beginnin', it was small, only annoyance for the man who kept tryin' so hard to embarrass him, often in front of large crowds. It rose, John had saved him from the clutches of a capall uisce that day on the beach, and Sherlock had been unable to let go. Now, it's a thick, sticky syrup, drenchin' every thought in Sherlock's head.

He thinks of swallows and terns and can only picture them dippin' through the air to nests hidden in Stockyard barns, or slippin' against wind along the cliffs, where John and he had raced, their red underbellies and strange two-note songs. When he thinks of his own survival come the first of November, his thoughts lead to Mary and Gladstone, hot breath and flat teeth and the dead dog, and the white mare with the emblem that had knocked John to the sand. Even picturin' Mrs Hudson is no good, because he is only reminded of how she fawned over John.

Perhaps John's magic stretches further than only his water horse, over all capaill he meets. More than just the Yard's keep, or the superstitious locals and bewildered European tourists. Perhaps it has found and sunk into Sherlock's very heart, wound around each atrium and ventricle, slipped through his aorta to be pumped to all arteries, back in through every vein, a powerful, constrictin' black poison that will kill him.

Mycroft would think very little of him for fallin' in love. It would not matter that John is unattainable, only that Sherlock had opened himself up enough to feel what he does. Why should he ever have done that? Oh, the beratin' that he would be subjected to, how he may call Sherlock an idiot, stupid, palin' in comparison to himself, a moron who has fallen in love with the idea of Island magic.

Because that's what John is, isn't it? Island magic. Soft, whispered, come-alive-at-night magic, that keeps Skarmouth and Tholla safe and the seas so raucous. The magic that calmed Mary, that made Gladstone scream, that has made John such a wild success in the Races.

The same magic has alienated John as much as it has helped him, has made the locals think he is a capall in disguise, come ashore to trick all of them, like the Scottish man's mainland kelpies. Sherlock remembers the way islanders had considered Jefferson Hope's comments about John's tidepool eyes.

But. Then there is the cobalt his eyes had been in the night in the heavy storm, the light blue during sunny afternoons, comfortin' grey while they sat on the cliffs, clouds castin' shadows over the open ocean. And none of those seem like the capaill's hunting glare.

-/-
A simple outpost sign near the town of Tholla reads:

*Be Wary Of The Horses,*

and nothing more.

Redbeard whuffs, sending snot over the grasses. He had better not be getting ill. After all, Sherlock will be racing no matter what, now that Moriarty has commended it. It’s that, or John won’t be able to buy Gladstone if, or, when, rather, he wins. Convinced Moriarty will use any excuse to stop John from leaving his sphere of influence, Sherlock sneers. What a pesky fly. What a smart, clever pesky fly.

He pushes his heels into Redbeard’s ribs, and the horse follows his desire, drawing closer to the cliffs.

There are four days until the Races and Sherlock’s chest feels heavy. The human heart of a male only weighs ten ounces, but Sherlock feels every milligram of it. It all hangs down his body, pulled to the ground by an invisible halting rein, turning myths of young women pining for a sailor out at sea and never to return, into a leaden truth. It's surprising that it hurts, that there’s a physical force on the most vital organ in his body.

He wants to rip it out of his chest and throw it over the cliffs and into the sea where it may be swept away by hushing waves along the shore. *Shhhhh, shhhhh.* Perhaps a *capall* will consume it and gain his cleverness, or he its strength.

But the muscle is gone already; another has it in his capable hands.

Why is he so absolutely helpless?

The shapes of the clouds above shadow over the open ocean, light colors fragmented across sheets of grey, pulled by strong wind that carries the scent of salt and throws Sherlock’s hair back from his brow, Redbeard’s mane across his hock, and the sweetgrass fluttering.

-/-

Sherlock realizes it in the daytime.

He's in love with John Watson.

No.

*With* would imply that John loved him, too.

Chapter End Notes

Big chapter update guys so sorry for the length and all the reading you now have to do, but yay an update! Comment if you enjoyed!

I’ve started my summer job again so that’s taking up a lot of my time, but tune in next
chapter for some water horse content (fun) and (finally) some romance!
**Chapter Summary**

**John Watson**

“This is where I walk.”

“Then walk.”

*Chapter Notes*

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**John Watson**

_Gladstone_

_5 to 1_

The auction weighs on him hard.

It presses heavily over his shoulders, dense on his back, and his legs and core ache with the riding and fake laughter he’s had to endure all morning. Like the posters say, the Yard is the five-time champion of the Scorpio Races. John’s name has nothing to do with the advertisements. So, how come every buyer, every mainland monger, is here just to see him? To gain his opinion and his knowledge about what-to-do-with-what-jockey? What to bet on? Who will win?

“You, of course,” all the mongers say, “it’s been that way for half a decade. Things will hardly change! Pour me some more of that gelding there, if you will.”

Even Henry Knight, with his wide, almost-fearful eyes and light questions, seemed a tad too hungry for information than John could handle. No, he couldn’t sell him a _capall usice_. No, John wouldn’t show their teeth to him. Yes, you can ride one.

Into the ironwood paddock, he decides, is the best place. John presses his fingertips to the chosen _capall’s_ jaw and whispers, asking for her to be quiet and easy today. Usually, she is the rush of fast sea foam, but she cooperates.

As relieved about how easy this ride will be as he is, he can’t help feeling like every horse in the Yard is acting out of character today. Some are showing off and striding high, as if they know they’re on display. Others are slow and wander for grass rather than attention.

“Do you ever think they’ll bite you?” Henry asks, high up on the white _capall’s_ back. Her long nostrils flare red and ears pin back at his words, iron chain draped over his face all that is keeping her from running to the ocean. Smoothly she moves, she is always listening.

“Every day,” John answers, tying another knot into her mane. He takes the lead rope, pulling her up. “I try not to let them.”

They walk for a few minutes in peace and quiet, John’s mind turning itself over to thoughts of the pub, the quay, and Sherlock. The cold rush of the wind last night budges up against him now, too, the morning’s short warmth has gone away. His fingers are freezing.
The twisted leather in his hands, however soft and worn it is, is a hundred times sharper than Sherlock’s smooth skin. Colder, too, infinitely colder. It’s been a long time since John has felt the skin of another person, just to feel it.

That alone must be the reason for his thoughts, he’s sure. And then he’s not sure, because Henry’s face, hesitant and non-angular, up against the grey sky above him, doesn’t evoke anything within him at all. He pictures a sharper nose, cheekbones that could cut even Thisby’s wind, and dark raven’s hair. Must remember to write that one down, he thinks, rocking the lead rope when the white mare starts to pull astray. This reminds him of helping children onto the island ponies at Skarmouth fairs, leading Henry like this.

Surely, the man is a capable rider, given his business, his professional gaze over horses. But then again, John’s never seen Moriarty ride, and he’s in this business. Holding onto the rope a bit harder, John sets his jaw.

“That man, the Holmes one,” Henry Knight says suddenly, “Do you really think he guessed all of that about me?” He adds, “You were there,” as if John wouldn’t recall.

Surprised, John glances up at him, then squints. What does this man think he knows about Sherlock? Whatever it is, John knows a lot more. He passes over a few rocks in the paddock, the mare’s hooves trample the sweetgrass. “I don’t think he really ever guesses at all. He’s just brilliantly clever.”

Henry nods, seeming to parse all this. Has this talent been what Henry has been thinking of since meeting Sherlock?

John knows it’s what he himself has been thinking of. Perhaps Henry’s wondering what else Sherlock knows about him but didn’t say.

The way Sherlock had first glanced him over on the cliffs was cold, a gaze of impassive disinterest, and reminded him at the time of the water horses, but now the gaze has become warmer, thawing like ice. When John had caught word of Holmes training up by the cliffs so long ago, something had come over him, and he’d left the Yard at once.

The miserable, lonely way that man had looked just last night, how John had seen him that way, sticks in his heart like sap. His chest squeezes just thinking of it.

But. Hm. That wasn’t really the first time they’d looked at each other, on the cliffs, was it? Thinking for a moment, it strikes him — John had first seen Sherlock on the racing beaches, with Mary, the blonde mare, freshly reared and kicking out for magic.

Mary. Words of Moriarty echo in his head, same as the wind over the shutters on the sides over the barns. How he’s set on having her, how having her would terrify every single other being employed or boarded at the Yard.

John would never let a finger on her, not after he’d felt the rushing hot waters of her mind when touching her after she’d kicked away her monger that first day. Her head was full of saltwater and malice, and hidden meanings. Magnussen likely loses himself every time he rides her, no matter the charms he thinks he’s using correctly.

Henry says, “I think I’d like to get off, now.”

They pull up near the mounting block and Henry expertly dismounts. He really must be a rider, or at least watched enough racing to know how to get off a capall, how to shorten the straps and keep your chin tucked, neck protected while you lean forward over the horn of the saddle. John’s seen
Sherlock dismount, and he merely leaps off. It should be stupid, but it’s always so graceful.

John waits until Henry has exited the paddock before turning the mare loose. The boards here are studded with iron. She won’t go near the edges. Wistfully, he wonders what it would be like to set her free.

“Any idea of what you’d like?” John asks, closing the paddock gate. Behind him, nearly opalescent against the green grass, decorative trees, and the red of the stables, the mare is standing pointedly in the middle of the paddock, just watching those around her.

“I’ve been thinking about those pair of duns,” Henry says absently, looking away and to a commotion about auctioning across the Yard. The wind blows his hair back. He takes off his gloves. “I’ve been thinking about visiting the beaches.”

John says, “It isn’t the best time.”

“My father thought it was,” Henry replies smoothly without looking at him. Sherlock would be able to gather more information from the monger, but John doesn’t have his gifts.

“Your father?”

“Yes. Capaill, in November, when I was young.”

It seems any question asked after someone on Thisby ends with a cause of death. John doesn’t feel like touching Henry, but extends a simple, “I’m sorry,” his way. Henry keeps watching the auction faraway, still and quiet.

In the paddock, the mare, a statue, is watching them, too.

-/-

An American buyer asks to see him out on a white half-blooded mare he’s interested in purchasing, and so this conversation is full of half-hooded meaning.

It’s veiled, as John can get into trouble for saying things about selling capaill bluntly and out loud. He wouldn’t mind the trouble too much, he thinks, last night there was loads of trouble and he loved it, more than anything he’s loved in a long time. The brisk air, the rush of the bleak wind against his face while he ran through Skarmouth’s dark alleys… His heart is racing just remembering.

Out in the pasture, John and the monger both lean on the fence. John doesn’t really care if his posture makes him look unprofessional, his mind is on other things, of when he’ll get to the racing cliffs tomorrow, what to bring, who he’s going to go see. His ears warm against the low wind, him silent and watching the horses, and the American talking about boating nonsense freely. He says something in particular and so John turns. There shouldn’t be thoughts about Sherlock Holmes when he’s here. It’s as if Moriarty is in his head, he can almost feel the man prodding his mind whenever he’s working.

“She’ll be difficult,” John says, then gets distracted by the roar of a car engine, not Sherlock’s, don’t bother, “—difficult to handle as she’s being shipped,” John says cautiously, glancing around as he does it. He’ll always warn people against buying these horses — even if he’s not from here, doesn’t belong, the capaill do, he’s seen evidence of it and the way they react when dragged from the surf in
the night. These half-bloods are all different. “And I would be wary of any foals from her. They might like the ocean more than you, or meat more than hay.”

The grey-eyed man’s bushy eyebrows rise and draw deep crinkles into his forehead. Then, he laughs, big guffaws that shake his shoulders and shift his clothes. “John Watson,” the man says, reaching forward to pat a hard pat on John’s jacket. His laughs subside, “Then I will have to bring any carnivorous fillies back for you and Mister Moriarty.”

John smiles tightly. The only capall he wishes for is the full-blooded one locked away in the stables.

“Which reminds me, hey, where is that man? I haven’t seen him since the bay’s auction early this morning. I want this unicorn.”

John shifts, finally regaining some semblance of personal space, to turn a lock over the bright paddock where the half-blood mare plays with an island pony. She is often quiet, this mare, but smart. She knows when food comes and when she’ll be approached with a saddle, and she knows when she is being looked at. Island horse things.

One of her only abnormalities, giving away her lineage, are the long, waving strands of hair, like a mane, traveling up from the pastern of her foot to the back of the cannon of her leg. It’s hair just as white as she is. To some, she could be as dreamy as a unicorn, prancing on long thin legs with a slim chest.

Until she opens her mouth, and her last secret is uncovered — those flat, crushing yellow teeth in her mouth. This mare only eats the things that bleed.

-/-

The American client prods him a bit more about Moriarty’s whereabouts while giving him more hard, fond pats. Well. John knows they’re meant to come off as friendly and nice, but John doesn’t want to be touched by anyone that is lacking Sherlock’s… anything, right now.

Moriarty’s elegant offices are north of the stables by just a way, holding rooms upon rooms with fans and heaters and posh things that John hates to look at. Even the ornate and fashionable front door seems to stare at him for his lack of wealth, looking over his palm on the handle as if to ask him what his business is here. In all his years employed here, more than ten, he’ll never get used to it.

Pushing through, John steps into the foyer without knocking. He’s long abandoned most of his sense of propriety, but so has Moriarty. Their dance is only in front of the buyers. Privately, John speaks almost freely.

He leaves his boots on, there’s always some maid or loose stablehand around and he enjoys being even a slight inconvenience to Moriarty. Striding down the expansive halls reminds him of the night before, of the officer’s building in Skarmouth, dashing through the rooms in search of evidence about to be stolen after a handsome enigma of a man…

Don’t think of him here, John reminds himself. Not at the heart of the dungeon, where his employer’s influence is the most potent.

“Moriarty,” John knocks hard on a thick wooden door. He ignores a few pretty fairytale books stacked on a table beside the office. Just for show, like Moriarty reads anything more than his checks.
“Moriarty.”


One more glance to the stack of thickly bound books. Has this table always been in this hallway? It doesn’t really matter, Moriarty can move any book any way he likes. John pushes into the office without another thought.

“Mr Rushford is looking for you in the paddocks. He’s looking to buy Fiona.”

Moriarty is sitting behind his expansive desk, dark and thick wood lined with papers, little knick-knacks, and a potted plant that is new from Henry Knight. It’s a purple flower that accents the room well, tying the unrelated wallpaper to the desk. John feels as though he’s seen the plant somewhere before. At Hooper’s, the bakery in Skarmouth, when he was with Sherlock.

Moriarty doesn’t look up from what he’s doing, which is probably nothing, and he doesn’t even shift in his chair. “Which one is Fiona?”

John’s stomach turns with frustration. With a wide stance, arms down at his sides, he answers through gritted teeth, “The white half-blood.”

“Tell him I’m coming. Oh, and John,” Moriarty turns, nonchalant, shuffling papers like he has something important to do. He makes his next statement in an equally unimpressed fashion, “I saw Sherlock Holmes this morning come up in that tatty old car of his,” a pause. “Gladstone is two-fifty.”

The mere mention of Sherlock’s name around Moriarty’s tongue has him bothered. He’s beginning to feel anger rise in his gut, the hot-heavy, black-hearted feelings that come with his occasional streaks of rage blinding him.

It makes him clench his teeth together, grinding his molars like Gladstone does. God, he needs to stop doing this so often. Forget Sherlock, draw the conversation from him. Why was he spoken of at all? What’s the point? What’s the game?

“That isn’t what we agreed,” John says.

James Moriarty looks at him with his big brown eyes. They’re wet like the capaill. “Agreements change. They’re flexible. It’s two-fifty or nothing. After this year, I won’t hear of this again.”

Two hundred and fifty is unattainable. John crosses his arms and shifts his stance, knowing full well there is no hope in trying to physically intimidate Moriarty into changing his price. He remembers Sherlock saying something about playing a game. Just as there’s no hope in changing Moriarty, there’s none in understanding Sherlock and his metaphors, those realizations of his that sound so cryptic to John’s untrained ears.

“You’re playing.” John tilts his head dangerously.

“I’m always playing. It’s so fun.”

“I know you don’t care about the money.”

“Of course I don’t. But you all do. And it’s funny to take away the things you care about.”

“This is a stupid game to play.”
Moriarty’s slowly-widening smile suddenly drops, as if John has struck a nerve.

John tempts fate further, like looking a water horse in the mouth. “What is it that you want? It isn’t money.”

“I want that horse.”

Emboldened, John shakes his head, pressing his lips together. “Nope. You don’t.” It isn’t denial that he presses forward with, its utter conviction. “You want more pieces in your game, don’t you?”

“It’s unwise to press the man that pays your salary, Doctor Watson.” Moriarty pouts.

“I’ll tell you that it’s just as unwise to press the man,” John says, “that handles the *capaill* better than anyone else on the island. What is it you want.” Here, he steals Sherlock’s very words. “I’ve made every horse in that stable what they are.”

But none of those animals have made John what he is.

Moriarty regards him for moments longer, watching the way John’s face is set and hard.

Then, at once the Yard’s owner says, “I want Sherlock Holmes. And it seems I want him *almost, almost* as badly as you do. But not in the same way,” Moriarty goes on while John’s stomach drops from under him, “I want him to look closer. And he never does.” Another pout.

*Almost* as badly as John does? Now his skin begins to crawl. There is no way Moriarty could know the depth and the ways in which John wants Sherlock, he’s spent all morning thinking of him. What has Moriarty spent the morning thinking of? Something in his chest squeezes tight, an anger and overprotective streak crashing over him like the water at high tide.

Moriarty stands now, his long fingers pressing into the vast, dark polished chestnut desk before him. On it, barely in John’s peripheral is the seal, the one that had stamped waxen death to that tourist man, an execution order.

Except, this doesn’t register because the anger from earlier has returned with a vengeance, flushing his face and drowning his mind in white noise. It’s bad enough Moriarty is ever near Gladstone. He won’t ever allow him near Sherlock. Salary be damned.

Moriarty be damned.

*Gladstone* be damned.

Expensive shoes click on the wooden floors, then silence themselves as Moriarty steps closer onto plush Persian carpet John is on. Moriarty has rounded the desk to stand before John.

“Jefferson was never really good enough for that black horse. I knew it from the start, it’s why I sent him there in the first place,” Moriarty says. He pulls open a long drawer close to John, who stands solid. “I was always watching. I like it,” he looks John in the eye, now leaning back to sit on his desk by John, “I like to watch. You know, you’re doing just the same thing Sherlock was doing on the beach,” he smiles, “talking about my games like you know anything at all.”

“Tell me, then.”

Moriarty tsks, eyes flicking away to look at a painting of thoroughbreds on a cliff over his windows. “No spoiling. Sherlock would do anything to achieve his ends. He might as well have told me as much. Would you do the same?”
John would do anything.

“He also might have told me as much, that I’d done something wrong by letting you go that first time. He told me I ought to have a different conversation with you. I promised him I would, if he gave me something too.”

No more wondering about what had changed Moriarty’s mind then. John’s belly is an uneasy pit of anger and anxiety. That’s what Moriarty had been doing staying on the beach after Hope was killed - he’d been talking to Sherlock. And Sherlock had been talking back.

They’d made a deal. Somewhere, an envious feeling emerges, but John roughly shoves it away.

“What did he promise you?” John asks. His voice has lost its edge in his fleeting jealousy and so Moriarty is lured in while John shifts, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Nothing more than he promised the night of the festival.”

Could there be a hidden conversation in this answer? Moriarty thinks John is so stupid. It’s embarrassing for the both of them. Feeling his skin tighten further over his knuckles, John hides his clenched fists in his crossed arms.

“He promised you he’d race, then,” John observes. But Sherlock was already doing that. There must have been a new equation in the mix, something that nobody was telling John about. Something Sherlock wasn’t telling him.

Had he had all the secret pieces, the snatches of interaction Sherlock seems to have had with Moriarty without him, he might’ve been able to argue for Sherlock’s safety, as well. But Sherlock told him nothing.

Moriarty dips his hand into his desk, and removes from the drawer a long, crystalline dagger with a silver handle. It’s half the length of his forearm.

These ones are recognizable. There are some displayed at Saint Columba’s, the church in Skarmouth where Stamford attends. At the church, they’re behind thick glass with plaques regarding the names of racing capaill they’ve killed. They are charmed, magic— wickedly sharp and expert at slicing muscle and water horse hide. John’s blood begins to thrum at the sight of it, and he whispers to himself to quell it all.

In the light of the office, it gleams as the hair off of wet ponies in the sun. A display of weaponry will not thwart him, but rather emboldens him. John sets his jaw and demands, leaning closer, “You say you want Sherlock Holmes. What does Gladstone have to do with him?”

“Like you aren’t already aware, Doctor Watson,” Moriarty says, puffing out his cheeks and rolling his eyes as he plays with the knife in his hands. He seems unbothered by John’s proximity. “Connections, connections, all across the island, you both have. Why would I want to lose both Holmes and that black horse? However would I eat his heart then?”

Here, John stands confused. It must be written over his face, because Moriarty’s cat-smile returns, and then grows ever wider.

“Doctor Watson, I would never take everything from you in one fell swoop. There wouldn’t be anything left of you to play with if I did,” He says, “And so I’ll make you your deal.”
Still perplexed, John responds, “One fifty.”

“This is where I walk, Johnny.”

“Then walk.”

Moriarty regards him for another long moment. The dagger’s handle glints in his hand. He grins. Then, “You’re just like him. Two hundred.” He extends his palm, leisurely.

John takes it.

“Two hundred.”

When he walks into the main stables, Bill Murray seems to have been waiting for him. The shop owner watches him for a second, and then goes back to stirring around whatever dark meats are in the pail by his shoes with a ladle.

John walks straight to Gladstone’s stall, the one absent of iron or charms that work to create prisons for the other capaill in the Yard, and watches the water horse from the outside. Within, the powerful black shadow is sleeping, or appears to be. His head and long neck are down, knees locked, and thin chest filling slowly with each huge breath, then emptying again.

Abruptly, an image of Sherlock’s face is thrown into John’s head.

He doesn’t even try to brush it away - although there may be some residual irritation that Sherlock hadn’t told him what had happened with Moriarty earlier, most of his thoughts towards the other man are gentle.

What had that secret conversation been about? Why would Sherlock promise anything to Moriarty for John’s sake? Hadn’t John done enough for him, essentially kicking him off the racing beaches in those first few days? Or maybe Sherlock felt indebted somehow, and as John has observed he’s a man who doesn’t like to have outstanding debts. The questions race in John’s mind just as quickly as they had last night in Sherlock’s sitting room.

Maybe it’s the deep color of Gladstone’s pelt that reminded him of Sherlock, or the way both breathe so carefully as they sleep. Do his ears feel hot? Or is the tough air streaming through the aisle simply biting at them? John feels the cold like a body pressed against him, and tucks frozen fingers into his jacket pockets.

Gently, his thumb sweeps over a bump, an item in his pocket. Without removing it, he knows it is the spiraling shell from the mare goddess. What wish was there to make? He’s wished to win before, but that isn’t what he promised this year. He’d lied to Sherlock about already making his wish. He had no clue in his head as to what he wanted.

This morning, when he left Sherlock’s house (or, Sherlock’s rented house, or Mrs Hudson’s house, with whom Sherlock was not involved with any more than in a mother and son relationship), the grass had been covered in frost outside. At the Stockyard, due to all the activity before and during the auction, it seemed like the frost had never been there at all. Even the flowerboxes and their plants seemed untouched by temperature, the houses and the stables all warmed for the comfort of
American or European buyers.

Another illusion drawn by Moriarty. As if Thisby isn’t always cold and unwelcoming. Thisby cares nothing for love and only for bravery.

He wonders what the dagger had meant.

He hears Murray’s boots as the man comes up. Murray stands next to John, taller than him, peering into Gladstone’s stall and watching the horse begin to stir. The horse shakes his head, white mane tossing to both sides. Evidently, Gladstone can feel all the eyes on him and it makes him both disquieted and prideful.

John keeps watching, even while Gladstone’s wicked teeth begin to clack over the wood by the little window as he lifts his face up to it.

Beryl had done the same thing, when she was attacked, pitifully dragging her mouth to taste the salt in the air like she never would again. The wind comes in again smelling of the birds in the barn and deep ocean brine. John needs to go to the sea. The cliffs tomorrow should ease his mind, bring some sense of clarity he cannot grasp here.

Murray’s voice breaks into his thoughts.

“That horse is a dangerous thing to love.”

But Murray has pegged John wrong, because it isn’t the horse he loves. It’s the Races.

The white-calm of adrenaline streaking through his veins, the way Gladstone’s pelt warms and burns to the touch, the utter silence and stillness of all the capaill before they run. The way his hand does not shake, and his leg does not hurt.

When the Races start, where will he keep Gladstone?

John stretches his leg now, clenching his calf and shifting his muscle as he changes his stance. It hasn’t hurt him since Sherlock Holmes pointed it out to him, and even now it’s just the same as his other leg, useful and unremarkable.

Should he stay at the back of the pack and come up at the last moment to steal the victory? Gladstone has done it before. And where will Sherlock be? Ah, he’s already told that man to stay close to the edge of the water. There, the sand will be firm and capaill under saddles will ward away from him.

John knows he won’t make his move until Sherlock makes his.

Carefully, he rubs his thumbs over his knuckles in agitation, watching Murray draw a cross over Gladstone’s stall door. Fools are the only people who think that religion will sate the water horses better than blood.

John says what’s on his mind. “It isn’t the horse I love at all.”

“You’re right,” Murray says instantly. “It’s that Sherlock Holmes.”

Chapter End Notes
A shorter chapter from John’s POV to shake things up a little... back to Sherlock soon!
Chapter Summary

Crimson wax, hard and bubbled under the emblem of a horse’s head and a cursive, deep-set M. The Stockyard’s callmark. There are thin, spiderwebbing cracks in the wax, as if someone had folded the letter and ruined the emblem.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

-/-

Sherlock Holmes

Redbeard

46 to 1
45 to 1
44 to 1

Sherlock drives the Ford into Skarmouth the next morning, parking over the same spot of bumpy cobblestone he had when coming to the pub last night. His skin still prickles uneasily with all of the dreaded feelings moving around underneath it. Internally, he is busy berating himself for being too unmotivated to solve the poisoning case yesterday. Really. Pathetic.

Outfitted in his long coat, which Mrs Hudson had fixed up and washed for him, his blue scarf and leather gloves, it’s only his nose, ears, and lips that feel the chill. He’s not about to pull his scarf over his nose, though, and he would rather die than crush his hair with a hat. Tourists putter around the town just the same as locals, both too enthused and too anxious by being so close to the day of the Races to do anything productive. It’s cold, but in a few days it will be November and he expected cold.

It’s only a matter of time until he must face the sharks in the water.

Tholla is probably less busy, he muses while avoiding a few women coming down the road on bright bicycles, further from the beaches as it is, but visitors to the island like to visit it all, from the sheep farms to the ports to the moorlands. A couple with linked arms, the woman clad in a long brushing skirt and flowing blouse, wrong choice of clothes for the cold today, heads down the walk on the other side of the road. Her outfit might look nice if the wind wasn’t blowing her hat off her head every other minute. It blows a few shutters against shop windows.
The ordinary people and the docks and the sea and the wind and the fish. The fish, Sherlock.

And the damn horses.

MH

For the first time in a long while, his thoughts resign themselves to his brother. His hateful brother. His hateful brother, who could not see past what he disliked about Thisby to find something worth its weight.

Had something truly pushed Mycroft from the island? Perhaps Thisby became so cold that even Mycroft, full of ice, had turned away.

Where is he?

Sherlock’s mouth hardens into a foul line while he stares out at the customers passing the bakery windows. A little pair of boys in knitted jumpers tug excitedly on their mother's hands until they have successfully herded her into the shop door.

He strides away from the quay, bakery, and tavern, towards his goal, his reason for coming into town today, and most days. His coat sweeps out behind him, and he adjusts his scarf. Crumpled, dry brown leaves flitter through the streets and back alleys, betraying the season upon them all.

The hulk of the station seems completely different in daylight than it did beneath Thisby’s black sky the other night, although his side is significantly colder, both with the wind and with the absence of a certain champion by his arm. Making sure his lips are marred into a frown, Sherlock strides right in the front door.

Abuzz with activity, officers are flitting around the foyer like busy flies, all over their heads with orders of gambling, reports of tourists getting their watches stolen right out from under their noses, or others swindled by conmen on the beach. It’s a touch warmer in here, a hotbox in the corner of the foyer. Sherlock glances around to find Donovan the sergeant, not Lestrade, directing some lower officer’s paperwork with a thin dark finger. Her hair has been done up for the cameras that populate Thisby in the few days before the Races.

In three days, Sherlock will be down on that beach with Redbeard under saddle, and the bulky cameras will be trained on him.

Donovan has spotted him. She scowls, straightens, and crosses her arms over her blouse.

“When are you going to get bored of all this?” She asks him outright, drawing the attention of the young officer she was helping.

“Where’s Lestrade? I don’t want to have to handle one of his lackeys.” One more step, and he will say something about Anderson and her. This seems to convey through his eyes, because her face turns ever harder, her hands twitching. It’s not a good look for her.

“I don’t have time for you, there’s a half dozen new pickpockets,” She says, pressed, “He’s in the notary’s. Not that you should go back there.”

Sherlock barely holds his viper’s tongue, striding confidently down the hallway much the same as he did with John in tow under the cover of darkness, brushing past a few officers as he goes that have long since stopped asking who he is and what he’s doing here.

The long lights on the ceiling illuminate the area more than the sun from outside, which has once
more disappeared behind a thick layer of grey clouds, relieving shadows from the walls.

Lestrade emerges from the notary’s office, just as Sherlock’s heading into it. They nearly collide, with Lestrade looking at him, surprised, and Sherlock stopping dead on a coin. The DI smells heavily of black coffee, and of something sweeter, like cinnamon, or warm honey. The scent is so strong that Sherlock scrunches up the bridge of his nose.

“You can’t spend all day in the bakery, Lestrade. Let me into the evidence room.”

“Sherlock!” He exclaims. Anderson, inside the office, glances up from his postage-sorting, and makes eye contact with Sherlock as Lestrade goes on, “Where have you been? I don’t know where the bloody file’s gone!”

“A thief procured it from the notary’s office the night you and I were at Hawkins’, but luckily for you I was present to apprehend him. I have the file. I don’t have the man. Now, the evidence room?”

“You don’t have him? Well, where’s he gone? How’d he get in?”

“I had a choice to go for him or the file. I chose to go after the photographs. Although his involvement is suspicious, depending on who sent him to steal the toxicology report and photographs, it was better I had the file. Do your job and figure him out yourself. As for entry, he must’ve picked the locks.”

Lestrade sputters, “Wha-- You’re the only witness!”

“Unless,” Crawls a dripping cadence from the notary’s office, “He was out with the champion rider again.”

Lestrade regards Anderson, turning when he begins to speak, and then back to Sherlock. Unlike pesky, bad-haired, sea-wishing Anderson, Lestrade doesn’t take their partnership with any bad tone. He uses it like a good officer would, as a way to collect more evidence. “Was Watson with you? Did he get a good look at the man? Epona, it’s bad enough you ,” he lowers his volume as another inspector cruises by him down the hallway, almost bumping Sherlock’s elbow, “It’s bad enough you get in here as much as you do.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, lips parting in a heavy sigh. “John saw half as much as I did, which was nothing. However, I have the photographs and report.” He produces the stack of papers, crumpled with dried saltwater but hardly smeared, from under his arm. “But I need to see the contents of the man’s pockets.”

The grey DI wearily takes the documents, his frustration and confusion suddenly abated. “You need to see his pockets? We haven’t done anything with the stuff. It’s all normal pocket things.”

Who was Lestrade to judge what was normal to have in a pocket? Sherlock asks him so, and Lestrade groans in answer, saying something about not wanting to know what Sherlock kept in his pockets at any given time, as he turns to lead the pair of them to the evidence locker. Sherlock doesn’t exactly need to be led, he’s been in there countless times, sometimes with Lestrade and sometimes separate of him, but he follows to appease the older man.

There’s no one in the musty room. Plenty of things line the shelves, some of them surely antiques and covered with cobwebs near the back, confiscated years and years ago in some investigation that never received a happy resolve. Probably because Sherlock didn’t work on them, the cases so cold and ancient, but Lestrade likely didn’t, either, so Sherlock doesn’t make a snappy comment.
Lestrade walks through the rows of shelves, eventually bending low to retrieve a small wooden box, and setting it onto one of the desks in the room, a deep mahogany.

“We haven’t gone through any of it, not that it’s unimportant. It’s racing season, and a murder is big, but there’s just too much going on to carry after it until after the Races.”

“Yet you allow Donovan to keep after all the island’s pickpockets.”

“She’s good at that stuff!”

Sherlock hums, pretending to agree so that he can leave more quickly with what he wants. Hm. Maybe leaving isn’t the best course of action. What if the envelope is in the box, and when he opens it, it has a letter of confession from Moriarty about the murder? He should be as close to the station as possible if that’s the case, so the arrest can happen more smoothly.

Of course, that’s never going to happen. Not so long as the spider breathes.

The dust in here tickles his nose.

“Unlock it,” He demands, straightening. What is he going to do if there is no envelope? There’s no way he could walk to the Stockyard and ask for another. Completely stupid.

Lestrade fits a key from his belt into the lock, twists and opens it.

Coins, a pocketwatch, an old patch of a company logo, pocket dust. And the yellowed envelope.

Exactly like John’s.

Lestrade looks confused. “I don’t remember that letter being in there,” he says, “I would’ve opened that.”

It’s obvious from this statement that the thief from the other night slipped it into the evidence locker before looking for the files.

Before Sherlock can ruminate on that, or even turn back to the DI, Donovan calls out her oh-so-affectionate nickname for him. “Freak,” he hears Sally Donovan’s voice float down the hall. She’s peering into the tall doorway from the corridor, still trying to deal with irritated, pickpocketed, stupid tourists. “You’ve got a visitor.”

Just past her is none other than John Watson, his trademarked jacket hanging worn and well over his shoulders as if salt had never touched it. His hair is not laying flat due to the wind from outside. His cheeks are pink, too, as if he was cold. He’s wearing gloves and his boots, but nothing else that would entail this being a cold-weather outfit.

Lestrade waves him in. Stepping past Donovan with a glance, John’s eyes find Sherlock’s as quick as waves flitting over sand. He looks relieved, part from seeing Sherlock, part from being out of the wind and cold, and part from getting away from Donovan, who was sure to put up a fight as to letting him in the back offices without Lestade’s approval. The former part of his relief, so apparent in his weary expression, makes Sherlock glow.

“I thought you might’ve gone yesterday. I wasn’t sure where to find you. I need to speak with you.”

Couldn’t bring myself to, Sherlock thinks, but says, “I was delayed.” He holds up the envelope, and
John’s eyes go big, and his stance changes, from something like reassurance and worry at finding him here, to a new, slightly-anxious-yet-excited expression.

“Watson,” says Lestrade.

“Lestrade. Have you opened it, Sherlock?”

“No.”

“You sort of have to do that to figure what’s inside.”

“No. You can tell plenty from the outside,” Sherlock says, suddenly glancing madly around the room for something to verify his claim. John has started smiling.

Watching the exchange are Donovan and Anderson, him having wandered over from across the hall in the notary’s, the former agape and the latter sneering. Sherlock thinks it’s funny how they’re both reacting so comically, without looking at the other. Maybe they really are made perfectly for one another.

He pays them no mind, really, stepping right to the desk lamp and twisting its metal, bulbous head so he can study the envelope in good light. John leans over one shoulder, Lestrade, curious, over the other.

First, he examines the seal. Crimson wax, hard and bubbled under the emblem of a horse’s head and a cursive, deep-set M. The Stockyard’s callmark. There are thin, spiderwebbing cracks in the wax, as if someone had folded the letter and ruined the emblem. “It was in this room since that other night,” Sherlock says, “Or else the wax would be more damaged, more cracked. The thief must’ve slipped it into this room before taking off with the files.”

The paper is the same, too, off-white, thick, and luxurious. Almost smooth to the touch, refined. Over the lamp, he can see the shadow of folded pages inside, feel them through the envelope. There’s something in here.

Yes.

He looks up, slotting the envelope into his pocket. “John and I will be going, now.”

“What?”

Sherlock begins to turn and make for the door, having grown tired of being around people who are distinctly not John alone. “Haven’t you heard? John Watson said he needed to speak with me.”

“Sherlock, you can’t go.”

Anderson asks, “Do you want us to detain them?”

“No,” Lestrade answers, and Sherlock sweeps out the evidence room’s door, walking briskly down the hallway in the same manner he did through the streets earlier. A young officer jumps from his path, spilling some hot drink over in a mug.

“Can’t stay all day,” Sherlock reaches the main door in the foyer, turning, pleased to see John’s been the one following closest to him, while Lestrade and the others back always. “I have very important matters to attend. Racing. Casing. Doing your job for you.”

“You’re bringing that back, you hear?” Lestrade points his finger accusingly at Sherlock. John
glances to him, as if wondering how many times Sherlock has stolen police evidence.

“‘I’ll bring everything back, including the murderer.’”

“What?”

“Really, Lestrade, it’s been grand, I’ll let you know as soon as there’s a new development,” he grins a big fake grin, like Musgrave, and shuts the foyer door. It wouldn’t really make the DI give up if he was set on the evidence not leaving the station, but it’s enough of a pointed, dramatic exit that Lestrade must be tired of it, and him, for the day.

He brushes down the front of his long coat. This is mostly for show, but partially because he was in that dusty evidence locker.

John laughs, and Sherlock begins to pry open the envelope, stepping away from the station with the champion following dutifully. He’s careful to angle the ripped opening away from his face should it be within Moriarty’s ideas to lace it with a powder. Though, that’s silly, because if it was, the tarts wouldn’t have needed to be poisoned in the first place.

A few tourists pass by, and despite the cold, seem happy with the brightness of the day. Ugh. Morning people.

“I need to speak with you,” John says, coming up by his arm, and gripping him by the elbow. John’s hands are bare to the cold, “I know the letter is pressing, but so is this.”

Sherlock is already beginning to hyper-focus on the envelope. Halfheartedly, he replies, “Yes.”

“On the beach— after Hope, what was it you spoke with Moriarty about?”

Taken aback, Sherlock forgets the envelope and glances to John from the corner of his eye. Why would John assume he’d spoken to Moriarty at all? Or, is it not an assumption? Had Moriarty changed the parameters of the deal he and Sherlock had struck?

Squinting, he keeps staring at the letter, feigning disinterest in the same detached manner he did yesterday morning, with John on the sofa. “I told him that I knew he was playing a game,” he says, telling the truth. Then, he lies. “And that was all.”

“You’re certain? You didn’t mention anything about racing?”

Now, he looks away from the envelope, to John instead. His face is as urgent as his voice. Sherlock’s chest squeezes, his lungs expand.

“Why? Oh, I see, you’re looking for something that pertains to you. No. I did not tell Moriarty all your weaknesses so that he may exploit them. I’m not insane,” back to the envelope, now a little hurt.

“No, about you. About you racing.”

How much does John know? He will not know that Sherlock bargained Gladstone for him by offering up his own racing, no, Sherlock will not tell him that in a hundred years, not even if he asked kindly. The wind blows over them.

Although he doesn’t seem to know everything — Sherlock’s actions in favor of John would cause the champion stress, he knows, that overprotective surge within John would push forward, and he could even grow angry with Sherlock — he certainly knows something. And how did he come to
learn this? Another interaction with the spider must be the answer.

“I assured him I was racing. I believe he was asking about the odds.”

Now, he rips open the top of the envelope completely. The scratch of torn paper is carried away on the air.

It’s part of a book - the pages of a story, ripped out, bits of old glue from the spine still grappling onto the edges, as if they had been torn out of anger and carelessly, or in a fit. Sherlock recognizes some lines vaguely. A poisoned apple, a wrong bite, a deep sleep.

He hands off the pages to John, who impatiently takes them from him. John reads while Sherlock steeplest his fingers below his chin, deep in thought.

“This is Snow White,” John says, incredulously, and providing the name Sherlock had deleted. “It’s the passage about her being poisoned by the evil witch. It’s the original version — the queen hires the huntsman to kill Snow White, she wants to eat her liver, lungs, and heart. Except,” John shifts the paper, “liver and lungs, they’re crossed out. The words.”

Sherlock had seen.

But John seems especially shaken by the sole inclusion of the heart organ. He looks both ill and deep in confusion. “Sherlock,” He starts. “There’s something Moriarty said to me yesterday.”

Interested, Sherlock raises his brows. Still gripping the paper for dear life, John says, “I had to haggle with him over Gladstone again. But. He mentioned you. He said if I took Gladstone and you, he’d never be able to ‘eat his heart.’” Sick, John looks at him for answers, “I don’t know whether he meant Gladstone or you.”

Parsing this, Sherlock again turns away. How disturbing that Moriarty is, he recalls the way Moriarty had taken his hand at the beach the day Hope was killed, the sweat and uneasy desperation, the wanting, he’d felt.

“Likely me,” He says suddenly, ignoring the way John’s face has suddenly dropped. “I don’t mean it to be prideful, but the practice of eating capaill has long since been disregarded by Thisby.”

The wind blows John’s hair askew, throwing short strands back from his face. He holds tighter to the paper, for fear of the island stealing it.

“He has all these fairytale books outside his office, just standing there. I think he may have moved them so I could see them.”

“Moriarty gave you those seeds, John. He could’ve gotten them from anywhere and their source is nearly gone or entirely depleted by now.” Sherlock frowns. He knows deep within him that Moriarty also tore the pages from his books to give to the poisoned tourist, only to recover it after his death and before the police appeared on the scene, so that no one but Sherlock could open it. But there’s a lack of proof. Anything he could bring to Lestrade right now would make him look insane. More insane than usual.

Curious, Sherlock asks, “What other books were there? The names,” and then he feels angry at himself for not demanding an answer very angrily, like he might’ve done of Lestrade. Asking so softly is to shout his feelings for John. His mouth thins, lips twisting begrudgingly into an unbecoming line.

He turns and grabs John’s head in his hands, his gloves protection against the cold as well as John’s
bare skin. His hands slip lower to take John by the upper arms, gripping as intensely as John had pulled on him to hide from the file thief.

“Sherlock, what--?”

Sherlock shushes him, “Concentrate. I need you to concentrate. Close your eyes.”


John has failed to answer immediately, but now his brows raise quick in surprise, his shoulders tensing as Sherlock begins to walk, spinning them in a circle, with his eyes focused directly into John’s.

“The names of the books, John, the other stories! I need you to maximize your visual memory. Try to picture what you saw? Can you picture it?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you remember it?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Can you remember the names?”

“Yes!”

“How much can you remember it?” They’re still spinning, the cold ground crunching beneath Sherlock’s shoes, trampled into a circle they trace.

“Well, don’t worry--”

“Because the average human memory on visual matters is only sixty-two percent accurate.”

“Yeah, well, don’t worry, I remember all of them--”

In disbelief, Sherlock breathes, “Really?”

“Yeah, or at least I would,” John stresses, and tugs himself free, although his body stays very close to Sherlock’s, as if angled towards him in a way Sherlock hadn’t tugged him to be, “if I can get to my pockets!” He rummages through his pocket while Sherlock stares. “I wrote them down.” He removes a small packet of paper from his jacket.

He hardly gets to unfold it before Sherlock seizes it from his grasp, his cheeks and ears red and hot, already trying to decipher John’s bad handwriting. It’s scrawly and unorderly, but not difficult, especially after Sherlock has already become familiar with it due to his own snooping through John’s blue notebook. Speaking of which, he means to return that in a moment.

Snow White, MacBeth, Little Red Riding Hood, Rumplestiltskin, Snow White.

“You’ve written Snow White twice,” Sherlock says, the embarrassment having faded from his voice. Now, perhaps, he can blame his color on the wind and the chill.

“He had two copies. Different versions, though, I think.”

Sherlock purses his lips. John hasn’t backed away from him at all. Standing in the middle of busy
Skarmouth, just days before racing, and John, Thisby’s resident champion, sidling up to him so close that it’s almost obscene. To himself, at least. Passerbys, and there are passerbys, probably wouldn’t blink at two men in deep conversation so close to each other. They may look like a pair of secretive gamblers to the uninformed.

Sherlock clears his throat. “He must’ve known you would see these books. It was deliberate. There are two copies of *Snow White*, and so it must be significant, a clue, or…” He looks up from studying John’s writing, “or, he’s acted on that particular fantasy twice, now. Just…” he looks up. “Just adding to his collection.”

Sherlock pulls out John’s blue notebook, from the depths of his long coat’s pocket, shoving it into John’s chest, a motion made for John to understand to take notes.

For a moment there is no answer, no expected exclamation of *brilliant!* to his deductions. Frowning, he turns to John, who is staring at the notebook in his grasp with a sort of horror in his eyes.

“I,” John’s ears look red. His face does, too. “I left this at your house.”

“Yes. Keep up, John.” Sherlock steeps his fingers. No wonder John is disquieted by the fact he left the book, Sherlock had read its contents. If he bothered ever writing down his thoughts about John, he would feel compromised, too.

To his credit, John seems to listen again and return to himself very quickly. “Acted on *Snow White* twice. Does that mean he’s… acted with the other books in mind? I feel like we’d have heard something about someone murdering a king to take a throne. Especially if it was as close as Scotland.”

Sherlock frowns. “That’s a very specific thing to say.”

Watching him for a moment, and then breaking into a laugh, John giggles, “I forgot, you know nothing of Shakespeare.”

“I read a play.”

“Oh, right?”

“After you patronized me over *Pyramus and Thisbe*.”

“Which was it, then? Go on.”

Finally, after so long so close, Sherlock takes a step away, “*Romeo and Juliet.*”

“That is not a comedy. You should have started with a comedy. Tragedy is hardly fair.” John recovers the distance.

Sherlock rolls his eyes, pretending to have very important things to do and be above it all. He turns on his heel and begins a walk through the street, ignoring a cycler that nearly gets in his way. The sound of John’s footsteps on the cold pavement are quick behind him, eager to catch up. The champion himself appears at Sherlock’s arm an instant later.

At once, Sherlock recalls John’s disappointment yesterday morning, that Sherlock would retrieve
more evidence alone and John would have to return to the Stockyard to assist with the youngstock auction, and play further into Moriarty’s hand. John likes it, the rushing, the chasing, the danger. How wide his eyes had been, sprinting after the file thief like it was the purpose of his whole existence.

Sherlock’s chest swells a bit, feeling as though he has found a person so in step with his own pace, that the pair of them could never walk apart again.

But this feeling goes only one way.

“I’ll have to see more of Moriarty’s lair,” Sherlock remarks, half for John’s benefit. “His web, it’s too complicated to untangle, the filaments are everywhere on Thisby, attached to everyone that owes him a debt. Pull one string,” Sherlock gives the list back to John as they walk towards the quay, Sherlock striding right up to the railing, “and you’ll alert the whole spider.”

His gloves clasp around the hard, frost bitten metal. Down in the quay, there’s an old wooden fishing vessel coming in, a dangerous time to be out. It’s hardly morning and already the sea is alive with horses and danger.

“You could practically be Shakespeare himself, you know.”

Unsure of what the champion means, Sherlock looks back to him, silhouetted by the tumultuous ocean while facing Skarmouth’s folksy frontier.

John smiles fondly at him. Or, rather, Sherlock believes it’s fond, because it’s the same way Sherlock looks at John, when he’s sure the other man isn’t looking. He thinks he may be slipping, ruining his own facade, because the dark ocean far beyond the cliffs and the quay make a lovely background for John, eyes of tidepools and hair of chalk.

“So I fell in love with Thisby the moment I came here, you know.”

Stopping, he blinks.

That hadn’t been what they were talking about at all. Not in the slightest. Unless Sherlock’s accidentally said some of his thought process out loud, in which case he’s given himself away, but John doesn’t look taken aback or shocked and so his thoughts must’ve stayed firmly in his own head.

Just like the morning after the storm, at Hooper’s Bakery, John’s suddenness has caught him by surprise. Why breach this topic, of all things? What has Sherlock done to deserve such a fate?

But the word, “Oh,” is all he can muster. Even that is almost swallowed by the wind that buffets them over the quay.

“Can… May I show you something? I know you’re on the spider thing, so maybe it’s a bit of a shot,” John asks. John licks his lips. “But if you really know that Lestrade and the station won’t listen without more solid evidence—”

“I do know it.”

“—Then let me show you something. Can I?”-

Sherlock smirks, “Depends.”

“On?”
“What it is. Tell me?”

John smiles a filthy smile, and Sherlock tries desperately to ignore the fluttering, desperate affection in his belly.

“That’d ruin the surprise.”

Chapter End Notes

Back to sherlock... midterms are coming up!
Chapter Summary

Something magic is gripping him. It’s wound tight around his heart, cast a net of frail spiderwebs and tugging downwards to the core of Gladstone. It’s the capall, trying to take him, and Sherlock’s mind briefly contemplates the idea of jumping off the island atop this horse, returning them all to the sea where they belong.

Chapter Notes

trigger warnings for past suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even the backsides of Thisby are beautiful.

Lone ridges in the earth rise before the steep slope of the cliffs drops them long distances down into black, choppy low water. You can see the curvature of the earth before you can see any more land, in any direction. There are no white or blue or orange splotches of ships or buoys out past the breakers today.

If he lived a life as a mill worker, when Mycroft’s rent ran out, he would never see this view again.

Although more sure of himself now that John has convinced him of Mrs Hudson’s affection for him, that she won’t turn him out, the threat of working in the mill, a boring, repetitive job that requires no thinking, is a threat worse than that of death.

In a few days, his fate may very well be death. In a few short days, just a handful of hours away, all this could be for nothing. The training, the long nights waiting for capaill to wander inland, Redbeard’s hard work and exhaustion — it could all mean nothing.

Unfortunately, racing is now a requirement of him, from the mouth of the spider of Thisby himself. He’s been told to stay away from the Stockyard, but that doesn’t mean that Moriarty can’t seek him out of his own volition. Strangely, Sherlock finds himself hoping he will do so. He won’t tell John this. There is much to uncover about that man in every interaction. So much swimming beneath the surface.

Gladstone jerks his great long neck forward, raising gooseflesh on Sherlock’s neck. His eyes swivel wildly in his skull, focusing and refocusing out on the vast ocean beyond the cliffs as the three of them walk.

John holds tighter to the reins that he leads the giant black horse with, twisting braided leather around his palm and whispering into the wind. Murray had been keeping Gladstone outside of town for the morning, near his tourist trap of a shop, Murray&Son’s, a favor for when John came in search of Sherlock and the envelope.
Murray’s own horse, Sherlock remembers, is boarded up at the Stockyard. Murray feeds her blood and beef.

For a small snatch of time, you can see the ocean before the cliffs rise up and fall down again, crazed water far closer than it is at the racing sand. The waves all smack against each other, whitecaps slapping over and melting back into the high breakwaters. Some groups of mussel-covered rocks have water foaming around them, and one dark spot past the shallows rises up and slips back under, flaring a red-brown spine and a head before it’s gone.

This isn't the best time to go out fishing.

“We’ll go down here,” John says, nodding his head to a swooping tract of soil and pebbles leading down to the rocky shoreline. That’s how the shores are on this side, all loose rock and washed-out remnants of coral. Sherlock muses, recalling the day he’d been on these shores alone, before meeting John on the cliffs had become such a brilliant staple of his day.

Gladstone hisses softly as John pulls his lead further, urging the horse to move a few paces. One step, and he’s there already, against a rocky outcropping of misshapen, wind-and-salt-beaten stones, all worn smooth and tired. John draws his circle, and Gladstone’s head plummets, lips twitching to the saltgrass. For an extra measure, Sherlock watches him fix the lead to the thinning trunk of a small tree growing out of the rocks.

As if Gladstone couldn’t pull away if he wanted to. But now the water horse is oddly entranced, and Sherlock can’t help thinking, if Mary was here, or the piebald, how the scent of the water carried on the air would lead them flying over the edge of the world. But the champion horse, hair braided in threes and sevens, thick leather saddle high up on his belly, just touches the ground with his nostrils meekly, fanning the grass with his long and even breaths.

Sherlock watches him, ruminating over what the Races would’ve been like for him if he had never met Gladstone. There’s a sense of security, albeit he knows it’s false, thinking that all the horses on the beach will be like Gladstone. Behaved in the hands of their keeper, and uninterested in Sherlock. But Mary, the piebald, Jefferson’s horse and that chestnut, have all shown him the other side of the capaill, and that Gladstone and John are the patient outliers in an ocean of madness.

Even now, as quiet as he is, Gladstone’s black, square pupil turns in his eye to regard him.

John touches his hand to Sherlock’s arm, pulling him gently and softly away from the capaill. This surprises Sherlock from his thoughts. “We’ll go down here,” He says again, and releases Sherlock’s arm. There’s a spot of warmth where his hand has left Sherlock’s jacket, and it takes a few seconds of high-level self-control to not take up John’s hand to replace it on his elbow again.

Like that, he’s tethered to the island again, unafraid of being swept away by magic.

Sherlock never turns his back to Gladstone until they are started down the rocky slope from the cliff to the beaches. Neither does John. Unaware.

It’s low tide, Sherlock notes with a sniff of the afternoon air, all salty breeze and wind throwing sand at his cheeks, reddening them. The water is crept back further than usual from the cliffs, exposing more of the island. Sharp, toothy rocks near the shore and stones smoothed by the waves further out, the occasional spot of sunlight gleaming off their cold, wet sides.

It’s here, climbing down the slopes and leaning back to carefully stay away from the water, that it strikes Sherlock, what John could be showing him. He hasn’t any idea, and that is what worries him.
John had only ever interacted with him because of the Races. What’s to happen when they’re over, assuming they both survive? Will John regret showing Sherlock a place so secret, once Sherlock is no longer special in any way because of the Races?

His chin twitches, face an unhappy mask.

All the waves crash and kick together, flinging white seafoam into the air before sliding back to one flat plain of water. If it were night, or if it were cloudier, he may not see any horses that pull themselves up from the ocean on this side of the island. These ones would be all hard rock and crashing tide, all blunt teeth and hungry eyes.

Slipping his hands into his coat pockets to protect them from the chill deeper than his gloves do, Sherlock turns away from the sea and follows John’s form down the rocks. He can taste the cold weather in the back of his throat.

They’re getting further from the slope they’d come down on, now, sweeping along the beach, walking next to the shore, and around the cove, shouldered by devastating cliffs on either side and stretching ocean before it on the other. He watches a few terns ride the breezes into holes in the cliff walls, disappearing into nooks that have been carved out over generations by the wind.

They must reach what John came here for, Sherlock marvels as the slanting entrance of a covered section of the cove comes into view. Like a quarry cut from the island, insides all removed, there is a heavy overhang, with dark patches of cover inside, where the sun can’t reach. A system of caves.

John glances back, and Sherlock’s eyes flutter to his. Is he making sure Sherlock is following? This one moment, where John doesn’t have to run after him, and instead must trust that Sherlock follows?

“Here,” John said, stopping at the heavy overhang before the caves are eclipsed by the cliffs. “I used to watch the horses come up here, all together.” He extends his hand to gesture to the reckless Scorpio Sea, which waves hungrily back.

Sherlock diligently watches John’s face for another weathered twitch or nervous smile. John’s study blue eyes squint against the bright clouds and wind, but nothing else. Sherlock follows him into the cave, the rocks beneath his boots crunching against each other with ever step. Were it high tide, the pair of them might have to swim inside, but now they can walk in with only minimally dampening their shoes.

The main cavern opens up shockingly wide underneath the island, carved from hard stone, and has high walls that stretch far above Sherlock’s head, far higher than even Gladstone’s neck would reach, were he down here with them. Fitting against the sides of this chamber are smaller, darker spots, black tunnels that run deeper into the island. How far into Thisby’s ground do they go? Sherlock peers curiously into them, unable to see more than a few meters down, and imagines a work of these mazes running beneath Mrs Hudson’s house, under the tavern and Hooper’s Bakery, under the Stockyard, everywhere.

The bottom of the cavern is littered with not only the pebbles that have been pushed in from the shore by the water, but old pieces of shells, cracked and almost crushed into sand, beaten against the sides of the cave when the tide comes in. Given the time, they should have a few hours yet. Conches (“For love magic,” he hears his mother’s voice drift in his ear), abalone shells, broken sand dollars.

Some of the shells are bigger and white, and are not shells, but bones. Sherlock spies a man’s scapula, and another human femur across the sandy floor, pushed up against the rocks where the waves have left them, covered in seaside growths and the remnants of algae.
What else could be trapped within this series of caverns?

“Deadman’s Caves, that’s what these are called,” John’s voice drifts to him, echoing in the ridges in the serene stone. Sherlock seeks the source, watching John press his hand against the walls, a twinge of remembrance on his face. “Come here to wait for the ocean to bring the capaill, or wait for it to swallow you. Or get lost,” John gestures to the smaller caves Sherlock had investigated earlier, “and then the ocean will seep through the tunnels.”

How terrifying it must be for someone to be here while a water horse shares the same space. He can imagine it now; standing on the ridge that is just over his head, back against the rock, the tide creeping around the pillars and the cave, coming to wash at his feet. And the sudden sounds of kittens mewling, babies crying, a whale song from underwater, emanating from only lengths away. The way it would pound in the ear and reverberate in the lungs...

Sherlock’s heart squeezes in his chest, breaking ribs and pulling thick muscle. Something is wrong. Why has John taken him to this place? Why is he explaining these things to him?

“At least there’s some pretty things to look at while you do it.”

John is now pointing to the cavern’s high, swooping ceiling, far above both of their heads and supported only vaguely by naturally-made columns of barnacle-covered rock. Above, there are darker shapes, and lighter ones, etched into the stone, or pressed on in the shapes of horses, people, houses, islands, boats, and waves.

Sherlock’s brows raise, and his lips part in genuine surprise. Paintings? How has the ocean not yet wiped them from history?

They must be centuries old. Sherlock would love to copy them into his notebook, to study and compare them to other art, but John’s soft countenance, gazing fondly at the drawings, shuts the school of thought entirely. He is learning, slowly, to appreciate things instead of wanting to take them apart. Appreciation is important, John has told him.

There is a red stallion standing over a dead man, smudges of black for hair and a line of red for his chest. The paintings are bright, untouched by the sun, so deep beneath Thisby.

He runs his hand across the bumpy surface of the cavern. Several pieces of rock crumble away from the uneven wall at his touch, dropping off and onto the rough ledges, or bouncing into the shallow rocks further below. The paintings are too high up for him to touch.

Hardly able to see, Sherlock steps down from his short ledge onto the sand and shells lining the bottom of the cavern, and moves to John, who is positioned to have a better angle. A few straggling characters, words, are smudged above the reach of the water.

“Wait for the water. It’s what I came to Thisby for.”

John says this the instant Sherlock has it figured in his head. A gripping sorrow clenches at his heart, the fact that such a brilliant human being had had such dark worries.

“It’s just, well. Everything on the mainland was empty and gone for me. But I saw something,” John goes on, gesturing to the floor of the cavern. “This giant black horse in the water at high tide, with his mane and tail so bright white I thought I would go blind. It was him and I, until the water went down, me on the ledge and him in the tide. I knew I had to have him. It was ten years before I caught him, with the Yard workers, on the racing beaches during a storm.”

“John,” Sherlock says softly.
John shakes his head. There is something deeply moving about John’s presence, the way he holds his head and doesn’t look at Sherlock when he talks. “I raced seven years ago, for the first time, and won them five times since. For those first ten years, though, I would see him in the water, or on the cliffs, like he was waiting.”

It’s very unlikely the capall was waiting for anything other than a meal. But Sherlock doesn’t say this.

John continues, “I was waiting for him to... Somehow, I’m still waiting.” he shakes his head. Sherlock presses, “Have you been waiting long?”

John takes a long breath. Cobalt eyes in the shadowed cavern connect with Sherlock’s. He replies, “I’ve been waiting my whole life for this.”

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Like terns in the spring, they’ve returned to the cliffs. Sherlock isn’t sure of the direction of the late afternoon from here, whether he’s expected to leave John alone or continue with their rendezvous. Redbeard isn’t here, there’s no training for Sherlock to be done. He will be on the beach a few mornings from now.

“Are you afraid of him?”

They’re standing out on the cliffs again, far above the reach of the caves, or where past men may have waited for the water to climb in past their heads. The brisk morning had given rise to a sunspotted afternoon, which in turn brought in more eastern clouds the later it became, although the chilling wind remains, blowing Sherlock’s hair over his forehead, and Gladstone’s tail over his haunches. The land is flat and rocky all the way around, and John is tending to Gladstone, removing his reins from the sapling they had been tied against.

Sherlock peers over at John’s voice, but does not turn his head. He believes Gladstone might take the opportunity to tear out his throat, like Hope. Gladstone looks just as proud as he always had, except now there is knowledge of his kill. In his past there may have been more. Sherlock sniffs. “No.”

“You should be.”

“You aren’t.”

“I shouldn’t be.”

“You aren’t arguing your point of the capaill are always faster and more dangerous very well.”

“You aren’t very good at picking up on things for a detective.”

Sherlock raises a quizzical brow, half-amused and feigning offense.

John sighs, smiling warmly. “I want you to love him.”

He blinks.
This explanation is so heart-wrenchingly simple and surprising that Sherlock can’t close his open mouth for the next five seconds, then snaps it shut with a click.

John smiles softly at him. “I want you to love him,” He repeats, quietly. Sherlock wonders if Gladstone understands the significance of the moment, because against the late afternoon sun he is still, and he is silent.

Why should it matter whether Sherlock loves Gladstone or not?

Then John shifts and the magic fades. It does not disappear. Gladstone is coiled tightly, and is now restless. Sherlock keeps his eye on the horse instead of John.

Gladstone’s nostrils flare red in the dying afternoon sun, scenting the wind that throws the smell of the ocean towards Sherlock’s clothing, tossing his hair to and fro. His neck keeps arching and then his head dips, and he leans forward, testing John’s patience. John taps Gladstone on the muzzle after the water horse has nosed him, and Gladstone repeals and grunts lowly several times, as though offended.

A new appreciation for the giant horse has settled in Sherlock’s stomach. The sign that kept John from waiting for the water anymore. But a water horse is still a water horse on the outside.

It was only days ago that Gladstone butted Jefferson Hope the same way he hits John, mere seconds before he ripped out his throat.

John is handling the reins at the front with expertise that comes from many years working with horses, many with this particular one, this particular sort. He does not look at Gladstone softly but with an edge, a warning and a threat.

Sherlock swallows, finding his voice high and uneasy. He clears his throat. “Why should it matter that I love him?” He asks, heedful. But he already knows -- Gladstone is an enormous part of John, and yet a separate entity entirely. This horse means everything to John, and John likely means very little to it in turn.

Even then, why would it matter to John that Sherlock loves this large part of him? His chest squeezes, like it did in the caves, a strange, hopeful array of shivers.

John just waves him near.

They walk, the three of them, to a dramatic outcropping of rocks in the middle of Thisby’s brown-yellow and green pastures. Several small saplings are trying to poke through the cracks and humps in the rock, none over a meter tall, bending in the wind.

John nods his head, and Sherlock carefully makes his way up the rocks while John brings the capall close enough for Sherlock to shove a boot in the left stirrup, high up on Gladstone’s belly.

But Gladstone is not paying attention to anything but John, and when John takes a step away to attempt a circle in the grasses, Gladstone rocks with him. Sherlock has to haul himself up swiftly, lest he be dislodged, clinging to the saddle horn and trying in vain to get a leg over the rise. Gladstone dances again as John moves back, threatening to throw Sherlock to the ground.

“John,” Sherlock warns.

John ducks below Gladstone’s massive head (never do that, Sherlock distinctly remembers being told, even with an island pony), and laughs at the sight. “I’ve got you,” He laughs, “Wait just a minute.”
“I’ll be here,” Says Sherlock tightly.

He’s able to turn his head enough to watch John lick a stripe up his palm, which throws a lump into Sherlock’s throat, and push that against Gladstone’s face, right between his eyes. Gladstone’s head plummets, neck bending morosely as John holds his hand in the same spot. A muscle jumps in Gladstone’s leg when Sherlock stretches up to finally, finally get on the damned horse.

When he’s sitting comfortably, it hits him just how tall these horses are. There’s no hope of his feet ever touching the ground, not even if Gladstone were to lie down on his belly. Sherlock looks to John, who presses the palm of his hand against Gladstone’s blackened nose, so close to those teeth, the teeth that killed a man, such a short while ago.

He’s never been on a capall before. The once he tried, it had been Mary on the beaches, and the event had not gone well. He had been fractions of a second from changing his mind about Mary when she had killed that dog. She had made the decision for him.

John spits at Gladstone’s hooves.

He throws the reins over Gladstone’s head as the stallion ducks it, rounding to Gladstone’s massive shoulder to hand them up to Sherlock.

Sherlock takes the reins, and is nearly blown away by the power he can feel, bridled inside of them.

John grins, watching Gladstone in the corner of his eye. Gladstone lays an ear back. As if reading his mind, he says, “Mary couldn't have given you a ride like this.”

“I have not seen her run. Her monger said she was faster than Gladstone,” Sherlock says. “Back when…”

“They’re all different,” John saves him from explanation, “Gladstone runs quick, but I can't say he doesn't curve. Mary is fast, but runs right towards the sea. I’ve watched it happen. I don’t know how she manages to walk on land in those iron horseshoes. Magnussen won't last five minutes on her in the Races.”

“The Races only last five minutes,” Sherlock points out.

*Five minutes, eighteen furlongs* on the sand, and this will all be over. Sherlock sets his shoulders. He does not shiver, even when imagining the *shhhhhhh, shhhhh* of the sea down far below. Somewhere under them there could be the tunnels of the caves, filled with paintings, bones, and water horses.

John’s flat palm pushes over Sherlock’s calf, manually shifting his leg.

“Here, budge up, you. Lean forward, yeah-- like that. Get your foot out of the stirrup.”

Snorting, Sherlock complies with every demand. John hikes a leg up until his foot is in the elongated stirrup, there’s a scrape of outcropping rock, then he reaches up, fingers finding the edge of the saddle, and he’s up and sitting behind Sherlock before a handful of seconds have passed. Beneath them, Sherlock can feel the low shudder of excitement rushing through Gladstone.

Together, in the slope of the saddle, John’s front presses heavily against Sherlock’s back, but not overly so. It’s… comfortable. He can feel, against his lower back, the points of John’s hip, and the soft part of his stomach. Half of his weight must come from the angle that the saddle is pushing him to, it’s not made for two riders, but Sherlock feels as though he is also leaning quite a bit...
John reaches around Sherlock’s body, and Sherlock is floored by this simple movement. John pushes down on his hands, keeping the reins low. Sherlock thinks the wind is to account for how the hair on the nape of his neck rises, and not John’s warm breath ghosting over his shoulder.

It’s like the night in the sitting room. He finds himself daydreaming about how to prolong this encounter, because the other night did not last long enough to satisfy Sherlock.

John leans to one side, pulling up the stirrup until Sherlock’s boots can nudge into it, melting away the settled atmosphere. John’s own knees put pressure on Gladstone’s side, situating and cementing himself to be one with the horse.

“Right. Just. Stay away from the cliffs.” The only warmth in the air comes from John’s breath, flattening over the back of Sherlock’s ear and neck.

And then one of John’s hands settles on Sherlock’s hip. The other clutches the twisted horn of the saddle, in front of them both. Just as the thought of that grip not being enough travels through Sherlock’s hotwired brain, John slides the strong arm over his middle, the flat of John’s forearm pressing on Sherlock’s belly.

The moment Gladstone rocks forwards, Sherlock yanks back on the reins, instantly doubtful.

John exclaims, “Hold on!” And when Gladstone stills again, shuddering in the wind, John says, softer, in Sherlock’s ear, “You need to let him run. But you also must look ahead of him. He’ll run and he’ll run and he won’t stop if he gets to the cliffs. It’s windy today. Right?”

“I know it’s windy.” Sherlock nods. John must feel Sherlock’s hair on his face, because he takes a moment to lean back, letting go of the places where his hands are, hip and horn, and tucks the longer curls at the back of Sherlock’s skull into the popped collar of his jacket.

“I know you know,” John laughs, returning his hands. Both of them go around Sherlock to grasp Gladstone’s mane, tying knots. Sherlock must remember to ask John about that. He so despises charms, do knots count?

John’s forearm shifts lower and Sherlock forgets whatever-the-hell he was thinking of.

Releasing the tightly gathered rein, Gladstone drops his leg, dipping his head tightly to his chest and arching his neck. Sherlock thinks he can see Gladstone’s ears lengthening, the prominent bones popping, stretching skin tightly overtop, like jet-black canvas flitted with fine white hairs. How old is Gladstone? He seems centuries.

There is no gentle sway of Gladstone’s hips as his rear legs hit the ground, not even to a small degree. Neither is this a four-beat walk. It’s a few steps and then a high, throaty wheeze, and Gladstone does not ease into the gallop - his strides lengthen with no effort, and suddenly, they’re soaring.

Suspension comes crashing down with a jolt, only to leap again, knees stretching far, one by one by one by one - Gladstone doesn’t need to gather his legs before he’s ending the next stride. Wind rips savagely at Sherlock’s eyes and ears, muffling all sound.

Most people come to Thisby seeing the ocean like a dog. A mutt, come to beg at their feet and lap at their toes. It’s a mistake, oftentimes a deadly one. The ocean is a wolf, lying in wait. The capaill are the teeth who come ashore to collect the taxing blood, payment for fishing the Scorpio sea, for living in its waters. Sherlock remembers the festival, suddenly awash in vivid color in his head, remembers pricking his finger and seeing the pool of blood in the dipping rock, reflecting
Something magic is gripping him. It’s wound tight around his heart, cast a net of frail spiderwebs and tugging downwards to the core of Gladstone. It’s the capall, trying to take him, and Sherlock’s mind briefly contemplates the idea of jumping off the island atop this horse, returning them all to the sea where they belong. With John pressed so bodily into him, Sherlock’s head quickly returns to itself. Sherlock presses back, a small amount, and is rewarded with more of John’s weight crushing forwards, grounding him, even as Gladstone flies and the wind tears.

His skin is all gooseflesh- prickling up and standing the hairs over the back of his neck and his arms. If Thisby is made of island magic, he and John are surely made from it too.

John’s cheek strengthens the spell whipping thick around them, pressed into Sherlock’s hair and mangling frizzy curls. “Ask him for more,” John whispers, so low it slides under the ripping air. Sherlock’s heels tighten against Gladstone’s rapidly flexing sides, and Gladstone leaps forward, quickening impossibly.

Sherlock and John are nothing at all, they don’t exist, not while Gladstone is galloping with merely half his might, as if this is nothing more than a walk in the meadow. Redbeard could never match this. He couldn’t dream of it. If Gladstone’s hooves were any sharper, they would pulverize the island below them and turn it into wet mush.

Sherlock sees the grass becoming thinner a moment before it’s too late - all colors are starting to look the same as the sun has begun to set.

He lays the rein against Gladstone’s neck and the water horse turns on a coin, flying away from the craggily line that makes up the edge of the island and sweeping inland, ripping through furlongs of grass in the blink of an eye. John’s arms tighten around him, squeezing playfully, and it hits Sherlock that John is laughing, only, the wind is taking it all. Sherlock’s mouth twists into a smile, one he tries to keep to himself.

Like the piebald once chased him, Gladstone is trying to outrun the wind.

All at once, Gladstone turns again, running back to the cliff edge. With Sherlock’s attentions momentarily divided and frayed, the water horse had leapt from the vague hold Sherlock had had over him. Sherlock’s heart throws itself against his ribcage, panicking. John should do something, Sherlock can’t hold him, but-- he pulls the reins tightly towards his belly once, releasing it immediately, and it works enough to reaffirm Gladstone’s wandering attentions, the horse swivels and runs parallel to the cliffs.

“--lit….el close!” John’s voice cuts through, lapses punctured by the wind. Does John want him closer to the cliff edge? Highly unlikely - the sun is orange, half in the sky, half behind the water, but Sherlock keeps looking forward, focusing on the outcropping that they once left far behind, coming up again with tremendous swiftness. A flock of white gulls cry out, flying beside them on the edge of the cliffs, keeping pace with them for but a moment before they fall far, far behind, farther with every half-stride.

He’s afraid of speaking because he could bite off his tongue each time Gladstone lurches forwards and to the ground.

John shares no such fear. “Pull him up!” John commands when they fly by the outcropping, and Sherlock reluctantly slows the giant beast, drawing him into a long trot, then a walk. Gladstone blatantly refuses to cooperate with Sherlock past this point, so John takes over, shifting his hips
closer into Sherlock’s body as he grapples around Sherlock for control of the reins. Sherlock closes his eyes and lets the shiver shudder through him.

John is the first one off Gladstone, who feels as though he’ll take off any second, dragging Sherlock with him. “Stay there for a moment,” John commands, cheeks hot and pink, and so Sherlock obeys.

With John behind him during the whole ride, close as he was, Sherlock had missed looking at him. John does his funny semicircle and spits in it, and Gladstone’s muscles abruptly stop their energized quivering when the saliva strikes the ground.

John watches Sherlock swing his leg over and step down.

Sherlock looks at John. He’s flushed with the bite of the wind, his thin lips are chapped, and he’s got that line between and above his eyebrows that means he’s concentrating,

John grins.

Sherlock fights it, but his mouth twists happily, nonetheless. John laughs, and Sherlock loves it, he knows he’s the reason for it, so he covers his face with one hand, purposefully hiding the exhilarated grin.

Gladstone throws his head back, Sherlock can see the slick eyes reflecting off the last daylight that graces Thisby, and gives a short gleeful shriek. John shouts, “Hey!” In answer, throwing his arms open like he’s about to embrace the huge water horse. Gladstone stomps both front legs down into the packed earth, observing John as the Thisby wind throws his white mane over his twitching withers. If horses could smile, Sherlock would like to think that Gladstone would be.

John said that he doesn’t trust Gladstone, but there’s no proof of that. Just then, Gladstone could’ve ripped open John’s chest cavity, bitten off his fingers, torn his skin away. Here is the conclusion - John trusts Gladstone. Here is the second one - Gladstone trusts John. It’s important not to humanize the animals, for the danger they represent is all too real, but Sherlock finds himself helpless to doing so.

*I love him, but I do not trust him.*

Oh John Watson. Ever the unreliable narrator.

Though Sherlock only has so much time before the Races finish and he loses John’s interest, he thinks he’ll keep this memory for a long time to come.

John rubs Gladstone’s shoulder affectionately. Sherlock can’t help but note that even while doing this, while acting so familiar with each other, John is still eyeing Gladstone.

And Gladstone is still eyeing John.

It’s not Mary looking at the dog before she tore it apart, all predator and blood. But it’s still glazed-over interest. John should not trust Gladstone. He does.

He steps closer. “Did the others enjoy this?” Sherlock asks carefully, releasing the fact that he did enjoy it. Of course he did. Only fools wouldn’t. Champion water horse aside, John was behind him, keeping him rooted to the ground as Gladstone leapt and galloped.

“There are no others,” John’s gives Gladstone a final approving pat, glancing to Sherlock over his shoulder. There’s a soft smile on his face, a truthful smile. *There never have been others.* “Only you.”
There’s something to say about the flutter John’s words evoke in Sherlock’s chest. He crosses his arms.

He’s in love, and trying to remember where he is.

The wind blows over them all again, and John stares long at Sherlock for a time, then blinks, breaks himself out of whatever hypnosis he was in, and retrieves a thermos from Gladstone’s saddlebag. It hardly even matters, it’s so far in the back of his mind, that Redbeard cannot hope to be faster than Gladstone, even with the thrall of the ocean.

“Do you want to sit?” John asks, not looking at him and drawing a new circle around the water horse. He doesn’t even look tired, Sherlock notes. John gestures then to the cliffs, and holds up his thermos.

“That is cold by now,” Sherlock says, “Whatever you have in it.” He knows it’s black tea.

“What?” John glances at his thermos. “No, they told me it could keep tea warm for hours.”

“It’s been hours,” Sherlock stresses, pushing his hands into his coat pockets. The long coat hem whips around his calves. He does some basic, quick math, for how long it’s been since John must’ve left the Stcokyard, when he brewed the tea, until now. “Four hours, and twenty-six minutes.”

He lets John lead him to the cliff edge anyways, and John looks over past the sea, as if seeing the low angle of the sun for the first time. “I suppose it has been a long while,” He agrees. Sherlock gets the distinct feeling that John is not referencing the time it’s been since he brewed the tea.

They sit, half a meter apart, looking out over the ocean. Far below, Sherlock can hear the gentle shhhhh, shhhhh as the water lulls over the rocks, creeping closer to the bottom of the chalk as the tide rolls in, slow and steady, predictable and loyal.

“It is cold,” John sighs. Sherlock watches him pull the thermos away from his lips, “You were right, like always.” A little thrill.

Sherlock’s dark coat collar is turned up against the thriving wind. John spends an unnatural amount of time staring at his neck.

“Do you remember the parade?” John asks suddenly.

Flashes of bonfires, sparks, Jefferson Hope and a black eye. John on the rider’s rock, his hands curled into hard fists, the line of his forearm kissed by orange light. “Yes.” He sniffs, smelling saltwater. Anderson, wild fears in his eyes, charcoal on his face, throwing Sherlock’s name into the night.

“When I saw Jefferson like that, I don’t know what came over me.”

Something is… changing. The crackling, whipping wind racing over Thisby’s flat land seems to have lulled, and now they speak in quiet conversation. The island is listening to them. Sherlock stays quiet, and John begins to talk faster. He cannot stop confessing.

“It was like the first day on the beach, you on Redbeard in the water, when the capall jumped up from nowhere. That nightlock, I have it with me on the beaches, I don’t.” He sucks in a breath, “I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never——” a pause. “I’ve never done that for anyone. Christ,” John sighs, rubbing his fingers against the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezed shut.

For a moment of island quiet, Sherlock begins to wonder whether John has a sudden migraine,
leaning closer with concern, but then John keeps talking, ripping his hand from his face and not looking at Sherlock. “I feel… guided. I feel like I’ve been guided to you.”

Only marginally offended, Sherlock sits back. “This island has a peculiar sense of humor, then.”

John’s nervousness bleeds out into his laugh. “Yeah?”

Sherlock hums, “After all, it assumes we can do any good for each other. Seeing how that’s turned out for you, I’m not certain Thisby favors you, anymore.”

John smiles, and the light makes him look in love. “It’s turned out well for me. You’ve helped me to achieve Gladstone. I could leave Moriarty,” he says, “and I could turn and never go back. Has it been bad for you?” He asks, as if suddenly self-conscious about his performance in their (strictly professional) relationship.

“Well. Jefferson didn’t end up actually killing me. Some would argue that’s… favorable.”

“If not-dying is your cup of tea.” John raises his thermos, then sets it down on the grass beside him.

“It’s most people’s cup of tea,” Sherlock scoffs. He’s not sure if it’s his, given how he spends his life chasing criminals and racing with killer water horses, and trying to find their bones and study them in the off-season.

“I didn’t mean only Jefferson,” John says, shifting his shoulder down. His voice goes low, and Sherlock shivers despite the absence of cold wind. He understands John wants the validation that he is as good for Sherlock as Sherlock thinks John is for him. Maybe it’s not validation, maybe it’s… the feeling of helpfulness.

At once, Sherlock remembers the night of the storm, of John’s flat, and looking at John’s worried expression. ‘I have to go and help, they need me.’ However, this night stirs other often-visited memories, too, John’s lips against Sherlock’s knuckles, his hand pressing close to Sherlock, crowding him against the door, ordering him not to stray from his side. There was desperation, caution, and excitement. John wants to help, always. Sherlock adores that sense in him, the fierce loyalty, the unwavering figure at his side.

“Does anyone ever ask you why you came, John Watson?” Sherlock fixes his gaze to John’s profile, staring off into the line of the ocean out past the edges of the cliff, where they sit. Only a few naked lengths of space between them, he feels suddenly like a trespasser on his island home. Is this the place where he should be?

Caught unaware, John answers, eyes wide and darting to and from Sherlock’s, entranced by color. “They do.”

“You told me why you do.”

“I showed you. Thisby, the islanders, the sea, and Gladstone.” It’s a beautiful response, something Sherlock was very much not expecting. A writer to the core. John means, I showed you, but I’ve only ever told them. “Has anyone ever asked you why you stay?”

Sherlock looks hard and away. He watches two waves smack heads together, down far below. They wash over the pebbles on shore. For this answer, he is unsure. He feels like paper carried away on the wind, something temporary.

No one’s asked him, not really, because no one on the island cares enough to ask. But that’s not what John means. John means, ‘why do you stay?’, he’s only saying it under the guise of it being
someone else’s words. This is John’s protection. “I’m not staying for very much longer.”

The wind sings and throws Sherlock’s hair. Gulls catch the air and glide above the rocky beach. John hesitates in continuing the conversation, as if struck by this.

John looks down at the chalky yellow grass under his shoes, “You’ve to find your brother.”

“Yes.”

There’s a silence. It’s nasty, and Sherlock is left contemplating the validity of his answer in the wake of it. Now that John’s not talking, he feels stupid about his response. He wonders how John felt, when he left the mainland. Did he ever consider that place his home? Does he consider Thisby that?

“And you won’t ever come back?” John finally asks, an edge to his voice, as if his mind is whirring on, beginning to think of some argument with Sherlock that will keep him on the island as John keeps Gladstone. John wants him here.

Sherlock answers dishonestly, “It depends.”

John’s growing irritated, it’s clear in the low, rumbling timbre of his voice, “Depends on what?”

“Whether or not you want me to.”

Sherlock wouldn't admit it if pressed, but it's perhaps the most nerve wracking thing he's ever said.

More anxiety-inducing than him, clutching John’s hands during the night of the storm, and more heart-stopping than giving his blood at the rider’s parade, or last night when John gripped him tight. But it seems so natural to say it, so bloody and so real, a valid statement he has let loose into the world and cannot recapture.

Regret begins to grow in his belly, the orange sun casting long shadows behind them as it starts to dip beneath the ocean.

John is usually so simple to read. Sherlock wishes that were true now, the champion is so suddenly unreadable. His expression has softened, but not changed dramatically. He's still looking down onto the beaches, where sandpipers are picking at the rocks. In a few minutes they’ll realize their efforts are fruitless, and return to the sandy side of the island. He longs to take John’s face in his hands, feel his skin, the way he had when John saved him from the grey capall on the racing beach, while they were underwater, and say ‘Look at me’, because John won’t.

A gull cries. A few seabirds titter in the faces of the cliffs.

“If I promised you forever, would you stay?”

When Sherlock snaps his eyes up from John’s arms to behold John’s countenance, John is fiddling with his notebook, which he has drawn from his pocket. Sherlock closes his mouth.

“I…” He tries. He fails.

John considers, finally looking away from the beach.

Sherlock finishes, “I would come back. I will. You can… You can come with me. When I go.”

“There’s nothing on the mainland for me.”
“Or for me,” Sherlock says too quickly, leaning too hard, pulled by John’s messy gravity.

“Brother,” John points out, quiet. They’re steadily getting closer. Sherlock puts his hand down on the grass between them, so he can balance his weight as he shifts nearer to John. John’s fingers twitch, and he looks down and Sherlock is convinced that John’s going to lay his hand over his. The moment does not come, and it stutters out.

Sherlock bites his lip.

He’s entirely surprised when John’s hand covers his. Warm. Smaller than his, a calloused mark on his knuckles. Sherlock blinks. And blinks. And blinks.

It’s so… different than when John has taken it in the past. The tavern, with Lestrade, a show of sturdiness and hardy strength when Sherlock’s mind had begun to overwhelm him, or at home, John behind him on the sofa, quiet comfort and a needed presence.

This is naked affection. A soft palm laid over the back of Sherlock’s hand, fingers gently curling to caress his knuckles. Sherlock’s heart is a racing horse in his chest, the hooves loudly thundering past his lungs, his throat closing up in panic and emotion. John must hear his heartbeat.

When John leans forward, Sherlock follows. Not all the way. A simple second is shared when their faces are not an inch apart, Sherlock’s heart hammering in his chest, the point of his nose centimeters away from brushing John’s. He stays there for a moment, feeling warmth and heavy heat pouring from John’s skin in the cold ambience, making him druzy with it.

He has half a mind to recall the old collie almost biting his face, the piebald on the beach staring him down, or staring blankly at his limp arm when he’d hurt himself.

To look his death in the face, it’s what he’s always wanted to do.

The realization that he is so close to John, and that John is not moving, is enough to make him whimper involuntarily. He wants so badly to lean in enough for John to cover him, for John to have his hands against his skin. It occurs to him that he has badly wanted John as close to him as they are now for weeks, ever since he had seen him on that beach with Mary. This horrible wrecking pain and pressure in his chest wasn’t anger, or envy for what John and the island have, it was a terrifying emotion, a heart-breaking want.

He breathes, gently, shakily, without disturbing the peace, as if to try to convey some semblance of any of that, while knowing it is impossible to vocalize, “John.”

Always John’s name, always at the forefront of his mind, even when he isn’t there.

John tilts his chin up, just a fraction of a degree, and his lips are pushing carefully against Sherlock’s. A bloom of warmth seizes Sherlock’s jaw, John sliding his hand to cautiously touch more of him. His other hand brushes Sherlock’s neck, sending a full-body shiver over Sherlock’s skin that has nothing to do with the cold.

Never having the confidence to imagine something like this as a remote possibility, Sherlock can’t even move, hardly even able to return the pressure against his mouth—sweet and careful, wary and afraid. But John feels so natural against him, tender hands, nose nudging against Sherlock’s, a small touch of wetness against the corner of his mouth from the edge of John’s tongue.

John pulls away for a moment, his eyes still closed, and breathes a laugh against Sherlock’s mouth. “All I taste is salt,” he says. The hard line of his palm is still sturdy and comforting and affectionate against Sherlock’s face, his other a warm bloom over Sherlock’s neck.
Sherlock flushes. Here they are, out on the cliffs, John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, champion and stranger, kissing; and John starts talking about the taste of Sherlock’s mouth. This is all a dream. Most certainly.

“Poor palette,” Sherlock quips, lashes down, pushing forward to put his forehead to John’s, their wind-whipped hair getting in the way. John laughs again, and Sherlock determines that he should never be more than six inches away from the source of John’s laughter at all times.

John leans away, a pink flush over his cheeks and his ears, separate from the wind-inflicted color Sherlock has so often seen him sporting. He’s realized what he’s done. “I’m— oh, I’m so sorry,” he says, and his hands are leaving Sherlock’s face! It’s not regret or anger coming from his voice, it’s his apology for overstepping some invisible barrier.

“John—”

“I should’ve—I’m sorry, do you— was that—?”

Perplexed for a half a second, and then Sherlock exclaims, his own hand reaching up to grab John’s in retreat, “No! I mean, I meant, yes, I meant,” he shakes his head, making a fool of himself, “I meant, yes, yes, don’t—” This is plain embarrassing, but he could care less about anything besides how to make John kiss him again.

John’s still a length away from his face, dark-edged eyes searching Sherlock’s expression. A half-smile emerges over his mouth, the one Sherlock had just had his lips upon. He would endure a hundred of Anderson’s sea wishes to keep doing this.

Putting more pressure on Sherlock’s face, John pulls him in again, stopping just before they touch. Again; they are so close without touching. Sherlock is melting. Whatever temperature John’s perfect hand is in his, that’s his melting point. Sherlock carefully slides his own palm over John’s jacket, resting on his bicep, which he squeezes through the salt-caked material.

The wind and the water and the cliffs and Redbeard and Gladstone and Mycroft suddenly don’t matter anymore. The Races don’t matter, Moriarty doesn’t matter, none of it. In a wretched heartbeat, Sherlock knows at once that he would give up any and all of these things for the man who kissed him. With this realization, both a somber and exciting one, he leans entirely into John, taking his weight off his arm and putting it instead onto John. John supports him easily, letting Sherlock sit against his shoulder.

They sit until Gladstone’s low cry pulls their combined attention. Even then, Sherlock contemplates letting whatever is annoying the water horse to keep doing it so he may stay like this.

Without moving his hands from Sherlock’s face, John glances over to Gladstone, and from where his forehead is now pressed against John’s cheek, Sherlock can feel the rise of a grin.

Chapter End Notes

WELL AFTER TWO AND HALF YEARS I FINALLY GOT TO WRITE THEM DOIN THIS.
let me know if this pulled on your heart, that was the goal...
final chapters are being super finicky about being written, but they are on their way....
>:}
Pull up ur bootstraps bc it’s halloween soon, the perfect time to ready this spooky story. I’m also thinking of, when this is soon complete, starting a new fic, although I’m not sure if it should be a new AU or some case-fic!
Against The Letter

Chapter Summary

It’s an old island funeral, where the body is burned into ashes that the fire flickers over into the wind, and rolls coldly down into the water far below. Meant for those born here, those who always knew they would perish here. The funeral-goers are one massive creature in the night, close together, huddled around the bonfire, and Father Stamford.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John’s arm wraps casually over Sherlock's shoulders, pulling Sherlock closer.

This entire afternoon has been impossible.

Tipping his head, Sherlock rests his temple against John's shoulder, feeling the worn material of the coat under his cheek, and letting his wind-blown hair tickle John’s neck. He’s taller, but even the cramp in his neck is worth nothing in this moment. His bones are weary, sore and content, even the cold has no effect on him, despite its bite on the exposed skin of his face.

Had he known that today was planned to go this way, he would’ve come with John more easily than he already had. The very moment John had arrived at the officer’s station with his mysterious 'can I show you something’ line, he would’ve leaped at the opportunity. In fact, he would’ve taken John by the elbow and lead him right to the caverns below the island, the ones John had shown him, and kissed him there. It would’ve been much faster, simpler, easier, if only he had known that John had any desire to kiss him.

But, he supposes, his hair blown by the wind and wisping over his ear and forehead, it wouldn’t have been as beautifully nerve-wracking as them together where they sit now, on the cliff grass, with Gladstone huffing into the salty air somewhere behind them.

John squeezes his upper arm.

Everything is backlit by the setting sun. Shadows form long dark spots behind them, and the island is thrown into shades of turbulent orange and hungry yellow. Dark amber, tiger, and clay all twist and create shadows all their own, turning the saltgrass from tired hay to ablaze in cider brown.

Unsure, Sherlock tilts his head, staring up at John’s quarter profile. John’s looking out at the ocean, not at the froth of the ocean beating against the rocks going on below. Perhaps he is ignoring it, or allowing his eyes a rest from all the carnage they tend to see. The glints of the waning sunlight off the waves in the water reflect in John’s eyes, turning tidepool blue into light, merry brown. He studies the lines beneath them, the crease over John’s brow as he squints against the shining sun off the ocean.

John shifts until he can see Sherlock’s face settled against his shoulder. Sherlock gives him a smile, at once too lazy to move and too tired to get the sun out of his eyes. John can’t reach his mouth because of the angle, so he drops a kiss against Sherlock’s hair. It’s stunning in its gentleness. It’s not enough, so Sherlock sits up slowly before leaning forwards again, the whole of his side pressed into
John. He would love nothing more than to fall and lay down with John beside him - right here at the back edge of the island.

What was his fear ever for? The night of the storm, how John felt the visceral need to leave and help the Stockyard, a place that has never helped him, his fear was felt for nothing. In hindsight, looking backwards, he feels stupid for ever experiencing the emotion.

John cups his face in his strong hands. There have been no declarations. Sherlock hopes there will be. Will he get to hear them? Should he bother to hope? Hope that the sand will not take any of them come the day of the Races? This is an oft-visited thought, losing Redbeard, but now, it feels as though there is something else real to lose, something solid, something that exists in their shared space. The space between them, where he can feel John’s breath over his lips.

And if he fails to keep both Redbeard and John? What if it comes down to a choice between them, saving one and allowing the other to fall victim to the Races and to the ocean? What if the wrong decision is made?

Is this, kissing John, the wrong decision?

There’s nowhere else on earth he would rather be, not looking for Mycroft, not dashing about alone in Skarmouth or Tholla, not solving perplexing murders, not foiling Moriarty - lately, his life has been ruled through ‘what if’ s. The suggestion that he should be elsewhere, away from John, is debilitating. Once, if Sherlock had been assured to the destruction of Moriarty, he would cheerfully have accepted his own.

His certainty is not so firm anymore. Their kiss hadn’t been passionate, more tender than anything, but anything resembling affection has ceded room to sobriety.

John pulls away after a moment. He searches for Sherlock’s gaze with an open expression, but Sherlock has dropped his eyes to the ground.

“You okay?” He can hear the doubt in John’s question, the strength.

How can John know him through his mouth so well, after only an hour spent together on these cliffs? The wind blows against the chalk. John is soft, like he has been since he struck up this odd acquaintance with Sherlock, but now there is nothing repressed in his voice. It seems he has said all he has ever wanted to this afternoon. Sherlock’s answer takes a long time to emerge from his mouth. John doesn’t press him, he spends the few silent moments listening intently to Sherlock’s quiet.

“What if you don’t come out of the Races.” Sherlock’s words flatten like the moor. An unvisited topic, and a deeply unsettling one.

John seems stricken for a moment, and then he smiles kindly. “I’m worried about you. Redbeard is amazing, and he’ll run quick and straight, but you,” John’s voice gentles through the air, soothing and soft, “You can’t keep running if you get knocked to the sand.”

Sherlock hadn’t considered John’s perspective on Sherlock’s own racing. If anything, he pictured himself as an unwelcome intruder on the sacred racing beaches. To hear that John wonders after his safety is profoundly calming. “I can run.” It is difficult to be afraid with John here.

“I’ve survived seven Races,” John says, “I can survive one more year.” A pause. It lengthens, and Sherlock lets it, turning his head, still in John’s hands, to a flock of gulls that are turning through the wind out by the ocean, searching the beaches for anything left by horses or men. John speaks again, “I sound like a cock, but, I’d rather have you alive than your horse.”
Sherlock snorts at this statement, though he recognizes his own hypocrisy. He would rather have John alive than Gladstone, as much as he is fascinated by the latter, he’d never want anything more than John. He thinks of Moriarty.

‘I want to see your face, when he dies.’

The vision of the spider’s face clouds behind his eyes.

In the end, John does not ask him not to race. Sherlock can see he’d like to, but John respects him too much to try.

How can he ask for John to give up something that has been such a staple, such a life-changing movement for him? So that there will be only one of them in danger? How could he ask that of him? He is hardly more than a stranger.

Selfishly, Sherlock longs to try. To spit out the words, don’t race, don’t race, and hush it all away like the ocean. John would never agree, never listen to that. It would mean having no chance in getting Gladstone from Moriarty. Sherlock glances away from John’s face, which has dropped, John’s eyes still searching Sherlock’s expression like there is anything he will be able to find. Sherlock’s gaze lands on Gladstone, behind them. The giant black water horse stands silently in the circle John has drawn for him in the grass and dirt, his long, gaunt face turned hauntingly towards the pair of them, regarding.

The salt in the air blows his tail against his hide and mane against his neck, gaining his interest, and he lifts his chin, stretching out his lips, mule-like, to scent the sea.

“There’s…” John starts out with, “I…” He shakes his head. His hands work to pull Sherlock’s face to him, and down, and he kisses Sherlock’s hair. Sherlock looks at the folds in John’s trousers, around the bend in his knee.

John’s leg will start to bother him if they sit here in the cold for any longer Perhaps it already aches, and John chooses to ignore it. If John killed a capall uisce with nightlock before he even knew Sherlock, why couldn’t Sherlock fantasize about John taking a step further, and exiting the Races altogether?

The Races are near.

Something incredibly secretive is lurking between his lungs, eating away at the cartilage that holds his ribs together even now, in these gentle minutes. It pounds a Scorpio rhythm on the underside of his sternum, persistent and enormous.

There are so many things to think about, and so little time to reflect. This hurts. Everything about this hurts. The horrifying part of it all, the dread and the time limit, the unknown of how things will be in a week - if they both live - stings. The razor twists in his chest. Elusive thoughts flash by in his head, all passing, feint, and unimaginable.

John shifts up, capturing all of Sherlock’s focus. His eyes are ribbon blue, with a wash of gold from the sun, which has dipped nearly entirely beyond the sea, and they flick between both of Sherlock’s. John is light, John is precious metal, all things topaz, picturesque and perfect among everything boring on this island. Slowly, gently, he shakes his head, staring back at Sherlock as if in disbelief. The weakening sun shines off the wetness of his tongue as it wets his lower lip.

“God, I’m sorry, I feel like I’ve been restraining myself for a century.”

Sherlock snorts.
“Do you...? Understand?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says. Sherlock leans forward, grasping the shoulder of John’s jacket and trailing down gently, squeezing his bicep. Yes, he understands, he knows, it is John that cannot understand the depth of this pit of longing in which Sherlock has been waiting, wanting, watching. The air feels cold, unadjusted, but careful, the coarse salt wind and the sweetgrass drifting up against him like a body.

Half of John’s face, the portion turned towards the great expanse of water past the sheer drop of the chalk cliffs, is cast in bright orange light. Sherlock marvels, for a moment, over the shadows contrasting this color on the other side of his expression. It brightens and shades secret areas, ones that Sherlock has never since been allowed to stare at. The impulse to sit and study John’s face for days surges within him.

The notion that this can all disappear like wisps of smoke in an instant, in three days, is disturbing. He reaches, tilts, and presses his mouth to John’s, anyways, the warmth of his lips a profound comfort, which he simmers into with ease, eyes drifting shut. John breathes, short and low, a puff of heat to Sherlock’s bottom lip, and the shiver runs between them both, connecting a wildly electric current. I need to live through him.

The muscles in John’s arm flex as he hauls Sherlock closer, the simple act a show of strength in itself, throwing Sherlock’s nerves ablaze and forcing a new, heated desire into his abdomen. Sherlock lets out a noise. It muffles against their kiss, and John pulls back just far enough to place another kiss on the corner of his open mouth, keeping their faces and bodies close. A thumb inexplicably sweeps along the ridge of Sherlock’s cheek, another beside his exposed neck.

Sherlock squeezes John’s arm harder, firming his grasp. His fingers curl against the worn jacket, wrinkling the leather patches.

John’s presence is steady and resilient, unwavering in its pride and strength. Sherlock can feel John tracking light, fluttering kisses down to his chin, and shudders weakly at the touches. Deep inside of him, at his core, this stings, and the Races hover in his mind, never ceasing to terrify, but now, he exists solely at the points at which John’s lips befall against his skin. He is a constellation made up of kiss-marks.

A hand wraps behind Sherlock’s head, settling firmly against the nape of his neck, fingers tangling in the wind-thrown curls. There is a great pain in his centre, in the simple movements, the careful presses of the path of kisses that John is laying warmly over his neck, now, how it aches, to feel this great adoration.

John’s other hand dips down, splaying over his thigh, and presses hard, sinking into the flesh that is clad in Sherlock’s trousers, while his face is taking avidly to the length of the tendon dropping down Sherlock’s neck. Sherlock gasps, sudden, and his hands come up to hold onto the sides of John’s head, needing desperately to grasp something. The drag of John’s unshaven face against the sensitive nerves near the surface of his skin makes him shiver.

At once, John lifts his head away, and Sherlock whines. John’s lips are wet, but the gleam has faded now that the sun is gone. His face and ears are flushed deep red, a heated desire burning in his eyes. Sherlock is careful not to drop his gaze to their laps, and his blood sings. The light blue is cast over John’s figure, betraying the tension in his shoulders.

John’s hand on his nape massage the edge of his scalp gently, a poor attempt to bring them both back down to earth. His breath is coming in fast. “Sherlock-- Sherlock, I want nothing more, I promise, but. I told Stamford I’d do something for him.” His voice sounds like it has been dragged
Absolutely floored, Sherlock blinks. He jerks back, but John’s grip keeps him close. “What--Mike?” Sherlock frowns. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Yeah, you know him.”

“Of course I know him, what has he go to do with--”

“It’ll only be an hour, can you part with me for an hour?” John rushes through this sentence. John’s continued closeness, and his body language, suggest that it’s him that can’t part with Sherlock.

Since he has only now received access to all of John, his lips, his secrets, his mind, Sherlock’s frown deepens into a scowl. “No,” He says, tilting his chin up. The impact of this attempt at his usual, intimidating glare is lessened due to the fact that the skin beneath his jaw is red and flushed, evidence of John’s work.

John slips his hand over Sherlock’s face now, brushing his thumb gently against the crest of Sherlock’s cheek again. Sherlock can spot how this is natural to him from a mile away. He narrows his eyes, wondering how many others John has touched like this. The hard edges of John’s worn skin catch along stray hairs. Perhaps he can be persuaded to calm down.

John says, “You are going to be trouble, aren’t you?”

This thrills Sherlock’s senses, sending everything all firing again, in case the message from John’s kisses weren’t clear enough. “I was under the impression that I was already trouble.” John is so close, he can still feel his warm breath over his face. A flare of irritation at Mike persists through this relaxing touch.

John smiles pleasantly. Finally, he drops his hold on Sherlock’s cheeks. He pats Sherlock’s thigh.

Without having to be asked with words by Sherlock, John sighs. His smile continues. “Alright. Yeah, alright. Come with me.” He shakes his head, and Sherlock loves him. It hurts not to say it, not to burst out with it, not to cup the feeling in his palms and offer it, offer everything, to John. “I can’t say you’ll love it.”

-/

It’s a funeral over the cliffs.

It’s an old island funeral, where the body is burned into ashes that the fire flickers over into the wind, and rolls coldly down into the water far below. Meant for those born here, those who always knew they would perish here. The funeral-goers are one massive creature in the night, close together, huddled around the bonfire and Father Stamford.

They’re back on the populated side of the island, around Skarmouth and near the cliffs that overlook the racing beaches, having ridden Gladstone. The ride was no less exhilarating as it had been before, no less fast, and Sherlock was left breathless again. He cannot think of a time he has felt safer in the darkness on Thisby, more than being on this giant capall. Who else would challenge them, from Gladstone’s back?
John’s front, hot and insistent, heavy and hard, had pressed into Sherlock’s back, as the champion took up the reins in front of Sherlock. Gladstone’s gait had been smooth, without a chance or cheap excuse for Sherlock to accidentally push back into John. John pressed his lips against the back of Sherlock’s neck, just under the collar of his coat, before he had dismounted upon reaching their destination.

Now, the champion water horse waits apart from them, watching the gathering of islanders, and reins in the hands of churchgoer that John says he trusts. Gladstone is invisible in the dark, a floating white mane and a ghostly tail. His eyes reflect the bonfire’s fading light, the only evidence that he exists at all.

This is the exact spot where Anderson had called Sherlock’s name the night of the festival and thrown his sea wish over his shoulder, into the ocean.

If he looks carefully, into the shade of this night, it’s like Anderson’s shadow is there now, at the edge of the land, face streaked dark in charcoal.

“Give yourself back to the ocean,” Father Stamford says in that proclaiming voice he has as John and Sherlock pass into the sizeable crowd. He’s at the cliffside, standing before the bonfire and preaching to the gathering of mourners. The dying flecks of glowing embers drift past him, over his shoulders and out to the expanse of the water. Smoke turns over and into the night.

John is here to give the dead rider’s capall uisce mare back to the ocean. Who else could anyone on the island trust with a water horse? She’s not for someone else to take, not to sell by old island standards, and is only the dead boy’s payment for racing. There is more debt required in the Races than the fifty coins to enter.

It hadn’t occurred to Sherlock that the other riders have families, people who care for them and hope everyday that they return from the beach unharmed. On the sand, it has always felt like the other men are nothing more than shadows that seek to wear him thin. They’ve been adversaries and only that. The idea that they all have stories, friends, family… It changes them all, in his mind. He thinks of John, and what he has learned that he did not know before. His expression remains closed.

John’s hand brushes Sherlock’s arm. A squeeze, and he pulls entirely away. His neck burns with the bodily memory of being rasped at by John’s stubble.

Sherlock’s body immensely and at once misses the comfort of John’s solid figure beside him, and finds himself longing to banish the steps John has taken to walk from him and cover the distance again. It is a feeling not unlike his desolate hunger after the pub, where they had raced after the file thief together, as if all the world existed to be between them. John’s hand had covered his, real in the tavern in front of Lestrade, and so, so real on the cliffs, this evening.

Sherlock tucks his hands into his pockets to quell his emotion. He stands separately from the weary crowd, watching John, cloaked in shadow and firelight, walk to retrieve the capall, big and blue-grey like angry water, from the boy’s father, a hard-iron working man, large and distant, like the horse. The boy’s father appears untouchable, dry-faced.

That’s all the rider had been, a boy. Barely old enough to race at seventeen, but foolhardy enough to try.

The family members, those Sherlock can discern, look weepy and tired, tired of the racing and the wind.

‘And the damn horses. MH’
Sherlock shakes his head. Not the time.

The father’s eyes track John as he approaches, squinting against the cold, and his wife is crying against him. The father and John say a few short words to each other, so low and far enough away that Sherlock doesn’t catch any of them. He can only see the pieces of them that are touched by moon and fire. The capall’s ear flicks to John’s side. Her neck is long and shiny-white, even if she isn’t wet.

When John takes her lead from the father’s scarred hands, her hooves rise easily from the ground, and gracefully they walk away from the cliff’s edge, where the rest of the funeral party is gathered around Stamford and the bonfire. The parents watch from away.

The remainder of the funeral is as short as the deceased’s life, beginning with Stamford talking over the roar of the air against the cliffs below them all, and ending with John coaxing the capall into a gallop. It passes as quickly and coldly as the wind.

Sherlock isn’t actually here, he’s not a part of the grieving members, and he hasn’t an integral part, like Father Stamford with his island fantasies and his introduction to eulogies, or John with the capall mare.

They are only separated by a short distance, but Sherlock can recognize the hold, the tightness of John’s hum stuck in his jaw. He is humming, low and raw to the horse. He pictures the curve of John’s face fitting into the cup of his own hand, and again imagines the dusting of short stubble fitting against his throat.

Like Gladstone on the night of the storm, the water horse obeys, rearing her head back and exposing the long, serpentine expanse of her chest. John tugs, and breaks into a run alongside the capall, her hooves tearing at the uneven clumps of long grass, until they hit the edge of the cliff, John pulls away, and the horse goes leaping off of it, back legs kicking and skin already starting to shimmer. Over the wind and the drop of the cliffs, against the black, he can’t hear or view the impact of her body against the water.

At the end, the weeping family members and friends of the dead rider have gathered around the ash and scraps of burnt-out bonfire, spitting low at their ankles still, ready for another body to burn, more wood to eat, and, by tradition, they should stay here until it goes out entirely. Sherlock waits along the edges of the cliffs, waiting for John, who approaches a moment later.

They should go off together now, leave and find a place to sit very quietly, very closely. Sherlock should come up with his own way to keep John down come the day of the Races.

Stamford approaches from the funeral party, however, and John stalls. Damn. Now they’re stuck. Sherlock frowns at the back of John’s head, as Stamford meets up with them, his face red from his speeches. He cannot help but think of all the ways Mike is preventing him from kissing John today.

“I’m glad I’ve caught the pair of you,” Stamford says. He looks off-beat, unhappy against the pale moonlight. There has just been a funeral, Sherlock reminds himself, but this doesn’t seem to be the reason why, exactly, Mike looks like this. He seems as worried as when he’d seen Sherlock pledging his name at the tavern. “I thought I’d catch you, John, but Sherlock, I needed you, as well.” This is different, like Stamford has a secret. He leans closer.

“What is it?” John asks, clever as ever.

Stamford looks over his shoulder. It isn’t too conspiratorial, and so Sherlock lets his own gaze slide across the land to the mass of the funeral party.
The rider’s father is looking at their tiny group. Peculiar.

From the low fire, the orange glints in his eyes, colors his skin and half his clothes.

Sherlock stares right back at him. The man’s fingers begin to curl into his palm, forming fists that are visibly shaking, even from here. Perhaps a normal person would glance away, up to the sky, and back down to John and Stamford. But Sherlock has abandoned those norms his entire life.

What can he see from here, dozens of meters away in the dark and against the cold? The man is a fisherman, Sherlock can see his clothes and his type of shoe, had seen the scars over the backs of his knuckles from the fishhooks when they were closer. And his hands — always shaking.

Finally, the father looks away from Sherlock, rejoining the black funeral party.

“We shouldn’t speak here.” Stamford pushes a note into John’s hand, a crumpled old bit of yellowed paper. At once, John unfurls it, and Sherlock leans close to read it, as well, suddenly feeling very vulnerable against the open area and the dark clouds, standing about in the fresh night.

\textit{Saint Columba’s}, the note reads, \textit{Seven o’clock}. That would be in an hour.

John’s face turns to Sherlock, then to Stamford. His mouth is a hard line, confused, but unwilling to speak and break their silence below the wind. Sherlock nods for him to Mike.

The father is approaching, now, dim gaze set on their small group.

“Mike,” John says, noticing and acting innocent. His eyes darken beneath his brows, “It was good to see you.”

“John,” Stamford says, louder, clapping John over the shoulder. “I hardly ever see you in racing season. It was a nice surprise. Oh, Mr Haverford?” Stamford begins, and breaks away from the pair of them.

The father, Mr Haverford apparently, trains his eyes to Stamford from where they had been dead-set on Sherlock. As Sherlock takes John’s arm to lead him quickly away from the scene, Stamford intercepts the burly man. This event had passed so quickly, he may have garnered whiplash from it all.

John tugs his arm free as they begin towards the buildings of Skarmouth, where they’d come from, where Gladstone is being kept amongst the outskirts.

“What was \textit{that}?” John asks him.

Sherlock continues striding confidently, “I don’t know. The father of the rider acted in a very peculiar manner.”

“No kidding, he was staring right at you,” John goes on, steps quickening to match the pace of Sherlock’s long legs. They hit the brick by the edge of the quay, and Sherlock turns, walking parallel to the railing and into town. “I mean, I stare at you, but that’s for personal reasons.”

Sherlock’s mouth quirks. John is funny. “Personal reasons?”

“Yeah, personal reasons including that you’re gorgeous.” John says this casually, like it’s nothing. Sherlock still feels the heat high up in his face, and sighs, like it’s an enormous burden to listen to John speak.
The churchgoer and Gladstone are near the back of a squat of old stone buildings. The churchgoer is holding Gladstone’s reins up high, like John instructed him, and the water horse, along with being physically held, is charmed to stay in place by a circle drawn in the dirt and road gravel around him.

The churchgoer is talking to a figure in the darkness.

“Henry,” John says as they come up, taking the reins up from the churchgoer. The man nods to him, John puts a few coins in his hand, and he goes off. Sherlock can tell by his walk, illuminated by lanterns of the town, that he’s going immediately to the tavern to spend this. There are voices and he can hear cars rumbling, but no one else is on the outside of town with the three of them.

The figure smiles. Closer now, and in the light of street lamps, in the light coastal music that is being played in the streets deeper into town, Sherlock recognizes him. Henry Knight, the mainland monger that he had met, just briefly, the first time he’d ever visited the Stockyard.

“Hey, John,” Henry greets. The ease of it makes Sherlock bristle. “I was wondering where you’d gotten off to.”

Sherlock quips to John, “It seems everyone is after you, tonight.”

John hushes him, but Sherlock doesn’t mind.

Henry Knight looks at him. He extends his hand. “Mr Holmes, it’s nice to see you again.”

Sherlock takes it. Last time they’d met, Henry had come off a disappointing ferry and was longing for a cigarette to cover his fatigue. Now, Henry simply appears for all the world like his profession suggests -- hungry for new mounts, new information, new answers, all things that John Watson can provide him with. Sherlock suspects this is the reason that Henry had searched for him. But how did he know that John would be by the racing cliffs this evening?

Perhaps, it is simple luck, or an assumption that John trains on the racing beaches, or, maybe, he was told by someone. The sure-footing of Henry’s feet on the cobblestone, however, tells Sherlock that he has not come from a tavern, doesn’t seek a drink or a cigarette anymore, and he is confident in where he stands. He meant to be here.

“Mr Moriarty told me you’d be out for a island funeral at six, John. I’m sorry if I’ve intruded,” He says, confirming Sherlock’s suspicions, “I was only seeking your advice.” His eyes flicker between them both. Sherlock stands solid, rolling his shoulders back.

“Can we speak tomorrow morning?” John asks.

Gladstone throws his head back, suddenly, and John pulls him back down with a practiced expertise. This has done great work to illustrate the point to Henry Knight, the point that John does not have the time or patience for Henry Knight’s mainland questions right now. The water horse bares his flat yellow teeth. He has come alive in the darkness.

Henry baulks. He had never been in danger, but anyone, even Sherlock, that witnesses such a blunt reminder that these horses do not abide by any time schedules, will not wait for a victim to finish a conversation before eating them, is certain to get it through their head. Those crushing teeth had been in Hope’s throat, what seems like only minutes ago.

“Yes, yes, I do apologize. I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the Yard. I’ll be at the Skarmouth Inn, I-- Oh, oh,” Henry says, like a thought has popped into his memory, “Yes, Mr Holmes. I was told that you may be with John, and Mr Moriarty asked me if I may deliver this to you tonight.”
From his jacket pocket, Henry Knight produces an envelope. Yellowed, with a distinctively glistening, red wax seal.

A barrage of possibilities seize Sherlock at once, tightening his chest.

He breathes out.

Slowly, he reaches, and takes the sealed envelope from Henry’s outstretched hand. The paper rustles against his skin. In the light, the unique profile view of a quarter horse, an emblem in red, stares, unseeing and unreal, up at him.

Tonight, tonight.

There is no mistake about it, no backwards way around it. Moriarty knew he would be with John, here, at this hour. Henry was a convenient messenger, but Moriarty knew.

Tonight.

The idea that his footsteps are being tracked, that he is known on Thisby, that his movements are being anticipated before he even considers them, is disconcerting. It worries over, rolling through his head like smoke in the wind.

Henry, task completed, dismisses himself from John and him. Tomorrow morning, he’ll be back for John. He disappears amongst a group of tourists on bicycles, amongst the music drifting through Skarmouth’s centre.

John’s grip is on Gladstone, but all his focus is on Sherlock, and what he holds. John swallows, looking up at him, a deep concern written in the lines around his mouth.

Sherlock narrows his eyes at the envelope. He glances up and away from it, to the paper lanterns strung above them, to Gladstone’s dead-eyed stare, to the dark buildings in the blackness all around them.

Abruptly, he says, “What do you know about Henry Knight?”

“He came here when he was a little boy, I think. A capall killed his father,” John says, startled by his sudden, unrelated question.


“He’s a mainland monger now.”

“Is that enough to consistently revisit a place where your father was killed? To relive it, each time you step off the ferry?””

John frowns. “He’s… still looking for what killed him?”

“Henry isn’t exceedingly clever, but he won’t wander down to the beaches in any season, racing or otherwise. He relies on Moriarty, and you, by extension, to bring in fresh crops of capaill every year, and under the guise of buying island ponies and those half-breeds, he watches for the Beast that killed his father.” He pauses. “Don’t you see how he looks at Gladstone? Fear, first-hand fear.”

Plenty of people experience such an emotion when they come into contact with a water horse. Even Sherlock does. Again, the envelope draws all focus, and he is unable to continue on unhappily about Henry Knight. It doesn’t matter, anyway, it’s insignificant, not important, and he doesn’t care.
John steadies the water horse. “It could be more seeds,” He says. Gladstone snorts saltwater over John’s shoulder.

Sherlock feels the packet with the pads of his fingers. There are no hard bits all around the bottom, but the flatness of a slice of parchment, instead. “It must be a letter. We’ve already received the seeds, he knows we’ve gotten the point of them.”

John thinks. “Perhaps you shouldn’t open it.”

Sherlock shakes his head. Does John think a mere envelope can contain a trap? “Moriarty told Henry to deliver this tonight. It must pertain to something about today, or tomorrow, or tonight.” It must be opened.

“It could be another clue about the poisoned tourist,” John says.

“Clever, John.” Carefully, Sherlock presses his thumb beneath the folded, sealed edge of the envelope. The wax comes apart, crumbling to the ground, image of the horse disappearing. He removes the parchment from inside with a gentle touch, wary that he could be about to read a hint that has the possibility of sloting all his information together.

Unhurriedly, Sherlock unfolds the paper.

There are only a few short lines.

Congratulations on your investigative work. You are something else, entirely.

It’s become known, to me, that you are searching for answers to a problem that may not exist.

Let us remedy that.

I thought you might write.

This evening, my office.

-- J. Moriarty

Chapter End Notes

Playlist!
https://open.spotify.com/user/oliveprobably/playlist/3tcBmaha6iJyc0pSaQstuk?si=7q4C6aU-RzOU8krWHX69BQ
if you’re in the mood to be transported to a tiny, cold coastal island, haunted by sea monsters and with a mind and magic of its own, i recommend giving it a listen. I created it back in september 2016, a few months after beginning this fic, and it’s been a great way to come up with scenes and ideas for our two boys.
FINALLY another chapter, this took awhile because, while writing, I decided to restructure, exactly, where every plot point was going to go, and thus added an extra chapter, the whole thing coming to 25 chapters, instead of 23.
I've also started trying to decide what AU to write next, so if you have any wonderings of, "hey, hardlyfair should be writing xxx, amiright?" pls let me know! I have some
ideas, but could use a wider scope!

IN THIS CHAPTER, we have some nice times, and lots more buildup to the climax of the next two chapters, the last two. A small mystery with Mr. Haverford will be resolved in a quick instant next chapter, and suspicions for Moriarty continue to grow...

leave a comment! :)
The Spider

Chapter Summary

“Let’s get down to business,” Moriarty says.

“Do we have business?” Sherlock says.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Congratulations on your investigative work. You are something else, entirely.

It’s become known, to me, that you are searching for answers to a problem that may not exist.

Let us remedy that.

I thought you might write.

This evening, my office.

-- J. Moriarty

After scanning the note, Sherlock shoves the paper into John’s chest. John reads, his other hand held up high under Gladstone’s hairy muzzle, the bridle firmly in his grip. Gladstone’s salty breath fogs up and rolls over in the air.

It’s a short message, but the lettering isn’t hurried. Moriarty had written purposefully, evident from each cross and dot to the careful lines of his print. This was calculated, thought-out, constructed intricately to convey the most it could to its intended, Sherlock, without really giving away anything at all. Ballpoint pen, thick black ink.

The corner of his mouth ticks up. Clever.

“Oh,” John breathes, “Well, that’s. Oh.”

“What?”

John fumbles for words. He doesn’t look shaken, not quite, but certainly on edge. Sherlock understands. They hadn’t been expecting this sort of letter from Moriarty -- perhaps another clue, a hint as to the expansive reach Moriarty has over the criminal world, a threat. But not a blatant invitation.

Sherlock’s mind is working at breakneck speed, considering the ramifications of what this could mean. A problem that may not exist? No, it must be a reference to the murder of the poisoned tourist, a poor attempt to shift the guilt. Of course. Moriarty would never confess in a letter. Not his style. If Sherlock wants to get anything from him, it’ll have to be in person, where he can see, in depth, every
fallacy of his facade, every twitch of his mouth, every lie that slips from it.

John’s mind has traveled a different direction entirely.

“Well. I was, you know.” Against the electric street lamps, John’s face is tinged with a pink deeper than that which has been caused by the frigid air. Even in the dark it is visible, framed by the wall of black that Gladstone’s body makes behind him. “If you were, well. I was going to ask you to come back there, anyways. Now it just seems like you have an excuse to come up.”

Sherlock blinks.

John doesn’t rush to correct himself. Sherlock imagines him saying, ‘That is, to sit, for tea, after this afternoon... I’m not... suggesting, anything.’ But John doesn’t say any of that. He glances up at Sherlock from under his brows, tongue peeking out to wet his lips.

“You…” Sherlock says. John is implying an awful lot. This realization is very disruptive to a train of thought that had been about murder and intrigue. He briefly stops functioning, blinking against the dark to the silhouettes of Skarmouth buildings. Oh.

“Let’s just,” John coughs awkwardly, holding up the envelope again. “Let’s focus on the letter.”

Much more familiar territory. Sherlock is going to die. He swallows, but his alarm does not die down in the slightest, his growing anxiety. Slowly, he turns his face back to the envelope’s shell in his cold hands. “Right.”

“Yes. Good.”

John wants to sleep with him.

He might’ve been able to tell earlier, if he weren’t the subject of John’s attention. If John wanted to sleep with someone else (a flair of hot jealousy eats away at this thought), he could’ve predicted this behavior, this suggestion of John’s. It’s intimidating, he realizes, the massive reputation John’s name holds over Thisby. It evokes such images associated with power, champion, winner, racer, rider.

Sherlock is stupid, he should’ve recognized the direction they were headed out on the cliffs at sunset. It’s past dusk now, though, and the dark is heavy and tiring, there’s a pull in his heart to submit to it. They must meet Mike Stamford, and then Sherlock must go to Moriarty. Then. His face heats, then... His reservations are appearing in great number now, the what if, what if worries that have haunted him for weeks.

Now, however, the what if concerns unpracticed abilities foiled against a potentially great prowess. What if this doesn’t mean what Sherlock thinks it does? What if his sentiment exceeds John’s? He had never suspected that he would get as far as he already has, and so the ideas of doing something like that, with John, of all people (of all people? Who else would it be?), are suddenly crippling.

“You’re not thinking of really going, are you?” John’s voice has slipped into something low. Sherlock leans against the wind that channels through their alley at the outskirts of Skarmouth, trying to feel the frigidity and ground his form in the present. Gladstone lifts his head to scent the air, and the reminder of his presence helps.

He’s unable to gather his bearings fast enough to avoid all suspicion. “What other choice is there? This is an invitation.”

“This,” John waves the paper, “is a trap. You know it is.”
Sherlock scoffs, rolls his eyes. John does not look happy about that. Sherlock goes on, rattled, “There isn’t anything he can do to me.” He says. Nothing that Moriarty can do that Sherlock will care about. Mind John.

But Moriarty knows about John already. He had merely been testing the waters that morbid day on the beach when they discussed nothing and everything at once. When he wants to disrupt the tide, Moriarty will have the exact tools he needs to do it. Namely, Moriarty knows that Sherlock would give up everything for John -- in this, he holds power.

Sherlock folds his hands together, touching the tips of his frozen fingers to his chin in thought.

“Moriarty was clear that he didn’t want me skulking about the Yard. Why would he change his mind suddenly?” It must be to throw another ploy into Sherlock’s life, to aggravate John, to distract them from the Races.

Moriarty is finally starting to get interesting.

The game is finally beginning.

John furrows his brow, attention entirely on something not-case-related. “When did he say that?”

“Oh the beach, after Hope.” Sherlock frowns. Didn’t they discuss that this morning? The day has been so long. The station and Lestrade, the caves beneath Thisby, Gladstone, John. John, kissing him, touching his face, his tongue coaxing Sherlock’s lips to part…

Sherlock has to clear his throat, his face flushed.

“I thought you said you only talked about racing.”

“It was a passing comment,” Sherlock lies, and then pauses. He is aware that it doesn’t do well to start off… whatever this is, by being dishonest, especially since John is interested in him in that capacity. His gaze slides to John from the corner of his eye.

There is no possibility of him telling John the complete truth. Not when racing day is so close; not when Moriarty is so near. Not when John still runs the risk of ruining things, of destroying his chances at gaining Gladstone or winning, should he be fully-informed.

Imagine it, Sherlock telling the whole truth, about how he would’ve given up racing, and all that it meant for him to win, for John to have just the barest chances at a happiness away from the Stockyard. How Sherlock had given up any agency he would’ve had at the last minute before the Races, how he could no longer back out without looming repercussions.

How Moriarty had stood there, drinking it all in, knowing Sherlock was playing into his hands. Stupid, stupid. Lie. Bend the truth. John may grow angry with him, when, if, he learns that Sherlock was ready to give this all away for him. John’s nice like that. Moral, loyal, strong. After the Races, come what may of them, it won’t matter. Moriarty’s direct hand will leave them. His influence over the island, however, will remain. Sherlock’s mouth twists. He won’t be satisfied until it’s eradicated completely.

“You said you told him you were racing. You said you spoke with him about the racing odds. Sherlock--”

“I told the truth, John.”

“But, everything, was that everything? I talked with Moriarty, Sherlock. He told me he wanted to
eat your heart out. Do you-- do you know how that felt?”

Surprised, Sherlock blinks, watching John’s expression fall. He looks almost betrayed, as if Sherlock’s not telling him the whole truth was a personal affront. Hm. Well, lying is a personal thing, isn’t it?

“Do you know how that felt, when, when I…” John shakes his head, twisting his hand into the chest of his jacket. He connects with Sherlock’s eyes. They are startlingly cobalt. John’s voice comes to him from the cliffs, as if it were a dream. If I promised you forever. John doesn’t want him to go anywhere; John wants him to stay on Thisby. “I can’t listen to him say that.”

John is terrified Sherlock will leave Thisby and never come back.

The comprehension hits him, and leaves Sherlock blinking again, stuck in the middle of his deductions and Moriarty’s impending threat, of John’s desire for him, of the murders and the Races and what freedom he has given up.

Perhaps John may feel deeply about Sherlock. Whether it is a terrible, disabling love, like Sherlock’s, remains to be seen, although it is unlikely by circumstance. Hurt by it, by his own slip of emotion, Sherlock frowns. John cannot be allowed all the information when it still has the ability to change the Races, to risk the outcomes.

“No, John. I answered honestly.”

“He wasn’t going to give me Gladstone, until after Hope was dead. He changed his mind. You must’ve said something to him.”

“I promised to race.”

John stops. “What?”

“I promised Moriarty that I would race, that I wouldn’t back out.” The words all rush out of him. “That is all. We smoked cigarettes.”

John stares at him. His eyes, gleaming against the light of the lanterns knocking lightly together above them, flick between Sherlock’s, trying to discern the truth. The yellow and pink shadows are all over the dips of his face. Something in what John knows must corroborate with what Moriarty has said, for John eventually nods. Short, hard. John hasn’t grasped what this means; Sherlock promised to not back out so that Moriarty would give Gladstone up to John, should John win the Races. He doesn’t comprehend this -- or if he does, he’s adept at hiding his displeasure.

Sherlock feels the shameful heat crawl over the back of his neck, swept away by the breeze a moment later, under such scrutiny.

John says, “That’s just what you did at the Scorpio Festival.”

“Yes, and at that festival, you had a conversation with a woman dressed up in a taxidermy horse’s head over a seashell.” Sherlock allows a smirk to come over his lips, tucking his chin against his neck. “I don’t think either of us are responsible for our festival-induced-actions.”

John breathes out fast, a chuckle bubbling up. Sherlock begins to smile. That’s better.

“I don’t know. I’d like to think I’m somewhat responsible for telling off Hope.”

“‘Telling off’? Is that what you call punching someone in the face?”
“I’m just saying,” John grins, “I’d like credit where credit is due.” He hands the letter back to Sherlock. Sherlock tucks the message back inside the envelope, and folds it into his pocket. The note hadn’t mentioned a time, but it should be before midnight, at latest. His nerves are crawling over him from his feet to his ears, a mix of uneasy worry, thrill, suspicion, and temptation. That one’s the newest.

“Moriarty has an office.”

“Mike, first,” John says, looking at his broken watch. “It’s nearly seven.”

“It’s half-past-six.”

“Shut up, you don’t always have to be right.”

“But I am,” Sherlock says, offended. John’s book had said so. He got everything right.

He turns his head, regarding the area around them. On one side, where they’d come up from the cliffs after the funeral, there’s the quay and the railing, the same area where Sherlock had gone in after the stolen file. There’s a few smokers chatting about something or another by the bicycle racks. Sherlock and John stand at the edge of the Skarmouth town, behind the buildings. Through the alleyways around them, those that lead deeper into town, rhythmic music beats lightly through the chill.

Sherlock feels small, a figure against the blackness of the island shadow. Walking through the lit streets of Skarmouth won’t be difficult, even with the drunks and unskilled tourists, but once he is in the outskirts, the despairing vulnerability of being alone may kick into his already-frayed system. And, John has Gladstone, who shouldn’t be allowed to walk through Skarmouth’s roads, lest he lash out.

Sherlock doesn’t want to be separated from John.

He pauses a long heartbeat, coat collar blowing against his neck, before all possible decisions on how to make the trip have made themselves known to him. He hums and steps to Gladstone’s side, reaching up to untuck the stirrup and drop it down a length. Where his hand brushes his pelt, Sherlock can feel the deep thrum of ocean magic.

Even for Sherlock’s long legs, the mount is difficult, and Gladstone does not make it easy. He twists like a snake, hissing to John, his ears flaying back at the unexpected weight upon his back. Sherlock sits up, hair worse for wear, and pushes it back over his forehead, trying to keep a semblance of indifference. The swept curls flop lifelessly back down.

John laughs at him. The champion smears the pattern of an old rune against Gladstone’s face, and the capall hisses again, clucking high near the end. Sherlock can feel it all vibrate against his calves where they nudge the barrel of Gladstone’s creaking ribs.

John makes him sit back, almost up at the rise of the cantle, loosens the strap of the stirrup lower, and climbs on, settling in front of him. Sherlock tentatively slides forward into the seat with John, watching the way the material of the trousers over John’s thighs shift as he tightens them against the seat jockey, strengthening the hold on the water horse. The reins drift between John’s fingers, evenly braided leather.

He’s going to be a passenger this time around, rather than the one in charge. It isn’t so bad to give up his agency to John. They both know where Saint Columba’s is, but John likely can’t see well over Sherlock’s higher shoulder to steer them. It’s efficient. Easy. Comfortable. Sherlock melts a
touch.

The warmth on his front, the eyeful of the back of John’s head, on the little hairs twitching in the wind and with his breath, makes Sherlock tuck himself closer. It’s efficient, he reasons, better than being put up against the cold.

The electric lamplight sneaking through the alleys nearby highlight different sections of black on Gladstone, morphing them into a pale sort of grey, like the pebbles on the seashore. His chest rises with heavy breaths, his eyes reflecting the light, twisting in his skull to look back at the riders.

John’s hand reaches back, snagging one of Sherlock’s wrists, and places it against his waist.

“Hang on to me,” John says. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Sherlock tightens the flats of his forearms around John’s abdomen. Tucks his bright face against John’s neck, squeezes.

Saint Columba’s sits outside of Skarmouth by only a small distance. The giant cross atop the cathedral glows with electric light against the dark island sky, a literal beacon.

It is a great, old building, one of the oldest on the Thisby, mind a few stables owned by Moriarty. Expanses of colored glass, steady columns, and intricate wood carvings cover it entirely.

Sherlock occasionally drops by to think if Mrs Hudson’s crew of bridge players are over, although he’s been neglecting the building and its resident priest recently on account of the Races and all that the season entails. The night he signed up for the Races, at Hawkins’ Tavern, he ran into Father Stamford, who told Sherlock of his old acquaintanceship with John Watson. ‘I think it’s just him. He’s got one foot in the ocean and one on the land. No one knows the water horses better than him. He’s the one to beat.’

‘I don’t think anyone’s close with that man.’

John budges up next to him, drawing his hand down the length of Sherlock’s arm, until his hand reaches Sherlock’s, his fingers lingering against his knuckles just long enough to capture all of Sherlock’s attention. Beneath his coat, Sherlock can feel the arms on his hair rise, entirely dissociated with the cold. He pushes out a sigh.

Gladstone waits, reins tied to the bicycle posts out the side of the cathedral, his nose brushing the quivering grasses near his hooves. There is no intention of eating them. His eyes regard Sherlock while John draws the resting circle around the capall and whispers to him. Sherlock is certain that no other racer could leave a capall alone like this. Only John. Gladstone tilts his head to the sound of John’s voice, his lips twitching. Sherlock understands. It’s captivating.

“Inside?” John asks, and Sherlock can see his breath fog up in the air. He loves the way John’s eyes fall upon the stained glass doors, loves the way he tilts his head just so, in question. It doesn’t matter what John desires of Sherlock, even if it’s only physical, Sherlock would still treasure him. His heart hurts. He glances away as to not be caught out.

The image on the doors is of the mare goddess in true form, Epona, god of horses, represented as a giant mare against a scene of blue sea and high cliffs. The light from inside the church shines through the colored glass, making the glass glow. The wind blows up the scent of ocean water and ancient wood.

Gladstone is no Epona— his body thin and long, meant to slip between the cracks in the sea floor like an eel. Epona is depicted on Thisby like a black and white gypsy vanner, all strong head, thick
neck and hefty legs, dinner-plate hooves.

Here, she is immortalized in stained glass, in beautiful artistry. Even sans religion, Sherlock can appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into creating these colorful windows for St Columba’s all those generations ago. Reared and striking, Epona looms, not unlike the branded white mare and Gladstone that Sherlock had seen in his mind in the back of Hooper’s Bakery. Her mane flows in panels of black and white, fracturing glass, beautifully spun into the window.

“Inside,” Sherlock agrees.

Sherlock holds the door ajar for John, and they slip inside. It’s bright, it’s always lit in here, and Sherlock gathers himself from the brisk weather in the shelter of the warm, open foyer. There’s the room with the pews in front of them, and out here, glass cases, plaques, commemorative benches to sit, statues, candelabras and lanterns, and ancient paintings of Epona decorate the foyer. The culturally significant pieces of artwork are on display behind thicker glass in cabinets that can withstand the non-stop exposure to light and cold. It’s more like a museum, out here, than the entrance to a place of worship.

They’re alone, clearly, at least out here, there is no one to see them. In truth, he’s finding it increasingly difficult to keep himself from gravitating back to John. It wouldn’t be so bad.

John wanders closer to Sherlock, as if pulled there by a similar force, considering the art. Sherlock represses a smug smile at the universe and at island magic. His hands clasp behind his back as he tries to work his frozen fingers back to life.

It smells of communion wine and dusty tomes in here, comforting and worn, with a hint of melted candlewax. It’s a place all of Thisby has come through before, well-walked, and this comes through in a hundred ways, from the layers of paint on the walls to the artifacts and objects around that are fifty times older than Sherlock. If he strains, Sherlock can pick up the further scent of John’s skin, the smell of hay that lingers on his clothes. Or, perhaps that’s a remnant from his memory of holding him close. Imagination.

John points to the case of glass in front of them. Inside are the infamous Thisby daggers, long, crystalline, and glittering under a display light. Thin blades are polished to obsessive perfection. Their history is short and bitter. Made and magicked for harming competing *capaill uisce* in the Races, and then outlawed. They’re old, but retain their gleam and their mystery. The small bronze plates beside each one details their name, origin, the *capaill* and men they have felled. They’re almost compelling, as if they are asking to be picked up, to be held, to be used.

“Moriarty had one of those,” John says.

Sherlock stops. He frowns. “What?”

“He owns one. It’s just in his desk drawer, I saw it. He brought it out the other day…”

John tells him the rest of his interaction with Moriarty. The haggling for Gladstone, both of them like a common beach monger, the prices, the fairytale stories and the comments about Sherlock’s heart.

What does Moriarty know about John’s involvement with Sherlock? He knew enough to be confident that Sherlock would be accompanying him this evening at the funeral, even when Sherlock hadn’t planned on it. Thanks to Sherlock, he’s aware of the effect John has, but what about the reverse? What does Moriarty know about John’s feelings? John is incredibly bothered by the threat to Sherlock’s wellbeing.
Lastly, John speaks of the knife.

Had the presence of the dagger been a threat to John? A threat to Sherlock, or Gladstone? Or was it just to show that Moriarty had the weapon like that, the ability to cut a water horse so deep that—

“That it would never walk again.”

Sherlock looks to John.

The weight of what has been uncovered sinks John’s shoulders like a stone in water. His mouth drops open, eyes flickering far away from Sherlock’s gaze, the creases over his brow appearing. Sherlock regards the wild-eyed romantic.

It was him, Moriarty, looking for Gladstone that night, and instead finding Beryl. It was his dagger that sealed her fate by drawing her blood, his hand that drew the iron line across the inside of her thigh, slicing the perfect weapon with a practiced expertise.

“He went in the barn before us,” John says, breathless, “the night of the storm. He walked through before we did.”

Sherlock can picture it now. Slipping into a darkened stall, with a darker horse pressed against the wood to get away from the crystal weapon. He can hear the low whining ripping through her throat, see the foam dripping over her wobbling lips, coalescing into a scream as Moriarty gleefully slices the most precious part of her body.

Sherlock stares a moment longer, then glances away. John’s eyes are tired and sad, and Sherlock can’t bear to look at them anymore, so he looks at the knives in the glass case instead again. Each of them are long and twisted, entirely unassuming.

“The riders aren’t allowed anywhere near these,” John touches the clear glass, “How could Moriarty get his hands on one?”

Sherlock watches the reflection of John’s complex expression in the glass. “The same way he could get wolfsbane.”

John looks back to him. “What? Wolfsbane, what do you mean?”

“Aconitine, John. The toxin that comes from the wolfsbane plant, found in lethal amounts in the system of the poisoned tourist.” Sherlock turns away, walking out of the foyer and beginning to stride down the long aisle of the ancient church towards the podiums, his feet tapping on the carpet as he walks, and echoing around the empty building. John follows him, distressed. He begins to speak faster, the ideas jumping to his head as he speaks, “We looked at the stolen file. The case of the tarts. Moriarty is the only private vendor importing and exporting anything from the mainland, his horses, his private goods. It’s just Bill Murray and his shop, otherwise. If he wanted a dagger from the mainland museums, he could get one, same as he could get the wolfsbane flowers. Fishermen and the other shops all have to declare their exports and imports, and go through customs, but Moriarty is private. He doesn’t have to disclose anything.”

“Someone still could have smuggled something in,” John says, “It isn’t hard to not declare something.”

John is right. But Sherlock cannot shake this utter conviction he has, that it is truly Moriarty that brought the dagger and the plant’s poison to the island. There is no evidence, besides John seeing the dagger in the Stockyard’s owner’s hands. Even then, as Moriarty is not a racer, it is legal for him to hold, if illegal to purchase. He remembers how much blood had soaked into the sandy lining of
Beryl’s stall, how clean the wound must have cut to allow such spillage. He remembers how similar Gladstone’s black coat and Beryl’s bay one look in the stormy-dark.

“You already know it’s him, Sherlock,” John says. His voice bounces around in the acoustics of the high, towering ceilings, against the rounded walls. Tiring of trailing after Sherlock, he seizes Sherlock’s elbow, stopping them. Sherlock narrows his eyes at John. John’s eyes are soft and vulnerable, deep blue in the church’s light. The candles on the walls flicker.

“You know it’s him, he’s toying with you because there’s no hard evidence. The stories, the seeds, the letter,” John gestures to Sherlock’s coat, “it’s a trick, Sherlock. His focus is you.”

“I know.”

“And, you-- you know? What?”

“I know it’s me he wants, John, that’s what this has all been about. He’s deluded himself into the belief that we could be good together, as if we’re on the same level of intelligence.”

John stares at him in disbelief. He lets go of Sherlock’s arm.

John starts, “I--” and then his eyes dart to somewhere behind Sherlock.

Father Stamford has appeared from the back office. A frail woman nods to him, thanking him for his time as the shepherd of the island flock, and then Mike comes to them, meeting them in the aisle. He’s in his clerical clothes, the tab collar inserted, the buttons down his middle straining a bit under his coat. His face gleams with perspiration.

“John, Sherlock,” Mike begins. He is less relaxed than Sherlock has ever seen him in this church. This is completely his domain, and yet, his tight posture conveys his need for secrecy in this moment. His eyes dart past the pair of them, towards the doors they’ve come in through.

“What is it?” John asks as soon as the woman is gone. His voice is lower, but no less exasperated. “What couldn’t you say on the cliffs?” He is jumping right at the issue, as Sherlock would do. Sherlock cannot shake the feeling that something has been left unsaid between him and John. Why did John seem so unhappy with Sherlock’s explanation as to why Moriarty is interested in him? Could he have taken it the wrong way?

Mike manages, “It’s just, Mr Haverford, I’ve come across something rather… unsavory, you know.”

“Spit it out, Mike,” Sherlock says, discontent evident. His mouth twists into a frown, loathing the long time it’s taking for Mike to speak. For every second that passes, he could be coming closer to discovering the interconnection between each death on the island, and where Moriarty is relative to it all. He could be making John less unhappy.

“I pray for the gamblers and the racers, every year,” Father Stamford says, urging them to come up to the stage and leading them. “Here.”

He bends, digging through the annotated Bibles under his podium. Sherlock leans over, watching him pull out a leather-bound notebook that clearly doesn’t belong to the church. “I know thieving is a sin.” Mike glances over his shoulder nervously. “I know, but. I stole this, because I had overheard the gamblers in the tavern and the butcher’s shop talking about bets.”

“What grabbed your attention enough to steal a book?” Sherlock asks, not questioning why Mike would be at the gambler’s hideout. He can recall Mike’s faraway stare as he peered over the potential
racer's, worry and love of his islanders knitted in a crease over his brow, 'so that I know who to pray for.'

He remembers seeing John, proud and confidently pledging his name, and yet unassuming and persistently quiet at the same time.

“’It’s not that, exactly, except.‘” Mike opens the book, undoing the leather strap. He flips several pages, the turning of the paper loud in the quiet church. “Except, I heard Mr Haverford talking about who, who he was betting his life savings on.”

Mike stops. He’s sweating, expression glowing in the candlelight, and he wets his lips. Nerves. Terrible nerves. He pats his forehead with the back of his hand absently. “He wasn’t betting on his son, John, look.”

Sherlock crowds closer. Messy writing, crosses and lines through words, adding and subtracting numbers, the bookkeeping of the gamblers, if you could call it that. Sherlock halfheartedly examines the paper. They’d be wanting this back, and were sure to notice soon. When did Mike steal this? “Give me the book, Mike. I will return it before anyone knows it’s gone missing. When did you take this?”

“Just before the funeral. Yes, you’re always like that, alright. But, look.” Mike traces a finger along a line. Marcus Haverford, the father, assumingly, with a large amount of money bet on Magnussen’s victory.

There’s a list of racers.

The son’s name has been circled, and then crossed out in a hard strikethrough. Sherlock’s eyes flick up and down the list, taking in the nearly fifty names, all of them riders. Old names jump to his mind, the few with a slash through them, he knows, have died on the beach already. His and John are among the list, as they should be. Neither is slashed or circled, but there are several down the list that are. Other than the son’s name, there are four others circled, missing a slash of death.

Clearly, it’s a hit list, of sorts. It’s a bit surprising that this circle of gamblers is risking this so close to the date of the Races. Then again, the resident police force is already busy with the influx of tourists and crime related to that, and less concerned with a rider who has been, supposedly, killed by his own capall.

Beside him, shoulder to shoulder, John is frowning. He is, no doubt, thinking about Mary. Mike goes on. “And it isn’t like the gamblers on Thisby are very passive betters.”

“You’re right about that,” John says, folding his arms across the broad of his chest.

“I saw the name, and what the others were saying to him, and I knew it wasn’t right, Sherlock. Something wasn’t right.”

“You’re correct, Mike. You’ve done well. I am… sorry you had to understand an instrumental part in the boy’s death.” He thinks. “Untimely death.” Yes, people like when you acknowledge a young person shouldn’t have died so young.

Sherlock slides the log book off the podium, holding it under his arm. He awkwardly pats Mike on the shoulder, a gesture that earns him a funny look from John. “No one will suspect a thing. It’ll be back at that tavern by the morning. The drunks will only think they misplaced it.” This is an understatement -- not all the gamblers are drunks, and one or two of them are bound to notice immediately. At this early hour, gambling for the night has already begun. “Clearly, Mr Haverford
and his wife are planning on benefitting over the fact that their son is now dead, with these amounts. It equates to much more than fisherman’s life savings.”

What else would this couple, would any of the gamblers, have done to ensure that Magnussen wins? What else could be planned? What else would they risk?

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking. I’m all for giving the benefit of the doubt,” Mike says, “but I wondered about it. I don’t think anyone noticed me take it.”

“Don’t worry,” says John. “We’ll get it all sorted.”

Mike smiles, his glasses budging up his cheeks a little with the broadness of it. Immense relief writes itself in his posture, relaxed and without the heavy anxiety from before.

John waves at the priest, and they exchange a few words, and Sherlock begins to sweep back up the aisle.

John catches up.

“Are you really going to return the book?” He asks quietly. Smart.

Sherlock hushes back, “Of course not, I’m telling Lestrade and giving it to him. I didn’t want Mike to think he stole it, permanently. Mr Haverford will be arrested, because his wife’s a witness to the murder, obviously.”

“Murder!”

“She’ll confess, too. Didn’t you see how stressed she was at the funeral?”

“It was her sons funeral, Sherlock, she was bound to be under stress.”

“It was an uncalled for amount of stress—”

John snorts, hissing under his breath as not to alarm Mike, “An uncalled for—”

“The Haverford’s boy was wounded by the father, incapacitated, perhaps a concussion - I can’t know, because the old islanders never give up for autopsies, and it’s incredibly unlikely that the murderous parents would’ve submitted him for investigation, another reason why he was burned almost immediately - and put within range of his own water horse. The capall did the real work for the family. They like his older brother much more, anyways, they were going to send him all the money they were to win. He lives on the mainland, you could tell by the wife’s shoes.”

John throws his hands up, exasperated. “Were you not going to tell me any of this, if I hadn’t asked?”

“I would have told you. We’re going to Lestrade, now, and the station. I’ll tell you how I figured it out, too, and then you’ll say that I’m brilliant, or something else that is equally preposterous.”

“Do you not like when I tell you that?”

Sherlock adores it. He flattens the expression on his face to conceal this fact. “This book holds a hit list, John, are you saying you’d like me to return it so that the gamblers can fix the Races for themselves?”

“No, I don’t want you to return the Murder Book.”
“Then, I will give it to Lestrade,” Sherlock says, and he nods to himself to solidify the action in the pit of his turning stomach. The idea that John’s name had even been included in this book begins to haunt him. It would do well to keep John close.

Thoughts of the white mare seep into his mind, the branded one from last year, the *capall* that tried her hardest to knock John off of Gladstone and flatten him. John’s conviction as he agreed with Mike, moments ago, about the gamblers on Thisby being willing to do almost anything for their cut of the pool, clouds his process. Conspiracy to murder people on this list of names. Conspiracy to murder John. What names would they have desperately circled tonight? Who would they have plotted for next?

John sighs, breaking his concentration.

He takes up Sherlock’s arm, pulling him outside of the church doors. Sherlock can feel the heat from his hand seeping through his coat, and he does his best not to melt, but the warmth spreads out anyways. Like a reaching strike of lightning, it covers his face in pink.

Sherlock makes large and theatrical gestures for John’s enjoyment as he explains while they walk back around Saint Columba’s to find Gladstone. Gladstone’s head is already lengthened, neck extended as he watches them approach. John clucks softly to him, and Gladstone’s tension eases.

They manage their way through the frigid backstreets of Skarmouth, with Sherlock explaining the brand of the rider’s mother’s shoes, and how expensive they are to import, how impossible it would be to attain them without family on the mainland (“And it only made sense for it to be a brother,” Sherlock articulates at one point, prompting John to laugh wonderfully). The few people that are around the back alleys disappear when they see Gladstone the monster stepping silently along the cobblestone roads.

The book falls easily into Lestrade’s open hands, and the worn-out inspector looks between the pair of them, framed in the doorway of the officer’s station.

Tourists are passing by, all illuminated by street lamps and the festival lanterns. Many of them stare at Gladstone, growing nervous, and whisper to each other. John sits on top of the water horse, making it a more domesticated picture, but none come close, not even the brave ones. Gladstone watches them all.

“I should be on the beaches, you know!” Lestrade says. Sherlock flips to the page for him, rattling off his long line of deduction, with the added assurance of how the wife will surely confess to the murder given a little prodding. John looks down at him like the sun.

Lestrade scrubs a hand over his face. “I don’t suppose you have the murderer for the poisoned tourist? You promised me this afternoon.”

“Genius takes more than a day to cultivate, Lestrade.”

“Yeah? Well, escaping the island takes *less* than a day. This person could be off of Thisby and at the mainland cities by now.”

“Yes, but he isn’t.”

“He?” Lestrade says. The brown wool collar of his coat is blown hard against the side of his neck from the wind. “You know who it is?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says. Without glancing, he adds, “Come along, John, we have places to be.”
John nods.

Lestrade looks wearily at them both. Then, back inside the station, where the cold is seeping in. He seems less than a minute away from dragging them both in by their bootstraps and questioning until the sun has risen. However, Sherlock can tell by his outfit, the short coat and vest, his riding trousers, that he does long to be on the racing beaches come early morning with his capall beneath him. After riding Gladstone with John, Sherlock can understand the deep, yearning urge, the powerful temptation, the way the magic can grip a man.

Finally, the inspector sighs. He closes the book. “Fine, yeah. Alright. I’ll get Donovan to pull the two of them in--”

“Donovan? Lestrade, you cannot be serious, you’re by far the most adequate--”

“I’m flattered, really, but I have things to do!”

“You are very excited by the prospect of shrugging off your job.” Sherlock wants to turn around and walk away, but he is aware of the limits of Lestrade’s patience.

“Hey, you’re a lucky man that I don’t bring the pair of you in.” Lestrade points between them, tucking the book under his arm. Gladstone looks at the movement of Lestrade’s hand. “Do I have to remind you, Mr Watson, about the by-laws in this town? You think I can’t figure how, exactly, Sherlock, you managed to see the bloke who picked up the files? I know you pop into my office regularly--”

“And you still don’t fix your windowsill,” Sherlock interrupts. His fingers itch in his pockets. He looks at John with a smirk, like John will find it funny and impressive that Sherlock manages to get into where he isn’t wanted. John bites his tongue, glancing away, as if innocent.

Lestrade scrubs his hand over his face. Then, spent, he waves at them. “Go, go. Donovan will haul in the Haverfords, and you,” Lestrade says, “will bring me the murderer by the end of the Races.”

“Works for me.”

-/-

The familiar bulk of the stables grows in the shadow. There is no fog tonight, too much wind, and not enough moonlight behind the fast-moving clouds. Gladstone’s head twitches this way and that, ears swiveling to catch sounds that neither John nor Sherlock can hear in the distant black. Sherlock wonders what other monsters could be out here with them in the night.

He clutches harder to John’s middle, laying his face on John’s shoulder and feeling the smooth gait of Gladstone’s rocking beneath them, considering what is to come. The letter, only a small piece of paper, feels extraordinarily heavy in his coat pocket, like it is weighing him down to the ocean depths.

John glances at him after Gladstone is in his stall once more, a clear concern. The lights above them illuminate the stable hands in the stalls, working on shoveling more warm hay into the stalls of island ponies and feeding the night-going capaill. These men are all quiet, going about their chores, and inconsequential.
“Moriarty’s meeting with you. He won’t come down for Gladstone,” John says, looking to Sherlock for validation.

Sherlock nods. “He won’t risk it again, I doubt he’ll even send someone to do it for him. He tried it, once, and it did not work. He won’t repeat himself.” Sherlock squints. Won’t he?

John sighs, brushing down the arms of his jacket. He looks nervous, sick with it, staring at Gladstone. The water horse, after being out and about all day, seems comforted, sticking his face out the tiny window he has, nostrils flaring to scent the wind blowing in from outside. After a heartbeat, John reaches for him arm. Sherlock lets him take it, lets John’s hand slide lower until it has found Sherlock’s.

“His office is past the stables on the north,” John directs, and they walk out of the stables. He can’t help but think of John crowding him back against the outside wall of his flat, of the rain that had soaked them both to the bone, of John’s hand tugging him, then.

John lets go of him as they come into view of the manor house. It’s large, by any standards, but especially by Thisby’s. Half the lights in the windows are on, shutters strapped down to the walls to prevent them flinging in the island wind. Dark paint, old architecture style, expensive doors. John doesn’t knock, just walks in. Right. Moriarty’s office must be in one of these rooms, and after working for him for so long, John may have gotten tired of waiting for someone to answer the doorbell.

John’s familiarity with the house does not sit well in Sherlock’s gut. He detests it, detests the idea that Moriarty must sleep, sometimes, in one of these rooms. He’d know which one if he saw it, but John doesn’t slow to allow him a good look around. He can’t picture Moriarty asleep without some ever-present smirk on his lips. Paintings of horses and old racing plaques decorate every carpeted hallway, completed with dark wallpaper and the occasional person of cleaning staff.

John stops in front of a closed door on the second floor.

It’s happening. Finally.

After Hope, during their heavy conversation on the wind-swept shore, Sherlock had never been allowed a chance to glance to man behind the spider’s mask. This is an incredible opportunity, and he feels his breath pick up at the prospect of making a real deduction.

John appears to sense this. He grips Sherlock’s hand. Tightly. His fingernails dig lightly into the back of Sherlock’s knuckles, holding onto him.

“Don’t,” He fails. He flattens his mouth into a line, glancing up and down the corridor. “Don’t rush in. Don’t let him get into your head.”

“It’s never--”

“Don’t say it hasn’t been a problem before. Don’t lie to me. I can’t, Sherlock, if you’re going to lie. Not when it comes to him.”

Sherlock stops a scowl from sprouting onto his face.

John squeezes his wrist. “Christ, I don’t want to let you go in.”

“John,” Sherlock hushes, “he’ll hear.” This cannot be compromised. He already had no say in where or when this rendezvous would occur. He must gain an advantage quickly into the conversation. That cannot be done if Moriarty brings John into the workings.
“Sherlock,” John pleads.

Finally, Sherlock relents. It is time for his appointment. He can’t walk in and pretend that he isn’t entirely consumed with thinking of John pacing silently outside the door. “It bothers you.”

“What?”

“That I understand Moriarty. It bothers you.”

“Sherlock,” John warns. “You don’t understand him. That’s nothing about your cleverness, it’s how he is. He wants to use you.” John shakes his head. “He uses everyone. You already said it was you he wanted. Now, he’s going to get you, he’s going to have you under his hand, if you can’t manage to remember that.”

Sherlock frowns. John looks at him, imploring Sherlock to believe him. He should trust John. He might have been disinclined, if things on the cliff had gone differently. But the way John holds his hand now, the soft whisper of the edge of John’s sleeve against Sherlock’s fingers, begs him to consider otherwise. His chin twitches.

“Yes, John. I’ll remember.”

John releases him, partly satisfied, and Sherlock straightens his shoulders, blinking away the emotions that have crept into his vision. He turns towards the door, staring, unseeing, at the panel of ornately carved wood for a long moment. John watches him, he can tell from the corner of his eye.

He will learn everything he can from the room, and then he will learn everything he can from the spider.

The brass knob twists under his sweaty grip.

Moriarty sits behind his expansive desk, at his ornate chair, appearing for anyone like he is engrossed in the book open in his hands before him, the spine balanced under a lean finger. Clearly, he is not reading, but only pretending to skim over the contents for Sherlock’s benefit.

He senses that he is being allowed time to grow accustomed to his surroundings.

So this is how they will play.

Sherlock draws in a deep breath, surveying the room. It smells of heavy saffron and mainland spices in here, wafting from whatever warm concoction is inside of the steaming, freshly-poured teacup in its painted saucer on Moriarty’s organized desk. Bookshelves are inlaid along the walls, full of old fieldwork journals, atlases, fiction. Glass bottles with curious specimens sit, undusted, on rows of shelves, and there is a Victorian gothic-styled portrait of a horse with some jockey hanging on a wall. Two windows frame Moriarty’s figure, one over each shoulder, Sherlock can spy the shades of darkness outside. Because of the hour, everything is thrown into sharp shadows from the dim lamps on the walls.

Purposefully, Moriarty moves, edging his chair nearer to the desk. He waves his fingers in a disinterested manner, a dismissal at him, gesturing to close the door. The door closes behind Sherlock with a click; a wall formed between John and him.

Finally, abruptly, the Stockyard owner looks up at him. There’s no need for him to squint against the pale sun like he had that day on the beach, after Hope had tried his best at handling Gladstone, and so his gaze is as full of fire as the day that they had first met, face to face, in the stables, with John, and Henry Knight. Even on the beach, there had been Moriarty’s stablehands about, placing
charms and flowers and turning the sand, but now. Now, they are entirely alone.

He tries hard not to picture John outside of the door. It gives him a last, feeble source of strength.

Moriarty sets down his book face down onto his desk. The span of the surface is covered in a myriad of small items. Astray, papers, a stamp, the dreaded wax seal that Sherlock recognizes instantly, a potted purple flower that matches the dark pattern on the walls.

“I would shake your hand,” Moriarty puffs out a long breath through his cheeks, breaking the silence, “but I think that we are both beyond that, and that you’ve got someone else to touch you, now.”

Else implying that Moriarty and him have ever touched. Sherlock’s top lip begins to curl at the rotten memory of Moriarty’s cold hand gripping his on the beach, after Hope’s throat was torn out by Gladstone. His sense of safety is gone.

One implication, and the tone for the entire interaction has been set. What a disgusting one it is.

“Let’s get down to business,” Moriarty says.

“Do we have business?” Sherlock says. He keeps his hands clasped behind his back.

“People like us, we always have business. There must be something you want to talk about, or you wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t have sought me out.”

Sherlock purses his lips carefully. “I was invited here.”

Cautiously, he strolls into the office, away from the doorway, looking around and acting like he hasn’t already categorized each and every visible item in the room. Like he is an inconsequential tourist.

Moriarty takes this in.

“You have been getting my invitations, then. All my fun letters -- the seeds, the stories. Delightful. Now, I have to ask. You understand this, we can abandon these mores. Does it ever bother you, living on an island? Surrounded by the wolves?” Moriarty taps a pen, one unlucky enough to have found its way into the crux of his fingers, in a beat against his desk. “Three days, until the Races.”

Sherlock says, turning his body slightly, “So, jumping right in, then.”

Moriarty pauses for dramatic effect. Then, he says, “I could say the same for you. You’re too meek. About this, of course. About eating,” He spins the pen. Then, he gestures to the chair before him. “You may sit. If you can.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“Ooh, the dominant position,” Moriarty crows, and then rolls his eyes, not at his own innuendo, but at Sherlock’s calm stance, remaining on the other side of the desk with a passive glare. “I can’t see the appeal. You could be far more relaxed if you sat down.”

“You thought I was here for business, and this is what you choose to talk about?”

“I am a man of excellent education. I am the organizer of half that is evil and all that is undetected on this great island… You need me, and my chatter about business, or you’re nothing. Not on this island.” He shrugs without care. “No one on this island is anything without me.”
“Is that so,” Sherlock says.

Tongue in cheek, Moriarty shifts. He snarls, “Of course, Marcus Haverford was a mere distraction.”

Sherlock approaches, and touches the edge of the hard wooden desk. Moriarty’s eyes linger on his fingers, where they slip against the smooth grain of polish. Sherlock glances up, a question in his eyes, but he does not vocalize it. A distraction.

They can dance, like this, the two of them. Sherlock will pretend to understand what is going on behind Moriarty’s stare, while Moriarty does the same. It is impossible that Moriarty can really know. He is an expert manipulator.

Moriarty gestures. “Tell me what you think.”

An opportunity not to be wasted, Sherlock considers. He presses both hands into the desk, leaning over it. “I think you delivered the letter to the poisoned tourist, but you never meant for him to open it. You poisoned him, stole the letter before it was filed into evidence,” only god knows how, “and replaced it when your man stole the files and the photographs. You didn’t want it opened by an officer, you wanted it in my hands. And once you were sure I had it, you had Henry Knight give me the invitation to tonight’s appointment.”

“Henry Knight, such a nice delivery boy,” Moriarty says. “You’re very clever. He’s done more delivering for me than you and he even know.”

This is maddening. Moriarty is perfectly aware no physical proof of his involvement exists. Sherlock would be a madman to bring just his word to Lestrade. Anderson would have a field day. It’s like he’s walking circles around Sherlock, in his own brain.

“Yes, then. Mr Haverford was a distraction from all of that nasty business. I quite like those,” Moriarty elaborates. His hands come up beneath his chin in a mock expression of Sherlock’s thinking pose. It is like he is praying.

“I had figured,” Sherlock says. He straightens, tucking his hands behind his back and feeling the exterior fabric of it for comfort, remembering John’s jacket. The back of his neck feels cold, despite the warmth of the room, and his hairs over his arms are beginning to raise. “It wasn’t a good distraction. Failed at its primary job.”

It isn’t like the feeling he gets from John taking his arm, from John’s warm breath against the back of his neck. It is the feeling he gets from standing too close to Gladstone’s mouth.

A distraction from what? From murder on the island, or even the mainland, from betting on the racers, from illegal importation?

What is Moriarty attempting to draw his attention from? Could it be something he already knows, that Moriarty isn’t aware of his knowledge of, yet, and thus be ineffective? Conceivably, the confusion of mentioning Mr Haverford at all is the distraction that Moriarty seeks.

“Yes. I figured that you had… figured,” His adversary grins. He folds his hands over the table, over his book. At the touch, he seems to remember that it’s there. He runs his palm over it, like he is touching a new lover’s skin, and is sure to find Sherlock’s eyes as he slowly picks it up, and cracks it open. “I love these,” he says, “These books. You may call them fairytales. I call them historical novellas. I especially love this one.” Now, he turns the cover, so that Sherlock can read the embellished title.
“I like this one,” Moriarty continues.

“You own several copies, apparently,” Sherlock says.

Moriarty nods at him, like Sherlock has performed well. “There are lots of pieces I like about this one. The old witch, the poisoned apple, the deep sleep. But I think my favorite part,” Moriarty cracks the book back open, leaning back on his chair. Sherlock glances at an embellished letter opener on his desk.

It is sharp, long, and perfect. Should Moriarty come at him, Sherlock’s hand will flash out and he will end the Stockyard owner, end his ruling hand over Thisby. But it is unwise to assume Moriarty will come at him physically at all.

“My favorite part, you’re not paying attention, Sherlock,” Moriarty’s voice drawls, and Sherlock finds his facial expression again, twisted in an air of a self-important grin. “It has got to be the theme of the damsel in distress. Prince saves her, essentially, after she’s poisoned. I’ve been a fan of yours for awhile, you know.”

Sherlock recalls Moriarty appearing when Henry Knight had, those weeks ago. How he said he’d read Sherlock’s articles in the paper, his tobacco ash dissertation. “You’ve mentioned,” Sherlock says, careful not to let on how much he remembers. Likely, Moriarty is underestimating him, and it would be in his favor to keep it this way. “Eat my heart out, was it?”

Moriarty smiles, as if he were a water horse. His eyes show no pleasure. “Oh, you’ve been talking, you two. How convenient.”

“Nevermore.”

“It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull. And as such a fan,” He goes on, “I’ve gotten to know a few things about you.”

“You don’t know me.” Sherlock leans farther over the desk, his upper lip caught in a snarl.

“I do. I do. You’re me.”

The penny drops.

Sherlock pulls back.

“You’re insane.”

Moriarty throws up his hands, and Sherlock makes sure not to flinch in concern, holding his posture, hands itching for the letter opener. He grins. “That’s what they always say about the rich old man who lives on the hill!” He taps the fairytale’s hardcover, and places it back down on the center of his desk. He straightens it, giving an impression of compulsion, until it is in line with his pens. “The king, the old king, they always make him out to be the bad one.”

“I don’t think that’s so,” Sherlock says, “But they tend to, when he murders people.” And when he makes light conversation about desiring people’s skulls, and eating their hearts.

He is beginning to see the extent that Moriarty has been watching him, the limits of his obsession. Any and all visits to Mrs Hudson’s house must’ve been all for Sherlock’s benefit. Toy ing with John and Gladstone, another. How could Sherlock not have noticed having such a… fan?
Moriarty’s elated facade drops. Slowly, he shakes his head. “Don’t think you’re on to anything there, Mr Holmes, to these islanders, I’ve never hurt a fly. And even if I did swat at one, every so often,” He sits back in the chair. He turns out his palms, smiling. Sherlock can see the crinkles in the corners of his eyes from across the plane of the desk, the crow’s feet. “Who would believe you?”

“The island’s entire police force.”

“Not entire, oh, no, not entire. You see, all your gallivanting around, with that island pony of yours, fraternizing with John Watson, it’s planted doubt. Don’t you see it? Doubt. The seeds of doubt? I’ve crafted them all so carefully, Sherlock, just for you. That Detective Lestrade?” Moriarty gestures. “I can have him off the island in a heartbeat. And that landlady - she makes a wonderful tea. It goes without saying, that John Watson, I can have him off the cliffs even sooner. I wanted to end the world, but I’ll settle for ending yours. I own him.”

Sherlock draws in a sharp breath through his nose. Never before has Moriarty articulated this so bluntly, so acutely.

There have been hints of it, fleeting glances into the depths and vigor of his wide-casting net. The poisoned tourist, so clearly Moriarty’s work but without hard proof and evidence or a confession to an officer, had only been the smallest glimpse into his world, an crime untouchable to anything but Sherlock’s own intuition. To insinuate that he is involved with Mr Haverford and the death of his son is another glimpse; to threaten to have anyone who cares for Sherlock is another, gone in an instant.

To have a hold on Gladstone is to have a hold over John, to own John is to own Sherlock. He knows that, now. Sherlock should’ve realized it all sooner. Perhaps in that case, he could have manipulated Moriarty’s beliefs to his own advantage. There is no hope for such a thing, it’s too late for that now. Sherlock must play the hand he has been dealt.

It was stupid of him to develop these emotions for John, for his safety and wellbeing and happiness. They do not fade, even as Sherlock’s mind detests its own weakness. Because he failed at keeping his distance, he will fall.

Moriarty’s eyes dance in merriment, and he smoothes back his dark hair. “I have him, Sherlock, and so, I have you, too.” Poignant, perfect, an accurate portrayal, Sherlock shifts his stance. “I love a damsel in distress. That’s what Mr Magnussen says. You know I own half the island, but you don’t know which half. Which people love me, and not you, Sherlock? How many of your police friends listen to me, only me, and never you?”

Images of Donovan’s and Anderson’s faces come into Sherlock’s mind, unwelcome and uninvited, and even Lestrade, at work in his office. How many of the officers there, lurking in the ranks and between the mundane shelves of paperwork, are waiting for only a word from Moriarty to shoot Lestrade in the spine? As it did this afternoon, Sherlock pictures Anderson’s charcoal-covered face in the dimness of the window behind Moriarty’s back.

“Did you ever come to think, it was me that Mr Watson was fascinated with, and never you?”

There. No worse words have ever been spoken to him. The implication that as some officers deceive Lestrade, John deceives Sherlock, has not been allowed into his mind before now. The idea grows. John’s wide eyes, his brilliance, it’s all too good for Sherlock -- isn’t it?

No.

Sherlock is doing all of this for John. It began on a whim for his curiosity, for Mycroft and Mrs Hudson’s house, but now. Now, he races because it is necessary for him to, for John’s happiness
found in the monstrous Gladstone. He swallows, thick, and Moriarty grins wider. This is what he’s meant to do, sew doubt into his head, wrap around his working memory and choke him. There is no way to rid the island of only the spider. Sherlock must extinguish the entire web, each and every radiation of the centre.

“No, it never occurred to you. Stupid. Home in your little nest of lies. He’s sweet, I can see why you like having him around. But then people do get so sentimental about their pets. They’re so touching and loyal. But oops! ” Moriarty goes on. Still, he does not outright say that John is doing his dark bidding for him. He caresses his book cover. “ ’Then she was satisfied, for she knew that the looking-glass spoke the truth.’ It’s all there, in the story, Sherlock. Our story.”

“In your story, you are both the king, and the looking-glass?” Sherlock says, belatedly pulling up snippets of Snow White that involve the magical mirror committing murder.

“I’m the king outside of the story, dearest. I’m the king everywhere. I was the king in London, and I’ll be the king, here. I’m the king everywhere,” He says, “Everywhere I go, doors open for me. In my fairytales, the man with the key is king. And when you own every key, that’s especially true.”

“You think that no one will listen to me.” Sherlock clenches his jaw. “You’re putting all your money on that.”

“No, Sherlock, in this story,” Moriarty smiles, going on as if he hadn’t heard Sherlock. “I am the villain. Fairytales… and pretty grim ones, too. I’ll see you, come the Races. Do be careful. This island can be treacherous.”

Chapter End Notes

IN THIS CHAPTER, we have some more moriarty being suspicious, some crime-solving with our friend mike the priest, and something SCANDALOUS coming next chapter! Can i say how much i love writing Moriarty’s creepy ass? And can you spot the couple of ACD canon quotes thrown into the mix? http://villains.wikia.com/wiki/James_Moriarty here’s the version of snow white that moriarty has ! https://germanstories.vcu.edu/grimm/schneeeng.html
Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

This could be a fun escapade for John, a last kick of adrenaline and endorphins before the Races trample everything. John’s body falls over Sherlock’s, and the notion flies out of his head.

Chapter Notes

chapter 25/26, please note the rating change to EXPLICIT - also it is a long chapter with ~11k.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moriarty’s office door slips shut behind him, fitting into the frame with a wooden click.

John looks up at the sound from across the hall, up to Sherlock’s emergence from the shadowed room.

Something in his throat is thick and cloying, blocking all words. As soon as he sees John’s face, the air goes warm and fuzzy and golden. The memory of the stuffy, oppressive office begins to fade.

“John--” Sherlock starts, but John seizes his arm.

“Come on,” he says quietly, “Get away from the door.”

Allowing himself to be pulled from the office, Sherlock risks a last glance over his shoulder. His nerves, frayed, smooth and flatten as John guides him down the shadowed staircase and past the jockey portraits and old island artifacts. If John stopped for a moment, he could take more time to figure their value and why Moriarty possesses them all, but John doesn’t stop until they are pushing through the front door and the Persian carpet disappears from beneath their feet.

John slows them, surveying Sherlock’s face, his gaze bouncing down to Sherlock’s lips and back up, concern plainly written in the line between his brow. He opens his mouth as they hit the gravel path outside the looming manor, and suddenly Sherlock cannot bear to hear his questions. Not after Moriarty had controlled their conversation so intensely. Sherlock cuts him off.

“He has someone inside the officer’s station. He wouldn’t have been able to steal the letter after the photographs were taken any other way.”

Taken aback by the outburst, John manages, “Steal the letter?”

John must be caught up. Sherlock speaks quickly, his footpace hastening, “In the photograph of the crime scene, the dead tourist with the lipstick--”

“Wayne Redding, yeah?”
Sherlock startles.

John shakes his head. “No, hang on.” The stables are a great hulking shape in the dark down the path. The lights of the manor house shine through the night behind them. “That’s his name. It was all over his file. You didn’t notice that?”

“No, unimportant. I was preoccupied with the toxicology,” Sherlock says. “Either way. In his pocket, you spotted it in the photograph, the letter was sticking out. With Moriarty’s seal. You recognized it because you received an identical envelope. By all accounts, the letter should’ve been processed into evidence when Redding’s body was taken in. But Lestrade said that he didn’t remember it being there. He said he would have opened it.”

“I imagine it would’ve looked fairly incriminating.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says, waving a hand dismissively. John frowns, his face cast in shadow, and Sherlock resets himself. The gravel crunches under their shoes. “Sorry. Yes, although the fairytale story within would have seemed arbitrary to Lestrade, it was damning to you and I because you understood the meaning of Moriarty’s obsession.”

Now, Sherlock does, too. The old man on the hill, the rich king, the mirror on the wall. The obsession that isn’t so much a broad fascination with Thisby, but one with Sherlock in particular. John is distinctly disquieted.

“Lestrade did not process the evidence himself, that much is clear. He was going on about the racing season when I arrived this morning, how busy the station was with the gamblers and the pickpockets. No time. So, another officer processed it, and that would be Moriarty’s individual on the inside, the one who stole the letter from the body and would have access to the locker to replace it for us to find, without the chance that Lestrade would open it. He won’t have been in since that night, didn’t want to risk our recognizing him, and his absence will have been noted, so he will be relatively easy to track down.”

“And that’s the same man who stole the files? The photographs?”

“Must have been, yes. Or else Lestrade would have noticed the letter before I visited.”

“I don’t understand,” John says, stepping into the stables. The wind carefully buffets the building, uncertain and salty. “Why would he replace the letter but steal the file? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s a game, John. The files held hard evidence to the murder, proof of poison. You said it yourself, in the pub - Moriarty is the biggest importer and exporter on the island. It would be nothing to slip poison into his usual delivery. The fairytale, however, doesn’t point to any one person, unless.” He glances to John, sinking his focus into John’s handsome face. He smiles, tracking the lines around John’s eyes. “Unless, one is already familiar with the murderer. Brilliant, John.”

“He told you this?”

“He alluded to having a man on his side in the officer’s station. Among other things.”

“What other things?”

Sherlock’s mouth pinches into an unhappy line. Something in his head cannot be convinced to consider John suspicious, as if Moriarty is in any way involved. It is something completely out of the blue, never visited before, not even in a moment of weakness or insecurity. John has been undoubttable, constant and devoted. Never has his story wavered, or his conviction been found suspect.
This is what Moriarty wants. He said so. ‘Doubt, doubt, the seeds of doubt.’ It’s another way that he can make a home inside of Sherlock’s head. A ruse, a trick, a red herring. John would surely tell him so, if he knew what Sherlock was thinking.

The idea sweeps away in the cool night air, gone as the breeze that rushes over the both of them through the cement aisle. It skitters loose pieces of hay out the other end. A capall in an iron-gated stall knocks her head gently against her door three times.

Sherlock preoccupies himself with tugging at the sleeve of his long black coat, unused to being honest. It is not strictly his fault - who has he ever needed to be honest to? John is different, hanging off his words and waiting patiently, ready and willing to listen. More than that, wanting to listen to Sherlock of his own volition. ‘I can’t, Sherlock, if you’re going to lie.’

“Sherlock,” John prods.

“Threatening to have a few key people removed from the island, said he’d like to ‘end my world’, as it were.” Sherlock swallows, keeping his eyes low.

John stops. Sherlock turns to look at him, feigning a question in his brow.

“Sherlock,” John says again, “what did he say?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does,” John snaps. “It does matter. Of course, yes, it matters. It all matters, because he’s doing this to get to you.” He shakes his head, surveys the aisle, and takes Sherlock’s hand, fitting his fingers between Sherlock’s, forcing Sherlock to step closer. John tips his head back to look up at him as they lean together.

Surprised by the warmth of his skin, Sherlock’s response dies on his tongue.

“He’s doing all of this for you.” John squeezes.

“I know.”

“You know?”

“I held suspicions before, but he said so in our meeting. Mr Haverford’s son was a distraction. The tourist, Redding, was a ploy for attention, a show of his influence. I’m willing to bet the female tourist from last week was, too - murdered by the butcher’s son but doubtlessly orchestrated by Moriarty.”

A muscle at the corner of John’s jaw jumps as he clenches his teeth together. Blue shadows from outside the stable throw dark over his nose. “I told you. It’s all for you. He wants to distract you enough to get you killed on the sand the day after tomorrow.”

Is that how near they are? ‘Three days until the Races,’ Moriarty had said. Tonight, tomorrow, and the end of the world. Time, time, it’s fluttering away. Here John stands before him in the cold, and the only point of contact between them are their hands. Fascinating, unfailing, unchanging John Watson. Suddenly, urgency is coloring every thought that flits through Sherlock’s head.

Overcome, Sherlock unlocks their fingers, reaching to hold John’s face in his hands. He leans down to press their mouths together, tasting the unique notes of John’s tongue - bright wind, clean seawater, fresh tea. The chill bites his cheeks as John’s nose hits the side of his, kissing him back. He shivers and John sighs, hands coming up to gently ground Sherlock’s arm and waist.
Sherlock tilts his head and John’s lips slot against his. A fizzle of energy runs down Sherlock’s spine, new and inviting. The whirring in Sherlock’s mind, the variables and unknowns of the equation, stutter and spin to a stop.

After a moment, John pulls away.

“Hold - hold, hang on,” John laughs, tucking his chin.

Sherlock leaves his hold on John’s face. He’s warm and safe while encompassed by Sherlock’s hands, untouched by the danger of the Races. Dejected, Sherlock exhaled, “Is there another funeral you need to attend?”

“Ah - no, there isn’t, which is… exactly what I’m saying.”

Sherlock blinks.

“My car,” he says suddenly.

“What?” John says.

“I - I left it. At Hawkin’s. There will be - people, all around. Drunks - idiots, the like.”

John’s grip tightens on Sherlock’s waist. His fingers rub suggestive circles over Sherlock’s elbow.

“You can get it in the morning.” No one wants to steal an old car.

“I didn’t intend to stay the night.”

“Didn’t you?” John smiles wryly.

Sherlock blinks again. John’s much more clever than Sherlock ever gives him credit for. Sherlock himself hadn’t even considered how he was getting back to the Ford in Skarmouth when Gladstone brought them to Moriarty’s summons. What was he thinking? Walk across the whole island, alone, in October?

“Come on,” John says. “Let’s get out of the cold.”

John’s two-room flat is as small as Sherlock remembers, and he remembers perfectly.

The details jump at him as John fits his key into the lock, the small porch light flickering above. John closes the door behind them, shutting out the cold night and Moriarty’s reach. John does not turn on the overhead, allowing the room to be dimly lit from the softly glowing woodstove and the residual moonlight.

The chill presses up against Sherlock, as if it leaks in from invisible cracks in the wall, but his face is flushed. Notebooks and veterinary texts are spilled over the countertop and the chair by the woodstove in the corner, and the flat holds a scent of old paper and tea. The bed is meticulously made, Sherlock notes with interest, with the pillows pushed up by the headboard. Did John expect to have company?

“Your bed is made.”

“What?” John shrugs off his jacket. The sight of his strong arms against his dark waistcoat makes Sherlock’s heart pick up. He is so unlike any of the other men on this island. John looks at the bed, and rubs the back of his neck, throwing the jacket over the chair with apparent disregard. “Yeah.”

John crouches by the heater, the hinges squealing as he pulls open the cover to shove in a new log
over faintly red coals. He stands, brushing his hands together like a carpenter after a long day’s work. The room grows hotter. Sherlock sticks his fists into the deep pockets of his coat, turning away awkwardly and fiddling with the Ford’s keys.

The window above the small four-space stove next to the sink - it reminds him of the little view that Gladstone has of the ocean he longs for. Through the thin veil of lace-white curtains, Sherlock can see the lights in the stables on the dark, open land. Farther away is the orange haze above Skarmouth, past the Stockyard’s property but not out of Moriarty’s reach.

He wants to inspect the curtains’ rail to see how often John parts them to gaze at what he does not possess, but a hand stops low on his back. The touch wrings Sherlock from his thoughts, and sucks all the air out of the flat. John comes up next to Sherlock and leans over the counter to draw the curtains, slowly.

“No…” John starts, then trails off. His brows knit into a nervous line, as if his confidence is wavering. He reaches to softly touch the buttons on Sherlock’s coat. With a dexterous, lazy movement, he works them open and pushes the swaths of his coat apart, dipping his thumb into the creases of their holes at Sherlock’s collar. “Let’s… get this off, then.”

A rising heat overtakes Sherlock’s cheeks, making them ruddy and pink, and it cannot only be attributed to the coals in the woodstove. It isn’t phrased like a question, but like a labored suggestion. The fabric rustles and bunches around Sherlock’s arms in thick dark folds. He removes his hands from his pockets so John can slip the armor off of his shoulders, and it slumps to the floor.

Without it, despite being fully clothed, he’s strangely bare, his hands lacking something to worry with the silence of the flat. The coals pop in the woodstove and his mind races, thoughts twisting to hurt him. He’s frozen.

“Ever since I saw you on the beach,” John says quietly, and Sherlock warms at his voice, the sound rumbly-low and pleasing. John draws a finger down the line of smaller buttons on Sherlock’s undershirt, capable hands rising to touch Sherlock’s throat. Sherlock hears his every breath. “Ever since Mary, I haven’t gotten you out of my head.”

Sherlock swallows, and John traces the bobbing movement with his fingertips. John has no idea what it means to have someone capture complete attention in a room, the moment he walks in. Sherlock has seen the effect on people when John appears - awe, jealousy, respect.

John caresses the column of Sherlock’s throat and slides away from the heated skin, and Sherlock is left to picture how much attention John could lavish on it with his mouth.

“And then you went down the next week.” John plucks a button, undoing it. “I couldn’t stop myself from running into the water. It seems so foolish to look back at it, but I’d do it a hundred times over.”

“Not more foolish than jumping into the quay?” Sherlock offers, high and tight and strained in an unfamiliar way.

John hums and smiles in a filthy way. “That was bad,” he says. “It showed me what a madman you are. I had my suspicions before,” John pushes Sherlock’s shirt down and away, allowing it to join his coat, wrapping around Sherlock’s hips and crowding close. Nerves at his exposure flit down Sherlock’s side. “But that sealed it. I was gone - you were brilliant.”

John sidles up. The material of his waistcoat obscenely drags against Sherlock’s bare chest. John’s hands tip Sherlock’s closer, digging into his waist as if under the impression Sherlock will bruise like
a peach. The physicality of it, the idea that there may be a real reminder of this event when it is over, sends a shock of arousal through his body.

It must be John where the heat is coming from. He’s radiating it in waves, it’s pouring off of him and Sherlock devours it. The back of Sherlock’s neck pricks with sweat, and his lips part. It’s not like being naked alone - being naked with John Watson is another affair entirely. It’s John’s eyes raking down his face and his figure, John’s hands that gravitate around his back to encircle him with solid strength and comfort, John’s fingers that flirt with the back edge of his trousers.

Feeling his arousal, John tilts his head up, and Sherlock leans to kiss him. Like the cliffs, it is light and slow until it isn’t, until it twists into John’s tongue sliding gently, probing at Sherlock’s mouth. John’s hands wander up his back, skimming up the notches in his spine and the bumps of his ribs. Sherlock’s arms find their purpose, draping around John’s shoulders, clutching at the material of his shirt and sharply drawing their bodies closer together.

John sucks in a breath that Sherlock feels against his lips. He returns the pressure, kissing the corner of John’s mouth with a newfound gravity, and the short stubble above John’s lip makes Sherlock’s mouth tickle, dragging lavishly and reddening his pale skin. It makes him feel raw.

John nudges his ankle between Sherlock’s, turning them and knocking the back of Sherlock’s legs up against the edge of the mattress. Reeling, Sherlock sits, angling away from John’s mouth and cold now that John’s warmth has left him. His mind has gone fuzzy around the borders, goes blanker still when John sways down and kisses him with new urgency.

His knee bumps between Sherlock’s thighs, allowing John to settle his weight on the bed and push it into Sherlock’s groin, grinding into Sherlock’s hard cock. Sherlock gasps, heat sparking all along the inside of his thighs like hot pepperflakes, but John licks the sound away, sucking on Sherlock’s bottom lip and burying his hands in his curls.

The tender pull on his hair, bordering on a tug, astounds Sherlock. It’s perfect, a chilling reminder of the power of John’s hands and of John’s choice to be soft. His scalp tingles, John scraping lightly behind his ear. His skin in thrumming all over with fussy energy, nearly numb in the spots where John kisses him, where John’s knee stimulates him.

Mere minutes from catastrophe if this keeps up, Sherlock cricks his neck for a neater angle, prompting John to slide a hand out of his hair (disaster, put that back), and down his chest. John presses on Sherlock’s sternum, the space between his pectorals as John pulls away, adding slight pressure. Nothing in Sherlock’s conscious mind understands but his body takes the hint, falling back onto the bed and drawing his legs up off the floor.

John shucks his waistcoat, and his fingers fumble to work open the buttons on his undershirt. It’s more sensual than when he’d been undoing Sherlock’s for him, this watching John. Little by little, John’s hands reveal everything, his tanned, gently sloping musculature, the gnarled knot of scar tissue at his shoulder - the cause of his psychosomatic limp. The accident at the end of last year’s Races, the intrigue of which was not the initial draw of Sherlock to John but certainly a factor.

Sherlock’s eyes dip lower to the smattered dusting of golden-red hair descending down John’s navel, and the prominent shadow of his cock in his trousers. Sherlock’s mouth goes dry.

Down to the second, Sherlock estimates when John will be finished kicking off his shoes, and John returns to him, kneeling over Sherlock and settling down onto his elbows. Those arms that Sherlock has spent so long considering push up under Sherlock’s, hooking around his shoulders from the back. It draws him deeper into the pillows, near to John’s face, and being handled so decisively sends a curling thrill to Sherlock’s cock.
This could be a fun escapade for John, a last kick of adrenaline and endorphins before the Races trample everything. John’s body falls over Sherlock’s, and the notion flies out of his head.

At once, he is consumed with the urge to have John everywhere. He fits his arms around John’s neck and breathes deeply, drawing in the scent of hot coals and some note that is cool and dark and distinctly John Watson. The skin under his feel is smooth, mind the uneven patch over his raised scar.

Sherlock’s brain rushes to categorize everything, the feel of John’s hair brushing his cheek, John’s open-mouthed, sucking kisses to Sherlock’s neck, the wet heat of it all. John grinds down, a hard and demanding length pushing against Sherlock’s hip insistently - Sherlock chokes, met with rigid evidence of his effect on John. Oh, god.

“Christ,” John swears, his breath fanning over Sherlock’s throat. Resounding shivers quake up Sherlock’s chest, making his grip shudder. He tightens his arms around John, the warmth in the room no longer enough. John says, as if hit with the ridiculousness of it all, “You’ve still got your shoes on.”

“And trousers,” Sherlock manages, muffled by John’s hair.

John smirks, and slides the flat of his forearm down behind Sherlock’s back, trapping his arm between it and the duvet. He grips Sherlock, enabling him to draw closer and make Sherlock arch. His hips press down over Sherlock’s, and the stiff line of his erection slides luxuriously against Sherlock’s through their trousers. A moan punches itself out of Sherlock’s lungs.

“Jesus,” John groans. His voice sounds like it’s been dragged over gravel and rocks, rough and low and frustrated. “Okay - okay, shoes,” he says, almost frantic. He withdraws his arms out from under Sherlock, who sags back down into the mattress.

He’s right, of course, Sherlock’s ragged mind supplies, propped up on his elbows to peer at John, winded, he can’t very well kick off his trousers if his shoes are on. Not as easily or as promptly as he would like. John sits back after a last kiss to Sherlock’s face, right above his brow on a singular freckle. It’s nearly too sweet, and it makes sweat break out over Sherlock’s body independently of the rising ambient temperature.

John holds his ankle gently and works off one shoe at the end of the bed and Sherlock toes the other off for him, growing impatient. Not for a conclusion, but for John to fit nicely on top of him again. John shifts up, kneeling between Sherlock’s legs. Sherlock’s breath goes shaky, ever so slightly out of time with the beat of his heart, when John’s palm brushes over his cock. It’s electric, somehow far dirtier than their literal grinding. John squeezes, pressing the heel of his hand down on his trousers in the parody of a stroke.

Sherlock’s head drops back, eyes falling shut. “John.”

“Fuck, Sherlock.” John opens Sherlock’s trousers, pulling them over Sherlock’s hips. He can’t manage to tug them all the way down, whether it’s haste and desperation or because of their positioning Sherlock’s mind is too foggy to consider. He bends, returning to draw Sherlock into a brief kiss, and Sherlock moans at the release of that delicious pressure against his straining prick.

Sherlock processes the vague rustle of fabric, but it’s unreal and far off, of another realm. John’s knees shift and his weight changes over the mattress. He lolls his head to the side and John descends on his neck once more, mouthing a humid path to Sherlock’s collarbone. John’s trousers hit the floor, accompanied by the clink and clatter of his belt buckle on wood. Sherlock would’ve liked to pry that off himself.
It’s quicker this way, he rationalizes a moment later when John taps his stomach to prompt Sherlock to lift his hips, better that John undress the both of them because Sherlock certainly cannot be trusted with anything involving coordination.

The waistband of his trousers and pants drags over his cock and elicits another weak, shivery sound from deep in his lungs, and a half-second later the clothing join the rest of the clothes tossed about the flat. John’s thumbs tuck into the curve of Sherlock’s prominent hips, curling his fingers around the soft part of his sides.

Brief apprehension stills him when John’s chest collapses onto his, and then the unbelievable scorch of his thick cock lines up and pushes against Sherlock’s, trapping them in the tight space between their bellies. The tension held high in Sherlock’s gut vanishes as John pushes again, groaning into Sherlock’s sweaty neck.

John sucks a low mark, and Sherlock’s body rolls up off the mattress, trying to gain any friction at all. The brush of wiry-blond hair tickles his abdomen, and he could sob with defeat when John’s hips snap to correct him, pushing their erections together. The humidity in the room makes the duvet stick to his back, heavy air clinging to his face when he buries his hands in John’s short hair.

John thrusts again, and the electricity shoots through Sherlock’s veins more intensely than anything before. He’s absolutely on the verge of death, gasping, and John is panting into his collarbone. Sherlock hooks a leg behind one of John’s knees, drawing him in and allowing John more space to shove his cock against Sherlock’s.

“God,” John groans, out of breath. His sweat-slick forehead drops to Sherlock’s sternum. “It’s fucking tropical.”

The comment is so unexpected that it knocks a surprised, nervous laugh out of Sherlock. “Is it not meant to be?” He rasps. John was the one who added fuel to the fire, literally and metaphorically.

John stills over Sherlock. Sherlock cracks open an eye to determine whether or not that’s the wrong thing to say. John’s looking at him, which shouldn’t embarrass him so much, given the fact that he was likely already doing that, but the gaze impales Sherlock and set his cheeks flaming anew, anyways. A perplexed tilt lifts his brows.

“What?” He croaks.

“Have you done this before?” John asks, and the question instantly stabs him.

Sherlock drops his leg off of John’s, tension gathering in his midsection. “No. Have you?”

“I’m not accusing you. Just asking,” John assures him. His hand runs up and down over Sherlock’s ribs, easing Sherlock out of his surprised state. “Er - not with a man.”

The admission makes Sherlock feel a bit better, although faint, residual jealousy remains. John’s hand slips between their bodies, he’s propped up on one forearm by Sherlock’s head, now, and grasps Sherlock’s cock. John draws a long stroke up his length, sliding his thumb over the tip, and it’s significantly more difficult to be nervous.

There isn’t time to fight for air, John’s mouth covers his in a hot kiss, tongue sliding through Sherlock’s parted lips. Sherlock jerks, his whole body wracked with shudders. His blood is singing, gooseflesh prickling all his exposed flesh. Every ridge of John’s fingerprint is monumental, his grasp half-dry with dampened sweat, erring on the side of a burn.

John realizes this. “Here,” he says, pulling away. Sherlock twitches with the loss of John’s hand,
unsympathetic, and John’s cock is still pushed insistently, untouched, against Sherlock’s navel. John reaches for the bedstand, fumbling a drawer open.

His hand returns, slick and wet with some lubricant from the glass bottle on his bedstand, enveloping the whole of Sherlock’s cock. It’s tight and gripping and hot, and John twists his wrist.

“Oh, John--” Sherlock fists a hand in John’s hair.

“Ha, hey, ouch, here,” John says, tipping his head up. Sherlock’s hands slide to John’s shoulders, where his grip softens and the edge of his fingers brush John’s scar delicately. John’s blissful strokes pull from base to tip, and Sherlock strains, hips unable to buck up with John atop him, pinned in place.

John hovers over him, rubbing Sherlock down at the root, pulling soft noises from Sherlock’s throat. “Can I…?”

Sherlock is just about ready to agree to anything. He nods frantically, unsure of what he’s nodding to, and John sits back on his knees. Sherlock grasps the pillow by his head for purchase, wringing the material, finally getting a visual on John’s cock. Red colors his face, as if he isn’t meant to be looking. It’s a solid length, firmed and thick, dropping away from John’s body heavily as if to point at him. Previous incidents suggested the measurements, but Sherlock finds himself intimidated, anyways.

John’s fingers slip under Sherlock’s cock, sliding wetly between his cheeks, his wrist nudging the underside of Sherlock’s cock. His other hand splays over Sherlock’s thigh, pushing them wider.

The initial nudge of John’s finger against his hole is enough to make him keen. It’s alien, unfamiliar territory, and Sherlock’s breath comes in faster, drawing out of him in a long sigh when John sinks his index into him.

It’s a slow, long slide, and Sherlock’s thighs quiver. John runs his hand along Sherlock’s legs, flitting through sparse black hairs. It isn’t necessarily uncomfortable, or comfortable, but John withdraws the finger and pushes back in, crooking it to one side -

“Unh,” Sherlock groans, the unexpected, blinding pressure makes heat explode over him again, over and over, as John drives the single finger in and out of him. “John - John, stop it.”

John smiles knowingly, watching Sherlock with a taken expression, his eyes all soft at the edges in the dim light of the glowing embers. “Stop what?”

“Either do something, or - or...” Sherlock trails off when John twists his finger, dragging it around the rim and pushing back in.

He can’t go on because John works a second finger into him, evidently understanding Sherlock without the need for vocalization. It’s more of an intrusion, but the stretch makes his head fall back, and all complaints disappear. He can feel it in his stomach, a gentle tug on his cock, the opposition of the soft pushes inside of him.

The warmth of the room spreads across his chest, and he’s certain his whole body is more flushed than John’s. The thrusts of John’s fingers turn softer and shallow, and it’s an embarrassing half-second before Sherlock realizes that John means to introduce a third. Where have his higher cognitive functions gone?

It’s too much of a stretch to get in, so Sherlock is graced with John pulling out and leaning back over him as the man reaches for the lubricant beside the bed, feeling that radiant heat of his body and
the brush of John’s lips against his once John has refreshed the slickness in his palm, coating his fingers. While tipping his head up to meet John’s mouth to feel the wet heat of his tongue and the kind vibration as John hums, Sherlock slips a hand between their naked bodies.

He encircles John’s prick, shocked by the way it burns his hand, the heaviness of it, the slight give when he squeezes, curious. John draws in a sharp breath, kissing Sherlock with greater fervor. Sherlock experiments with his touching, sliding and slow.

“God, fuck, Sherlock,” John groans at his lips. Sherlock aches, struggling to push his cock against John’s hip. John isn’t close enough for real friction and Sherlock throws a hand back, curling his fist in the duvet out of frustration. “God, let me…” John’s hips stutter forwards, shoving his cock further into Sherlock’s hand. His arms shake to support him. It isn’t a lack of strength but a lack of composure, which is thrilling. “Oh, fuck.”

He lets John lean away, but just barely, his heavy cock slipping from Sherlock’s grip. The two fingers return with no small warning, drenched in viscous slick, and Sherlock arches his back when they seek out the spot inside of him immediately and without hesitation. John’s wrist curves to follow his movement. John is thorough and practiced, grazing and making Sherlock’s cock impossibly harder.

The thrusts turn shallow again, and now when the third finger prods at him, Sherlock tries desperately to relax, drawing a leg up to offer John more room. It’s a stretch that should burn, logically, should hurt, but John works so slowly, in such short circular pushes, that it is only a minute before they’re sunk to the knuckle inside of Sherlock’s body.

John twists them, and Sherlock flinches like he’s been struck, gasping as if there is no air in the flat. They twist again, purposefully, the first hint that John is thinking of the near future.

“You’re gorgeous, oh, you’re amazing,” John says, shunting them deeper inside. Something in Sherlock’s hindbrain flickers to life, on and off, a rising agony searing between his lungs. “Do you - do you want to…”

John clearly does . Sherlock peers at him through his lashes, lips dry and parted, with every part of him that has been kissed flushed red and coarse. He can only imagine what litany of praise will fall from John’s voice should John be inside of him, the closeness that their bodies will afford them, the way their skin will stick together.

An impression of a thought floats to him, the inciting consideration of John’s cock fitting into him. Recklessly, Sherlock nods. “Mm.”

“Okay, okay,” John says, breathless. His dry hand comes down to touch Sherlock’s face, trailing it over his brow and into his hair, smearing sweat on sweat. Sherlock swallows, throat bobbing. John pulls his fingers from Sherlock, uses the same hand to stroke himself until his shoulders slope and shudder, which feels incredibly filthy.

John pushes on Sherlock’s inner thighs, and Sherlock tilts them back, drawing both his legs up and planting his feet on the mattress. Exposed, the rest of his nerves awaken, mollified only when John leans over him yet again, coats his hand with the lubricant and then his cock, and settles his weight on a forearm propped by Sherlock’s head.

His other hand is lower, seeking Sherlock’s hole with his fingers, and then pressing the hot, heavy head of his cock to it. The first push garners resistance, and Sherlock’s hands fly to grip John’s biceps, biting his nails into them, hard.
John tilts his face up to kiss him and pants into his mouth. “Relax,” John says quietly, “we don’t have to…”

“I want to,” Sherlock assures him, voice coming out high and defensive, feigning offense that John doesn’t think him to have any sense of agency. “John, I’ve been affected by you since we met, don’t start.”

John huffs out a short laugh, his shoulders shaking. It’s calming, refreshing to see. Sherlock wouldn’t have expected sex to include so much laughing. As long as it isn’t directed at him, he’ll allow it.

“Alright. Christ.” John’s cock slips between his cheeks, applying a light nudge to Sherlock’s hole. Sherlock has the short-lived, sickening thought of John being physically unable to fit inside of him, but something gives and John presses an inch of his cock in. His grip tightens on John’s arms as John blows out a relieved, warm breath over Sherlock’s chest.

It’s blunt and slippery, a slow, bittersweet stretch of it makes Sherlock’s toes curl. He digs his knees into John’s waist, stilling him for a moment. John pauses, clearly using restraint, and when Sherlock releases him, he nudges in just a little deeper.

He removes his hand from his cock, wiping it on the duvet and placing it to mirror his other arm. John shifts on his knees and his hips stutter, unintentionally giving Sherlock a shock with more of his unending length. Sherlock fails to suppress a whine.

John’s preparation was enough to keep the sensation of his cock sliding in from being painful, but it’s still strange, foreign and an unusual stretch, up until the point where John bottoms out. He grinds into Sherlock for good measure, then pulls back a few inches and thrusts in again.

“Wait, wait,” Sherlock manages, clenching his jaw, and John hushes a breathless apology, brushing over his hair with an unbalanced hand. The simplicity is so charming that Sherlock could faint. The base of John’s cock is thick, smoothing out over its length. It’s tortuous, holding Sherlock open. After a minute, Sherlock relaxes and loosens his grip on John’s arms, and jerks his chin down in a nod.

Rightly taking it as an invitation, John’s hips stutter back and pitch forward again. Sherlock lets out a small *uhh*, unable to bite his lip and stifle it quick enough. John kisses where he can, his stubble dragging luxuriously across Sherlock’s skin as he thrusts once more, establishing a slow and rocking rhythm.

Every shallow slide catches Sherlock somewhere deep, coiling in a red flourish in his groin, but it isn’t until John works his knees halfway under Sherlock that John’s cock catches past on the right spot.

“Uh.” Sherlock throws his arms around John’s neck, hauling him in to kiss. John’s mouth smears messily over Sherlock, who pants out regular sounds of pleasure in tune with John’s snapping thrusts. He tastes like seasalt. By pulling him closer, John’s cock sinks better into him, and John grunts. John’s pelvis could mark twin bruises in the skin of Sherlock’s arse and he wouldn’t care.

John’s slow pushes into Sherlock do nothing to stop the tightness in Sherlock’s throat, his stomach, his thighs - everything shakes. Sherlock fights a desperate sob, clinging to John. Oh, everything is
agonizing - the expert snaps that John thrusts into him with, the relentless heat on his back from the twisted duvet, the dim glow of sweat on John’s face in the half-light.

It’s world-shaking, mind-twisting, incessant movement that John extracts from Sherlock, and Sherlock is betrayed by his body in every drop of his head and shudder of his arms, wrapped around John and drawing stinging scratches into his back.

The tension that had built when John was fingering him returns in earnest, only now it becomes unstoppable, rising high and raising the tropical heat of the room. John’s cock drags and shoves into him, hitting him deep and grazing his point of disaster, and each thrust brushes Sherlock’s cock against John’s belly, warm against him.

“John,” he warns, unsure, “John, I--”

“Yeah?” John widens his knees for balance, forcing Sherlock to spread his legs. He drops a hand between their bodies, pulling at Sherlock’s cock.

The touch jostles him, distracts from the repeated, gasping thrill of John’s thrusts, sizzling excite down his spine, through his ribs, up into his mind. Red-hot needles thrum over his skin. Another stroke, and he is completely gone, moaning, rolling his hips down to meet John’s cock. His tightens, and he buries his face into the side of John’s hair, coming with a shout.

Sherlock shakes and John strokes him through it, drawn-out longer by John’s cock moving inside of him. Flutters of gratifying shocks echo over his sensitive nerves, sending wracks of endless tremors down his legs.

“Sherlock,” John groans, pitching forward once more, the deepest push yet, and stilling.

His muscles go lax and he sags against Sherlock.

Stickiness clings to Sherlock’s belly as evidence, smeared between him and John’s heavy weight. His senses filter in, slowly expanding from the pinhole of focus on taste and touch that he’d been grasping for. The shivering in his legs, weariness of his quadriceps from clenching around John’s body for so long, is without end. Sherlock relaxes his arms over John’s perspiring shoulders, allowing them to drop away as John shifts.

Slight discomfort makes Sherlock scrunch up his nose as John’s softened cock slips out of him, accompanied by the sound of something wet. John falls onto the mattress beside him, getting his breath back. John throws an arm over his forehead exaggeratingly.

Sherlock stares at the ceiling, speechless. Then his voice comes out ragged, “You swear a lot.”

John rolls over onto his side, the length of his body pressing up against Sherlock, and he touches Sherlock’s chin, running over the constellation of moles on Sherlock’s neck. “Means you feel good.”

Although Sherlock’s face never stopped burning since the beginning of this encounter, it flushes deeper. John is simple and edgeless, surely not meaning for his words to come off so intensely indecent, but they impact Sherlock regardless. John has a penchant for surprises, it has become obvious, with his actions and his proclivity to impress Sherlock beyond measure.

Sherlock’s gaze flicks down to admire the rise of John’s hipbone, the gentle slope of his biceps. The shine of Sherlock’s semen in the dimness is tacky on John’s abdomen from where he’d lounged over Sherlock. John’s skin is poured of molten gold, warm to the touch, dizzyingly sweet when Sherlock turns over, leans forward and kisses him. His taste is the same, brilliant and alive and deep, except now it is sated where it was once hungry.
They’ve both gone soft, and the duvet is damp under Sherlock’s seat. Sherlock pushes himself up, shuddering when the change in position makes something leak out of him. He winces, something twinging inside of him.

“It’s - wet,” Sherlock says bluntly, gesturing to his lower half and glancing at John. How else should he phrase it?

“How else should he phrase it?” John says. He closes his eyes. “I’m getting up.” He doesn’t, and laughs when he opens his eyes again to find Sherlock staring down at his face.

The sweat on Sherlock’s body has begun to cool, and he reaches back to find frizzy curls in a knot at the back of his head when John disappears into the loo. Detangling them will be a chore tomorrow, but definitely for the morning and not presently. Sherlock’s level of coordination and common sense is teetering on the low side of efficient.

The water runs, and shuts off, and John returns with a flannel. Satisfaction curls in Sherlock’s smile, noting the continual lack of any articles of clothing between them.

John returns to the bed, covering Sherlock’s middle with the flannel, damp and warm like the air around them. Sherlock lies back, letting John dip the flannel around and below his cock. He flinches as John swipes away the evidence at his backside, clean and kind.

“How else should he phrase it?” John asks, tossing the cloth somewhere onto the floor. It’s clear he isn’t thinking ahead, about how it will be to find that in the morning. John likely won’t care much, he might laugh about it, or his ears will turn that lovely shade of scarlet that they are now as his thoughts circle to what secret has just transpired.

John doesn’t naturally sleep on his side, Sherlock observes as John pulls the duvet out from under them and they settle next to each other on the pillow. Sherlock is slow to move his legs out of the way and John calls him lazy.

“You must be tired,” he says with the implication of disguised pride, fitting his ankle between Sherlock’s shins.

Sherlock is on the cusp of a snappy retort to expose this, but his body betrays him and he yawns. His muscles are weak, responses lethargic, his hip flexors are sore. He is tired, but the uneasy energy from earlier begins to make his mind stir, that reluctance to accept or consider how John sees this nameless… thing between the two of them.

He is, nonetheless, disinclined to mention it should he pull too taunt, apply pressure and break something.

John is the solution, not a problem.

“You don’t sleep on your side. Lay on your back.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Your shoulder, the wider impression of the mattress underneath me, a hundred things, John. Your back.”

“Bossy,” John smiles, but listens anyways. His face is less weathered than Sherlock has ever seen it, younger. Together, they are guarded from every obstacle outside, oblivious and quiet. The schemes of gamblers and Moriarty and the other racers are trivial when Sherlock is dripping in satisfaction. It’s like his mind has been soothed, instead of his body. Drained of apprehension,
drenched in chemicals.

Sherlock arranges his head on John’s shoulder. He rests a hand on John’s bare stomach, watching
the fill of John’s lungs expand his chest, rising and falling, lulling and captivating. Repetitive, deep,
right. His eyelids droop. He blinks, glancing at the glass jar of lubricant on the bedstand.

Beside it in the dim shadows, there is a seashell, spiralled and neat and small, sitting meekly on the
surface.

Sherlock stares at it, suddenly transfixed. It steals all the mystery in the room and exude its strange,
soft magic in little pulses. He lifts his head.

John notices. He coughs, pushing a fist to his mouth, and sits up on his elbows, dislodging one of
Sherlock’s arms. Going by the nervous look in his eye, he’s trying to come up with an explanation.
An excuse! Sherlock sits bolt upright, the peace flushing out of him.

“You said you’d already made your wish,” Sherlock bristles, beating John to it. He tries hard to
glare, but it doesn’t do much damage with sweat-dried curls sticking to his forehead. He should have
noticed earlier, refused to have been distracted by the man he adores. “You lied.”

“To be fair,” John smiles, “it is the only thing I’ve lied about.”

“Liar.”

“Be nice to me. You’d be able to tell if I were lying about anything else.” John sits up fully now,
back against the headboard, and reaches for the shell. He holds it out in his palm for Sherlock to take.
“I’ve still got a day before I have to make it.”

“You cannot think of one thing you could possibly want?” Sherlock says, appeased enough by the
shell that he leans back down against John’s good shoulder.

“There are lots of things I want.”

The flared ridges of the shell poke into Sherlock’s hand. He turns it over to peer at it against the
dimness as he leans his head against John’s arm. Images of the mare goddess, of whoever was in the
costume that night of the festival with a deep, ocean-filled voice, surface in his mind. The delicious
air of the festival, the splintering pops of the bonfire, the crashing of drums, the sharp prick on his
fingertip.

Of all the luck and magic that brought them together, the shell intrigues him the most. How did it
come to pass that John received it this year? And why? What would Sherlock wish for, if the shell
had been gifted to him instead?

It would be for John. The world comes collapsing back on top of him. They’re lying in bed
together, naked, sated, and yet something is still unvoiced.

Internally, Sherlock scoffs at himself. Thisby cares not for him.

“The ocean knows your name,” Sherlock murmurs, voice rumbling low, examining the shell. He
touches each notch, admiring the small rose murex, big as a coin. All he’s ever seen of it have been
small snatches of John tucking it away in his jacket pocket. It’s impossible to figure who was in the
goddess costume that night from looking at this one shell.

John draws in a sharp breath. Sherlock glances to his shocked expression. After a moment, John
exhales, closing his eyes with a smirk playing over his thin lips. “It was you. I was right, you are an
“Of course it was me. You already knew that. Don’t act surprised.” Sherlock hands the seashell back. When will John find the time to throw it over the cliff edges and make his wish into the wind?

Bitterly, Anderson’s sea wish comes to mind. Sherlock’s name, streaked backwards in smudged charcoal, carried out to sea. Done out of malevolence and frustration. It has had no effect on him besides unsettling something in his gut, leaving him vulnerable to danger and emotion. But maybe that was the point of it. The Races are soon, however, and that could all change. How many riders have written John’s name on a sea wish and sent it away? Through the years, there must have been many.

Noticing that John has been silent since returning the seashell to his hand, Sherlock picks his head up. He’s near enough to brush his lips against John’s ear. He tilts his head to observe John’s face. John’s mouth is knit into a flat grimace, staring at the shell without really looking at it. He’s far off, absorbed in thought, the dimple of his chin tucked to his neck. His curve of astray, flaxen-grey hair obscures a contemplative line over his forehead.

“Alright?” Sherlock asks, worry crashing around him.

“It’s just, what you said, earlier.”

Sherlock’s heart hammers. He searches his memory but it all comes up blissfully blank. What could he have let slip while his brain was a puddle? “John, I…”

“How he did all of this for your attention. On some level, I knew he was up to something, he had to have been, but to think he’d been doing so much, right in front of my face…” John’s shoulders slump. “I feel like an idiot.” His body leans away from Sherlock’s as he replaces the shell on the bedstand with a small clatter.

“You weren’t aware you should be looking for anything,” Sherlock says. “There was no reason for you to be suspicious.”

“You weren’t aware you should be looking for anything,” Sherlock says. “There was no reason for you to be suspicious.”

“There was. He’s a bastard, I’ve known forever. Can’t say why I never noticed before.”


John laughs. Sherlock smiles, the tension diffused. The sweat-tinged air settles heavily over them again like a down blanket. John radiates warmth. Sherlock pushes his nose into John’s hair. The scent of woodsmoke and earl grey tea is bright in the room, but deeper, closer, John smells like saltwater and the sand at the shoreline.

“You’re right, I can’t get rid of you. I’d quit noticing things altogether if you went away. Stop it, you’re tickling my ear.”

Sherlock blows in his ear. John smacks him with a pillow. It’s all the most wondrous thing that’s ever happened to Sherlock.

-/-
The day breaks and the dappled early-morning light filters through the veil of drawn curtains, throwing muted yellow over John’s hip and highlighting the back of his head.

John is restful in sleep, Sherlock has seen so far as he’s been awake, his hair pressed up on his face on one side, mashed against the pillow. He’s slack, unconscious, serene.

John is utterly unique to anyone Sherlock has ever met.

Once, Sherlock thought it was because of his mainland heritage and his champion pride.

But John is different in the small ways, as well as the enormous ones. Small, like his weary determination, the dimple in his chin, his unassuming work. Enormous, like his tolerance of Sherlock, his profound ideals of the *capaill*, his way with the ocean, his morality and his devotion.

The whole rest of the island is cold, but John Watson remains so captivatingly warm.

Sherlock knows what sex can do to people.

He’s seen it a hundred times over in the broken bodies of those young and in love, or bitter and jealous, or old and foolish, or those who simply happened to get in between the wrong two people. Sherlock drums his fingers against the mattress gently to not rouse John, appreciating his tan and the blond of his lashes flitted against his cheeks. Sherlock would hate to see the shape of someone who stepped between him and John.

Something is fluttering in him, still desperate to be said. Sherlock drums it out on the sheets. Things are slow and tired so close to the start, and Sherlock has the hopeless impulse to keep it that way.

Eventually, John stirs, and Sherlock doesn’t bother to hide his stare.

For one moment everything is up in the air.

Then John smiles.

“You’re up early,” John murmurs. *Or late.* His eyes are light blue today, not like tidepools or shallow waves, but like open Thisby sky. Like Mrs Hudson’s teapots, like Redbeard’s faded saddle pad.

“Usually.” Sherlock quips. John stretches, brush a hand across his own cheek, scratching at his stubble. John normally doesn’t let it grow this long, Sherlock can tell. “*Not* usually accompanied,” Sherlock admits, and then wonders why he said that.

“I must be the exception, then.” John says hopefully. He slips his arm under the pillow Sherlock rests on, and bends his elbow, hauling Sherlock in by the back of his neck. John smiles like a deviant.

“I never make exceptions.” Sherlock acquiesce to their new, intimate touching, and mutters into John’s neck. He huffs out a hot breath and John resoundly shudders. “An exception disproves the rule.”

“But you’ve been disproving an awful lot of rules lately, haven’t you?”

Fondness builds up in such a tidal wave that Sherlock throws an arm over John’s naked chest. He swings his leg over John’s waist, earning a laugh. Sherlock pushes his face into the crook of John’s
neck, half smothering himself in the pillow John’s head is resting on.

Fingers curl into his hair, scratch lightly at his scalp. Sherlock shivers when they trace over the crown of his head, then hums his assent when they massage behind his ear.

“Yeah?” John’s rasps, and it sounds an awful lot like something he said last night. The tone coaxes a shudder from Sherlock’s bare shoulders as John’s thumb rubs the nape of his neck.

“No.”

John’s fingers tug on his hair. His voice goes soft. “I used to wonder what you’d be like.”

Sherlock looks up. He frowns.

“You know. Everyone on the island wonders about you.”

“Everyone on the island is an idiot. What did you hear?” Sherlock demands, because obviously it’s something. Why should John bring it up now? What rumors of Sherlock did John hear before their official meeting? Sherlock has never, not once, been portrayed well in a story. Accurately, yes, because he is rude, but not well. Maybe by Lestrade on occasion, but even then, who would Lestrade speak fondly to?

John shifts. Once he’s up, he’s up. “People said you were clever. And strange.”

“I am clever.” Sherlock is a few seconds away from spouting off every deduction he can list about John’s flat. That would show John.

But John doesn’t need showing. “I know. They were right, but that was the only thing they were right about. Yesterday morning, when I was looking for you at the station. Donovan…”

“What about her?”

“She said you liked the mysteries, the murders. That you aren’t paid, you get off on it.”

That isn’t so bad. It’s true, nearly. Sherlock half-heartedly shrugs. “Why isn’t that right?”

John kisses the side of his cheekbone. “Because I know what you actually get off on.”

Sherlock fumbles for an answer with John’s warm grin stretched so near to his face. “You brought this up entirely just to say that.”

“Yeah, a bit. Come on, I’ll make tea.”

“Next you’ll be saying that I’m - impenetrable.”

John stares at him, and then he tucks his chin and starts that lovely giggle of his, and it makes him younger, and Sherlock doesn’t attempt to hold back the wonky grin pulling at his own lips. John smooths back his hair, still giggling, and Sherlock tips his head for a kiss. John obliges, dry and brisk, and then gets up for the kettle.

Sherlock reclines on the mattress, half-covered with the duvet. There’s a mysterious dried stain on top of it, so Sherlock resolutely drops down to the pillows, closing his eyes and listening to the sounds of John’s puttering at the stove. Clack of the burner, clatter of the kettle placed over it. Cabinet open, box of teabags, cabinet closed.

Minute pressure (kiss, gentle, sweeping) drops onto his forehead, and he blinks up to John’s face.
Sherlock should’ve recognized the displacement of weight on the floorboards and anticipated this. John drops another kiss on his nose, and swipes an unkempt curl out of Sherlock’s vision. He’s put his pants on, but Sherlock can see the creases where it was crumpled on the floor all night. “You’re posing.”

“No.”

“Yeah, you are. Do you want to get breakfast? I don’t have anything here.”

“What?”

“The bakery. You didn’t think I was going to kick you out soon as the sun came up?”

Sherlock props himself up on his elbows and fiddles with the duvet cover, whirring too late in coming up with an answer.

John focuses on the anxious movement, his hands stilling over the kettle.

“That’s…” John shakes his head. The lines appear over his brow as he thinks. His thought patterns are so loud that Sherlock can practically hear them. “That’s, you…”

Sherlock sits up, ears ringing and on the defensive. With one pair of pants between the two of them, he can’t manage a good enough glare.

“Did you mean for this to be a one-off?” John asks, voice tempered.

There is no way that Sherlock can answer honestly and come off not entirely foolish and desperate. To tell the truth and say how very much he does not mean for this to be a one-off… he’s going to convey how stupid he is - how utterly in love he is. To lie is to ensure this never happens again, but to be honest is to endanger himself. No, no, no. Slowly, he shakes his head. When John still looks concerned, he says sternly, “No.”

To his immense surprise, John’s shoulders slope. Relief. “I was joking about the kicking-you-out bit. I wouldn’t. I’m…” John scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah. Don’t - you don’t have to look like that.”

“Like what?”

“Nervous.”

“I’m not. I don’t.”

“And handsome.”

Sherlock slumps back into the pillows, chest lightened considerably. John doesn’t mean to kick him out, and doesn’t mean for this to be a ‘one-off’. “Hm.”

/-/

The bakery is shining in pink morning light as it filters through the hand-painted windows. It casts rings and stripes of shadow over the display of cinnamon twists and November cakes behind glass on the sill. There’s a poster on the wall for the Stockyard’s youngstock auction from Thursday.
Honey glaze floats on the air, puff pastries sit behind the counter glass display. Butter-breads and warm chocolates are arranged perfectly over cloth and in decorative Thisby baskets, waiting to be plucked for purchase. Loaves of sweetbread lean up against each other in paper packets like the bicycles outside the window.

Sherlock’s clothes feel tight and rumpled around his body, as if they cling to him in revealing ways. Of course they don’t - no one on the island could tell what he has been up to. The brisk walk here from the Stockyard wasn’t short, but it wasn’t enough to exert him. What has really suffered from the wind and last night is Sherlock’s frizzy hair.

The bakery’s empty, at the moment, save for Molly. She’s sitting behind the counter on a stool in front of the register, flipping through a mainland magazine. A few chairs have been pushed out from the tables near the windows, evidence of earlier patrons.

She looks up at the sound of the bell chiming above the door that Sherlock holds open for John. “Oh, Sherlock,” she says. She points a slim finger to the back, where Sherlock can hear Archie clattering baking sheets. “I can go get him for you.”

Sherlock notices the strands of long brown hair misplaced behind her ear as they approach the counter. Her ponytail is resting lower than usual, swept over one of her shoulders. He bends to one side, hands in his pockets, peering under the counter to get a view of her shoes. Yes, she’s wearing the same socks as yesterday. He draws in a very deep breath through his nose. John looks at him strangely.

“Goodmorning, Molly. How was your evening with Detective Lestrade?”

Molly’s mouth pops open.

“I’ll just - I’ll go in the back. I think we have some - new, new cakes?” She manages, and disappears behind the swinging door.

Sherlock frowns, finding John’s face for guidance. “Not good?”

“Well,” John nods, rocking back on his heels, “you usually aren’t supposed to air someone’s sexual history. Especially in their place of work. Especially when you’re trying to buy breakfast from them.”

“I was legitimately asking.”

“I’m sure you were trying to be polite. How would you feel if someone did that to you?”

“No one could do that to me,” Sherlock scoffs, but it wouldn’t be difficult. The list is only one name long and he’s spent weeks publicly fawning over the man.

John crosses his arms while they wait for Molly to reappear, and watches Sherlock eye the November cakes arranged behind glass. “How’d you know about Lestrade?”

“His cologne. She hasn’t washed her hair, and she’s wearing the same socks as yesterday.”

“Could just be a sleepless night?”

“Mm. It was.”

John snorts. Pleased with himself, Sherlock smiles smugly.
“That must’ve been why he was so pissed when you told him to bring in the Haverfords last night,” John giggles, “Brilliant. He wasn’t going to the beaches. He did say he had things to do.”

“Stop it,” Sherlock hushes him as Molly makes a reappearance. They both straighten like schoolboys caught out and feign serious expressions.

She holds out a paper bag for the two of them, her cheeks tinged pink and her hair pulled back tighter than before. John hands her a few coins, smiling apologetically. She plunks them into the register.

“Sorry, he’s, uh… yeah. Sorry.”

“He’s always like that.” Molly finishes for John, and retreats again.

Sherlock would like to sit across from John and marvel at his face, but the day is clear and bright and, true to Thisby weather, rain could be around any corner. Best to get the most out of their last day. They should go back outside. Sherlock needs to see Redbeard still, and retrieve the Ford from the back of the pub. Separation from John does not appeal in the slightest, especially after Sherlock spent all day and night with the man.

The bell chimes again over their heads as Sherlock pulls open the door for John.

“Sherlock, Sherlock, Mr Holmes,” Says a plucky voice from behind the bakery counter.

Sherlock turns. Archie is there, peering over the display on his toes. His bright eyes flick from Sherlock to John beside him, and then back. “Are you going down to the beach tomorrow?”

“The Races are tomorrow.”

“Are you going to be in them? That’s what Molly said,” Archie says. His hands touch the glass and make floury imprints as he tries to pull himself up higher, stepping on a shelf. He can’t do it, so half his face remains hidden behind the display. “Do you think I could go?”

“You’d have to ask Molly,” Sherlock says, aware that Molly would never agree but unwilling to deny the boy. She hardly agreed to let Sherlock haul grain and flour for her from the mill, a month ago. She doesn’t like the Races and doesn’t take any interest or pleasure in watching them.

They are hardly out the front door and down the walk before John turns to him, an itching smile beginning to pull at his lips.

“Do you know him?” He asks.

“Mm,” Sherlock hums, uninterested in being harassed about his finicky relationship with the young baker’s apprentice. He pretends to inspect the paper bag.

Now, John is really grinning. “What’s his name?” He glances back to the shop, stepping to let a few tourists by on their way down the cobblestone walk.

Sherlock grunts.

“Come on!”

“Archie.”

“He looks like he likes you.”
Sherlock nods noncommittally. Archie, he likes to think, has always been fond of him. It likely helps that Molly is equally, if not more fond of him, and probably tells Archie nice things about him. Hopefully, he is living up to whoever Molly dreams him to be.

-/-

John kisses him goodbye against the Ford, backing him until Sherlock’s legs bump up against the driver’s side door. The cold metal shocks him, even with the barrier of a long coat that John pushes open to thumb at his hip. The buildings creating the alleyway around them have made their corner dim. Sherlock never pictured himself enjoying a snog outside the bins at the back of the pub.

“Come back tonight.” John hums against Sherlock’s chin. “When it gets dark.”

“You think your employer would be thrilled at that?”

John’s hand cards up into Sherlock’s hair, catching on unbrushed curls. Sherlock melts, tilting his head back, and he can feel the rise of John’s cheek as the man smiles at his neck.

“No, but I think you’d be. I would be. And I’d like to see you off in the morning.”

-/-

Bets are growing frantic, tourists come out to the cliffs.

The horses grow restless. They call and lust for the sea. They rub off the hair of their manes on stall doors in their madness for the November waters. Hooper’s is running out of cinnamon twists and cakes and loaves of sweet bread. The sound of bells is ceaseless.

A rider dies and his capall drags him out into the ocean and under the surf.

The Races are near.

The Races are near.

-/-

Sherlock parks the Ford with a squeal of tired breaks, stopped up against the grass outside the pasture of Mrs Hudson’s. He tucks the keys into his pocket, briefly fluttering a hand at his side and idling by the car. Mrs Hudson has none of his gifts of perception, but last night wasn’t her bridge night with Mrs Turner, and so she is bound to have noticed his absence.

It’s probable she thinks he was murdered in town or something, but something about the cleanly state of the foyer and the two-stall-stable tells him she hadn’t worried herself silly.

Redbeard knocks his nose on his stall door, snorting. His ears prick forwards, no doubt wondering where Sherlock has been. Not working him today, or yesterday, will be good. He will have had
plenty of time to rest before the Races tomorrow morning, and none of his earned stamina will have faded.

Sherlock fixes his hay, and gently touches Josephine’s long withered face. Her mane is more wiry-grey than black, these days.

The house smells like garlic and simmering-something when Sherlock strides in. He listens, shutting the door quietly behind him, silent until he hears the soft radio music from the kitchen downstairs. He will return to his room and retreat into his own head, but first it would do to explain himself to Mrs Hudson, as vaguely as possible.

Mrs Hudson is at the stove when he descends, her apron tied over her dress and her thin hair pinned back. It reminds him of Josephine outside. She fusses with a pan and the kettle before she turns and spots him. She flinches, touches her chest out of surprise, and then swats him with an oven mitt for sneaking up on her.

“Should’ve heard you come in,” she says, and gestures for him to sit at the table.

“Mm.”

“Where were you off to last night? More quay-jumping?”

“No.”

“You must have been somewhere last night, and it wasn’t Molly Hooper or Mrs Turner, because I phoned, young man.”

Sherlock glances over the kitchen table, spread with mainland magazines, some that boast sales of Mrs Hudson’s painted teacups. There are newspapers, and some of Sherlock’s personal clippings of old racing reports that Mrs Hudson has dug out from somewhere. The evidence states that Mrs Hudson must be planning on attending the Races.

Weeks ago, she was distraught over the idea of Sherlock joining. Clearly, she has decided that he cannot be talked out of this one. The idea that Mrs Hudson knows him well enough to not try is comforting in a strange manner. She is as stubborn as him.

“You don’t have to come tomorrow.”

Mrs Hudson pours the steaming water from the kettle into her meticulously-painted teacups. One, then the other. Sherlock watches her dreg the tea. “And miss it?”

“It won’t be - anything. You’ve seen Races before.” Sherlock sits at his usual chair against the table, wondering where John would sit if he were here. Right next to Sherlock, he thinks. He shifts uncomfortably on the chair and crosses his legs under the table.

“But I haven’t seen you race before.”

“Several days ago you didn’t wish to see me race at all.”

“I won’t miss it, young man.” She settles a teacup in a matching saucer in front of him. By looking at the ornate blue flower petals, Sherlock notes exactly which brush she used to achieve its desired effect, tiny forget-me-nots. The scent of the tea wafts around the kitchen, tucking into all the places Sherlock is tired and missing John. “And it will be something, with you and John Watson together.”

The teacup slips in Sherlock’s hand, sloshing over the edges. Hot water burns his hand.
“Together?” He asks, settling the cup back into its wet saucer.

“Of course, together, Sherlock. I’m not stupid, you know, even if I never was as clever as you and your brother.” Mrs Hudson sits on the kitchen chair beside him. “But I do know what goes on in my own sitting room.”

Sherlock’s face flushes, but he keeps markedly cool when he clears his throat. “Ah, yes.” He says, suddenly gaining interest in the mainland magazines on the table. He picks one up and opens it to cover his expression, clearing his throat again. It’s a moment before he continues, considering that Mrs Hudson should be aware of his whereabouts. “He… asked me back, this evening.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice. There’s always fun things to do in Skarmouth the night before. Me and my ex-husband, you know—”

“Not Skarmouth,” Sherlock corrects, “His flat.”

“Sherlock, are you sure? Night before the Races?”

Traditionally, it’s a murderous, desperate night. “You did say it was… fun.” Sherlock lowers the magazine a fraction, just some bumbling article about old music and new radios, and peers over at Mrs Hudson.

She’s smiling knowingly. She knows everything. Well, not everything, but somehow, she always has a handle on what’s going through Sherlock’s mind. She lifts a hand to cover one of his, still gripping the magazine, and lowers it to the table, forcing eye contact with a stern motherly gaze.

“He’s very nice, Sherlock. And handsome. He’s lovely.”

“I know,” Sherlock says, defensively.

“And he really was quite worried about you when you had gotten all wet. I thought I was the only one who worried like that!”

“Do you think I’m searching for your approval?”

“You’re so clever, Sherlock.”

“Clever, not fragile.”

She taps his knuckles gently. “Come back in the morning. I’ll see you off tomorrow. We should invite him over for tea, afterwards.” Mrs Hudson winks, assuming there will be an afterwards in which Sherlock emerges unscathed. She collects her empty teacup and rises, flitting to the sink. “Did you ever solve that murder? Right up your alley, that tourist poisoning. Oh, god, what was his name? Poor man.”

Tomorrow, tomorrow.

“Wayne Redding,” Sherlock says.

-/-

‘I was the king in London, and I’ll be the king, here.’

Henry Knight and the paper bag given to Molly, marked London. Not a native plant, something brought, imported, delivered.

The helmet-shaped purple blooming flowers by Archie’s wrist when he reaches across the counter to handle change, settled in the little pot that it is already beginning to outgrow.

Molly’s gloved hands, tapping at the petals nonchalantly.

‘He’s done more delivering for me than you and he will ever know.’

It was another casual show of power and manipulation - a display to broadcast how easily Moriarty can infiltrate the bakery.

The wolfsbane flower.

The bubbled froth at the corners of Wayne Redding’s lips, a reaction to the nerve paralysis and heart failure.

Beryl, the thundering victim of Moriarty’s knife, sea foam overflowing from her mouth, the whites all around her eyes, bouncing around wildly in her skull.

Chapter End Notes

I literally cannot believe I had to add ANOTHER chapter, but an extra showdown scene arrived, which would've placed this chapter WELL ABOVE 25k! but hey, at least now it'll all be tied up by the end. ;) enjoy the last day before the Races - filled with some Moriarty hints and some romance!
as of now it's still a long chapter, but the final act comes next chapter!
Final chapter is written and will be posted soon! good luck reading, leave a comment! :)

The Races

Chapter Summary

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The Cliffs.
Midnight.
- S.H.

--

Chapter Notes

prepare yourself for 20k words in this last chapter. could deny a last chapter no longer. good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ow, John--John, my hair.”

“Oh, sorry.”

"You're on my hair."

The quilt rustles.

“You’re still on it.”

“My elbows aren’t anywhere near your head!”

John stills over him, wandering fingers trailing to a stop over Sherlock’s naked torso. Sherlock holds the duvet around them up higher, trying to find John’s face in the dark. Why has he stopped moving? Sherlock twitches, thinning his kiss-wet lips into a line.

To test John’s resolve, this teasing that is obviously purposeful, Sherlock wriggles, sinking his back deeper into the plush mattress. John’s slick hand slides over Sherlock’s thigh instead of between his legs, where Sherlock wants it to go. John skims the dipping notch between his hip and navel, extending warmth and electric delight.

“Er - not sure if that’s very clever for tonight.”

“What?” Sherlock demands.

John grins, his cheeks smudged with indistinct color. He tilts his head. “Makes it hard to sit in a saddle.”

Sherlock’s face flushes deep. The heat spreads down his neck and bare chest.
“That a good enough reason?”

Sherlock collapses back against the pillows, letting the quilt fall over John, and knocking his knee into John’s hip as punishment.

John flings the quilt off the bed entirely, emerging from its tent. He’s still smiling, and it still launches Sherlock’s heart into desperate flutters. His features are better seen in the dim of the flat instead of under the covers.

John leans down, smacking a line of kisses onto Sherlock’s throat. It tickles.

Sherlock tracks the grooves of John’s scar, drawing his fingers into the dips of mended tissue, committing their pattern to memory.

The human body is an incredible machine, with John’s as the most incredible. Able to heal broken pieces, shift and change according to circumstance, like John. John rocks against him, grips their cocks together and slides a hot, wet hand between them both. Sherlock clings to him completely, mind unable to escape and travel elsewhere.

John is amazing, brilliant, and true, in body and heart.

Afterwards, John falls beside him. His breathing slows. The sweat dries on the back of Sherlock’s neck, an earthly reminder. Tingles shiver under Sherlock’s arm. John faces Sherlock’s profile, silver-blond hair sticking up by his neck, and turns over onto his side.

“Your shoulder.”

“It’s okay. Come here.”

Sherlock rearranges himself, fitting John’s front against his spine. John tucks his hand beneath Sherlock’s hip, curling close. They could just as easily turn over, but Sherlock falls restlessly asleep before he starts an argument.

-/-

It’s a few short hours before Sherlock wakes again. Perhaps it's due to the fact that his body is unaccustomed to another's heat, or lingering anxiety, or his erratic sleep schedule.

Somewhere in sleep, he and John have shifted. Heat flows from the coals in the woodstove. John breathes quietly, lips parted against his pillow. A slack arm lays over Sherlock’s hip.

Sherlock’s curls brush his pillow, lashes flicking as his eyes dart to commit John to memory.

How much blood will the sand claim in the morning? John could be taken, Redbeard, safe at home for this last night, could be felled. It’s not a difficult leap to make - people want John dead. Gamblers, racers, envious islanders. Sherlock curls his fingers into the sheets between their bodies, tracking the lax lines underneath John’s eyes.

‘This island can be treacherous.’ Try as he might, the spider won’t dislodge from his mind. Moriarty’s veiled threats echo around the studio flat, curling around the unswept corners and haunting the slivers of shadow in the floorboards.
Slipping from John's sleeping embrace is difficult, because John acts like a space heater and the rest of the flat is cold, as well as the fact that John has pinned his waist. Sherlock must, sadly, pry him off.

Equally difficult is sliding on his shoes, shirt, and trousers, glancing to John to be sure of his unconscious state.

The old porch creaks under his feet. The pasture grass dotted with morning dew soaks his bare ankles, wet droplets ready to be evaporated by a sun that has not yet risen on the most horrifying day of the year. Gathering clouds stripe across the sky, the stars are more visible out here than they are by Skarmouth. The cold grips him round the middle and nips at his ears.

The stable doors are closed but unlocked, rolling in their tracts as Sherlock pushes them open enough to slip inside.

 Darkness has seeped into the stables, illuminated sharply by the light bulbs. The sounds inside are soft, the \textit{whuff} of tired horses, sleepy ponies, rustling in the hay on their floors, or in the sand by their hooves.

Murray's \textit{capall} peers down its sloped nose at Sherlock silently, tracking his movement down the aisle. An empty stall that used to hold Beryl passes by, and the long shadows stuffed into high ceiling corners take the shape of Moriarty's figure.

At the end of the aisle, Gladstone's three locks are held in place. The \textit{capaill} do things in threes - three whinnies, three kicks, three locks, and Gladstone is quiet again. The cold metal cools Sherlock’s shivering wrist. The aged wood groans as he pulls open the stall door.

For a simple moment, Sherlock stands in the open doorway, staring at the \textit{capall}. Everything inside of him urges him not to step forward. Gladstone’s head is low, swathed in sharp shadows, bent as he pretends to investigate the sand, facing away from Sherlock.

Expecting to feel the same warmth that was present in the champion water horse when they rode together out on the cliffs, Sherlock is taken aback when a clammy coolness greets his fingertips. Gladstone’s hide is salty-wet, and his teeth begin to rattle. Sherlock's hand flinches away.

John’s words come floating back to him. ‘I love him, but I do not trust him’. John's capable hands, taut muscle, his knowledge of the \textit{capaill} beyond any islander’s. His whispers to Gladstone to keep him grounded on the sand, and his whispers to Sherlock.

Slowly, Sherlock steps further into the stall, the sand whispering around his shoes, grains crunching underfoot. He trails his hand over the hard bumps of Gladstone’s misshapen ribs, coming to rest at his long, low neck.

Gladstone raises his head, his lip twitching, little hairs illuminated by the world outside his window.

Determined, Sherlock leans close to the water horse's ear. He falters. Gladstone is unmoved, his skin thrumming under Sherlock’s touch and leaking deep into Sherlock’s bones.

Sherlock senses it as clearly as he felt it on Gladstone’s back. Winding, dredging, pulling, tightening. Ebbing and flowing, pulses of magic like John’s shell, hushing like the tide. The sea, the sea, the sea.

\textit{Shhhh, shhhhh.}

Gladstone’s mouth drops open, one eye rolled back to regard his midnight visitor.
At risk of his life, Sherlock presses his forehead against the horse’s round, cold jaw. His fingers curl around the loops in his braided halter.

This is illogical. This is dangerous.

“Please,” he whispers, breath warming Gladstone’s pelt. The worry in his chest extends, clogging his throat. It works with the magic, tugging at his neck as if to suffocate him. There is no wind in the stables, but cool air makes the white mane brush his cheek. Sherlock swallows.

Gladstone’s breath picks up. Please, do not eat John Watson, please, do not throw him, please, do not drown him.

The ocean will command the opposite tomorrow.

When he releases Gladstone’s face, the horse’s eye strains back to look at him, square pupil dilating. His quickening breath rolls over in the cold air, haunting smoke and icy seawater. In the dark, he could be Beryl. Only white hair of mane and tail stand against the night-black panels of the stall. He could be the piebald. He might even be Mary.

His lips wrinkle back. They reveal a flat of familiar teeth that fit perfectly into the patterned grooves on John’s shoulder.

Sherlock steps back (never turn your back on a water horse) and goes.

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John blows an easy sigh over Sherlock’s shoulder in sleep.

He’s lain awake since returning from the stables, wondering at their circumstance. At first, John had roused, murmuring blearily about how Sherlock’s feet had gone cold, but Sherlock told him it was a trip to the loo, poignantly aware of the lie on his tongue. John had slipped his arm back over Sherlock’s waist.

It’s today. All of his life has been culminating to today. This is the peak and there is no predicting the decline. There are no moments left to think of how the day will turn out. It will happen, for good or for bad, and it is unstoppable. There’s no force on Thisby that can stop the Races, that can prevent the sea from drumming or the sun from rising.

Sherlock twists his fingers into the bedsheets before him, watching morning turn the sky grey-violet in the beginnings of a breaking sun through the lone window. The room warms in pink slowly, and John stirs behind him.

John’s arm tightens, pressing the flat of his forearm to Sherlock’s abdomen, and releases - a stretch, of sorts.

Sherlock turns over.

“Hello,” John says, half lost to a yawn.

“Hello,” Sherlock returns in a low baritone.

By noon today, Sherlock’s fate will be decided. John draws a touch across Sherlock’s shoulder,
lingering around the line of Sherlock’s clavicle and sweeping under his shirt. Hunger follows John’s path, like flowers after the fae. By noon today, he’ll figure whether John will ever touch him again.

Sherlock sneers at his inner self, trying to determine when it was that he began to let magic dictate his fate.

His gaze flits around the room, taking in the small details, craving memorization. Notebooks, one blue, the kettle on the stove, the chest of clothes at the door, their clothes on the floor, discarded. The woodstove framed behind John, the lack of cobwebs in the ceiling corners. When is he going to see it again?

*Five to one, forty-two to one.*

Sherlock could not bear it if the odds were the other way around.

“You’ve put a shirt back on,” John says.

“It’s nearly eight.”

“Really?” John props himself up on one arm, peering over Sherlock’s body to squint at the light out the window. “Should’ve gotten me up earlier.” He throws the quilt off, piling it atop Sherlock.

“Me?” Sherlock says, acting incredulous. As if the blame is on him! “Me!”

John stands and stretches, and Sherlock’s frustration lessens considerably as he takes in John’s naked torso and the smooth, hard muscles in his hair-grazed thighs.

Next, his scar, just as perfect as the rest of John, all the more beautiful as it is interesting. The worry takes over, the horrible, unending wondering, the grisly mental images of John’s accident from last year. Drowned, eaten, thrown, torn apart, broken, crumpled on the beach.

John has never said it. Never told Sherlock that it was Gladstone that tore into his shoulder.

But it’s the truth. It wasn’t the white mare or another horse at the finish line.

No wonder John does not trust him.

Sherlock forces these things from his mind, intently watching John pull his pants and chosen riding trousers on, ones with dark leather patches sewn along the inner thighs. Would it be so terrible to close the curtains and stay in bed until the evening, and forget about the Races?

John sees him. He crouches by the edge of the bed, awash in distress. “Hey.”

The sudden urge to let go rises in Sherlock’s chest - let go of every fragment of despair that makes a home beneath his sternum. John could make it better, if he knew. Sherlock would ruin everything, if John knew.

John, steady and knowing, squeezes Sherlock’s hand. “Let’s get dressed, alright? Every racing day begins with getting dressed.”

Sherlock scoffs, a sound that breaks embarrassingly in his throat. “Are you going to walk me through your entire morning routine?”

“If it’ll help. It’s pants first.”

“I know how to dress myself. I’ve been doing it for several decades, John.”
“You could’ve fooled me.”

Pursing his lips, Sherlock pushes the duvet off, shoving it in John’s direction.

“What are you worried for?” John asks.

“What am I worried for?” Sherlock barks. “Ten riders have died since the festival. This is your eighth year, John. Most riders have raced far, far fewer times.”

“And some have raced more.”

“You’re the senior rider with the most fingers left. Would you like a medal?”

John retorts, “I’ve got five already, don’t need one for fingers.” He stands. His left hand clenches and unclenches, thoughts rolling over in his head. Sherlock scowls up at him, and John sighs. John rubs his face with a hand. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped. Please. Just, tell me what’s the matter. Is it the Races?”

Sherlock pauses. Should he mention Gladstone? John wouldn’t puzzle out where he’d gone in the middle of the night, nor that he left at all, he isn’t the suspicious type, but Sherlock cannot shake the uneasy feeling that being dishonest with John gives him.

John gives him time, snagging his waistcoat from his chest of clothing.

Sherlock answers, “It was your own horse that mauled you.”

John turns to him, wide-eyed. He frowns, glancing down at his hands, stilled in their buttoning of his waistcoat. He shakes his head. For an indeterminate reason, this annoys Sherlock.

“It was, John. I’ve seen his teeth and I’ve seen your shoulder.”

John shakes his head again, closes his eyes tight and sniffs dangerously. His hands tense on his buttons. “I know it was him. Don’t you think I know it was him?”

Sherlock swallows. His irritation wanes. “Then you know what I am worried for.”

“For me?”

“Yes.” It’s the closest Sherlock can come to confessing.

John remains paralyzed for a heartbeat. He tucks his chin and does up the rest of his buttons. Sherlock fiddles nervously with his short sleeve, worrying at the seam. “It isn’t the Races then?”

“No. It’s you. It’s Gladstone and Redbeard.” It isn’t me. It’s never been me.

John looks away. “I can’t stop now.”

Sherlock slides off the bed. His legs ache with sleep, hips sore. It’s alright. John can’t stop racing. Not now, when everything he’s wanted for years in within his grasp.

Gladstone.

What will John do when he gets him? He’s spent twenty years going after the black capall stallion. The giant shadowed sign that kept John from dying in the caverns beneath Thisby. Gladstone’s been John’s beacon, his goal, for a long time. What about when that’s behind him?
John’s stance tells Sherlock all he needs to know. John will continue to long for racing season, for the danger, for excite. ‘I can’t stop now’ is just ‘I can’t stop.’

But there are other ways to find that on this island. Sherlock discovered that soon after the muted buzz of cocaine faded from his veins. The Races aren’t all that Thisby has, no matter what Mycroft used to say.

Sherlock dresses quickly. His riding clothes are at Mrs Hudson’s, at home. He pulls on yesterday’s tailored trousers and shoes without socks instead, still wet from his secret trip. He snags his coat off the back of John’s bathroom door, preparing to shrug it on.

“What do you want from these Races?” John asks, mouth twisting into a grim guise.

Sherlock snaps to glare at him, freezing. He’s told John this before, turned out his heart, divulged its contents - was John not listening? No. John is asking him this to give him direction; to remind Sherlock what he is racing for.

But his wants for the outcome have shifted, mottled, changed. What he’d once admitted wasn’t the entire truth anymore.

“I want Redbeard, the house, and to know of Mycroft,” Sherlock says, sliding on his coat. And at the end of it, I want you. He pops his collar.

John smiles. His grin is self-satisfied, but tired. Minutely concerned, gaze lingering on Sherlock’s for too long. Weary, ready for another go-around in the highest-risk sport he could ever manage to become a key player in.

“Keep to the shoreline, as near as you can be, and you’ll have it.”

The twist of guilt beneath Sherlock’s sternum digs hard into his ribs. He could get what he wanted, one small chance against the stacked odds, but John would be without Gladstone. “And you?”

“I want space to breathe, and you, and open ocean all around.”

He doesn’t mention Gladstone’s name.

Like he has said so many times before, John says, this time against Sherlock’s lips, “Meet me on the cliffs.”

-/-

Redbeard whuffs in his stall, gently thudding his nose into the door as Sherlock steps inside the stable. Josephine hears the commotion and hooks her head around her door, chewing. She slips back inside when she figures Sherlock isn’t worth any excitement.

Sherlock’s hair has been washed, and he’s done up his black riding boots to the knee. His black breeches grip his thighs, his blue button-down tucked into the waistline. He forgoes a waistcoat, slipping on his long coat instead. He’s already going to stick out on the beach, might as well go the full mile and dress strangely, too. Certainly, people expect him to. Sherlock Holmes and his island pony. He tucks his riding gloves into his pockets.
“You’re sure of this,” Mrs Hudson says, holding Sherlock’s saddle pad for him. Her lipstick is bright red today, and the blue over her eyelids seems like a tired shadow, like bleak clouds.

There is no way to backpedal now. Sherlock replaces Redbeard’s halter with his good bridle, tightening the cheek piece and brushing hay off the noseband. “Yes.” He checks the time on Mrs Hudson’s watch as she throws the pad over Redbeard’s back. Little over an hour before the Races begin.

She adjusts the edge at Redbeard’s withers, murmuring to herself while Sherlock grapples with the clasp of his riding boots.

“You’ll take the car,” Sherlock instructs, holding out the keys for her. He thinks for a moment. Has he ever seen her in the Ford? “Do you know how to drive?”

Mrs Hudson laughs a little tearfully, skipping the keys and taking his hand instead. Her grip is fierce. “Young man, I’ve been driving for longer than you’ve been alive.”

And she’ll continue for a long time after he dies.

But neither of them mention that.

-/-

Sherlock’s fingers brush the crest on Redbeard’s saddle.

Redbeard swings his face around, nudging his mouth to Sherlock’s shoulder as he adjusts the leather girth for the fifth time this morning. Wanting more attention or perhaps breakfast, Redbeard nudges him again, blowing a hot whuff of breath on Sherlock’s face.

Something in him is thrumming, and yet his heart refuses to beat. His head is full of saltwater, rushing in from his ears, amplifying the puttering of the crowds around them on the cliffs. Scorpio drums are pounding over the sulky blows of the wind into chalk, beating out a familiar rhythm to tune along to the final race.

It should settle him, this ease into island life, these sounds of home, but he’s unable to grasp how wrong it is to hear these drums at this time. There’s a mass of unwelcome tourists pouring around him.

He should be in Skarmouth, or Tholla, running between buildings and around alleyways, over skips and beneath broken fences in pursuit of the rush that comes in times of high need, listening to the festival grow louder.

Sherlock wishes he could stop everything, the unending noise and impatience hot in his blood. Wishes he could apologize, could stop and lean his head against Redbeard’s neck. Redbeard deserves none of this risk yet he shoulders much of it. A pause would tip off his hesitation, would make him look weak, especially in front of lurking mainland photographers.

No one gives him any room because Redbeard is an ordinary horse, not a risk to brush against in passing. Sherlock finds himself jealous of the lithe, snake-like capaill uisce that have plenty of personal space, guided by their prepped and fashionable riders, flashing charmed braids and saddles in Thisby colours, iron bits and flower petals.
Sherlock tamps down his rising irritation at Redbeard’s knocking. It isn’t Redbeard that he’s frustrated with, or the saddle, or the bit that Redbeard fusses about with in his mouth, it’s the Races.

It’s the cold, making his fingers slow; it’s the crowd that keeps bumping into him; it’s Moriarty, turning his mind raw and angry. It’s the vendors, hocking island trinkets to paying tourists and shouting loudly; it’s the gulls for circling the air like they know what’s to happen.

It’s John, for being late.

“Where were you?” Sherlock demands the moment John arrives. His long black boots have been cleaned, and his waistcoat conceals the chest of his long-sleeved white shirt. His tanned wrists and face are of great contrast to the white fabric, which only makes him look more strapping.

John reaches high up to pat Gladstone’s neck, where his white mane lies in seven flat braids. John’s hand comes away wet with salt-slick, but he touches Sherlock’s face lovingly with it anyways. Sherlock scoffs and wipes the capall sweat away with the back of his wrist.

“Don’t be angry,” John says sweetly, as if there aren’t a million things to be angry about. “Where are your colours?”

“I’m scarlet.”

Yeah, you’re red alright.” John grins.

“John, you cannot possibly be amenable to this situation,” Sherlock says, annoyed with John’s cool exterior. He throws up an arm and gestures around them, where tourists are crowding every meter of land. A Scorpio rhythm drifts on the wind, along with the passing scent of seasalt and November cake glaze.

“Happens every year. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

Redbeard knocks his face against Sherlock’s hair, and lips at his curls. Sherlock brushes him away, but the island horse swings back and does it again before gaining interest in the grass by his hooves.

“That really makes you look like a champion,” John smiles. He searches the crowds around them, and steps as close as Gladstone will let him. The people nearby give the water horse a wide berth, moving about well out of striking range and taking photographs of the five-time winner, seven-time racer with flashbulbs. At least there’s breathing room, now.

John grips Sherlock’s elbow. Sherlock’s worry begins to dissipate. John says, “I missed you. Let me help you with your colours. Take off Redbeard’s saddle.”

Sherlock holds the saddle and Gladstone’s lead while John fits the scarlet cloth on top of Redbeard’s pad, and throws the saddle back over top again. John cinches the girth tightly for him, and Sherlock doesn’t double-check it. He could have done it himself, but John’s hands steady out when he helps. Sherlock wouldn’t deny John that.

With a care that makes Sherlock bite the inside of his cheek, John ties the band of matching scarlet colours around Sherlock’s upper arm after Sherlock shrugs off his coat. John knots the fabric, but keeps his hand present. It bunches the thin material of his shirt, clashing with the dark blue.

“There. Now, I’ll be able to see you.” John takes his own horse’s reins again.

Sherlock glances to Gladstone, where a blanket of deep teal sticks out from beneath the polished brown saddle high up by his withers. The capall shakes his head, tossing his braids, the bridle’s
metal clanging against his reins. Redbeard snorts at the giant, and Gladstone clucks back as if they are old friends.

An official shouts for riders to head down to the beach.

John’s expression sobers. “Listen, I… I want you to be careful. We won’t make our move until you make yours.”

Sherlock recoils. “John, don’t be stupid.”

“I’m serious, Sherlock. We, I am not leaving you behind. We’ll cross the finish together.” John says strictly. When Sherlock rolls his eyes, John sighs, lowering his volume. “We don’t have to play this game of his.”

But Sherlock knows that isn’t true. There is no way these Races finish and the pair of them don’t end up playing into Moriarty’s hands. John would hate for him to say this, however, so Sherlock seals his mouth shut and resolutely doesn’t answer.

Mrs Hudson picks this moment to return from whatever vendor she has been since bothering with small-talk. John releases his arm. Sherlock hands her his coat, and she sets her hands on her hips. Sherlock hyper-focuses on the new flour on her blouse collar. “Seems right, Sherlock Holmes, sneak away while I’m talking!”

“I wouldn’t pin your hopes on Mr Chatterjee, he’s got a wife on the mainland nobody knows about.” Sherlock drums his fingers on his leg impatiently. “Well, nobody except me.”

“Oh, please,” Mrs Hudson scoffs, “What would Mycroft say about this?”

“Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock admonishes, offended. Mycroft would look down his long nose at his choice, raise a lip, and sneer that a life at the mill was better than no life at all. There is no room to disagree with his brother. He could ask Mrs Hudson to let Mycroft know if he dies, but it’s no use, he recalls that was the whole point of racing in the first place.

His mind has been elsewhere than on the topic of his brother, recently.

She fusses with the band on his arm. His cheeks warm, potently aware of John standing solid, watching her mother over Sherlock. She looks fitful, when at last she’s satisfied with the tie, saying something about it not coming loose so that she can keep an eye on him. “You be careful.”

“You don’t have to stay and watch,” Sherlock says, a repetition of yesterday. “It would be in the best interest for you to go home. Or stay talking to Mr Chatterjee.”

“Sherlock Holmes, I have seen worse things than a few Races.” She waves a hand, tsking at him. A warm smile pinches at his face, overcome with gratitude for this woman.

John clears his throat.

Sherlock turns and steps back. He brushes down the front of his shirt and the armband. “Mrs Hudson, you remember John. John Watson.”

Mrs Hudson glances between the pair of them. “The only man who ever appreciated my cooking,” She says, “Of course I remember this one.”

“‘This one’?” John repeats.
“I haven’t seen such a big one up close,” Mrs Hudson says to Sherlock, gesturing to Gladstone like he’s a dog to be impressed by. She doesn’t startle in the slightest when Gladstone peers at her inquisitively. “He’s very handsome.”

John smiles. “Thank you.”

Sherlock sighs, incredibly burdened by this well-wishing. “Come along, John.” He nods at Mrs Hudson. “I will see you at the end.”

“Oh,” she frets, turning to search around them. She cranes her neck. “Oh, Molly wanted to see you off, too. She couldn’t get Archie off her arm!”

He draws her into a brief embrace. Her thin arms come up to encircle him, and then he pulls away. “At the end,” He repeats. She nods, looking teary-eyed but not frail, clinging to his coat in her hands. Sherlock turns back to his companion for assistance. “John?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

At the end. It’s conditional. Frigent upon his completion, his survival, and it truly is, which makes the air heavier, the bright clouds oppressing. There can’t be any thinking about what will happen if he wins because it’s such a large if. This impossible thing needs to happen - Sherlock needs it, badly.

John’s hand slips against his elbow as people part before Gladstone, wading through the crowd as easily as he does the sea.

It’s a brief press, a note to remember that John is here with him. For an undetermined reason, John’s solid figure beside him is nearly enough to break Sherlock’s will. There is no way to retreat, for Moriarty is surely here among the crowds of tourists and islanders. Sherlock made a promise to race - a promise to Thisby and a promise to Moriarty.

The island won’t forgive him if he pulls back, and neither will the spider. He won’t risk the revocation of John’s racing terms just because nerves are making his hands shake.

John shifts up next to him, hand held high under Gladstone’s lead up by his bridle, touching the metal ring under his chin. Gladstone tracks the movement of a young child as her mother tugs her along before their path. They stop beside a few island vendors selling Skarmouth trinkets and scarves of Thisby wool.

John’s teal band is crooked around his bicep. Sherlock straightens it for him, lingering.

John clears his throat.

“I’ll see you at the end,” John says, stepping back and extending his hand.

A beat.

Sherlock narrows his eyes.

Is he expected to take that?

After all of this, the murder, the intrigue, Moriarty, the buildup to the Races, their days and nights spent together, he is to assume all he is owed is a handshake? His heart begins to hurt, to ache, looking down at that extension of John’s arm.

A white flash catches his attention.
Ah. The cameras, here to film and photograph the Races for the squeamish mainland viewers who couldn’t make it down. Sherlock’s chest does a horrified barrel-roll. I’ll see you, I love you, I’ll see you. He glances back to John, warily taking the proffered hand. At the end, at the end, at the end.

Tightly, John squeezes. It’s not a shake, but a squeeze. His thumb brushes over the back of Sherlock’s hand, infinitely warm against the biting salt breeze. A tug, and John has hauled Sherlock close, tilting his face up to Sherlock’s hair, his breath ghosting Sherlock’s ear. As soon as Sherlock has relaxed into it, this one-sided parody of an embrace, it’s gone and away, lifted from him.

He swallows, tasting salt and something bitter, sour and dark. Another flashbulb goes off, blinding.

“Move out of my way,” John demands, and the mainland photographers part for him, bleary-eyed and windswept. No doubt they will attempt to get more photographs of John, Thisby’s champion, bound to make a sixth sweep.

The world is mild, like the gentle slumping of the island edges before the sharp drop of the cliffs. If Sherlock thinks that he’ll be racing soon, he’ll turn to stone. Sherlock watches John go, Gladstone a giant black shadow trailing behind him.

The tourists and islanders stand out of the path of the giant water horse, an unending river of movement as they migrate, prepping for the final race of the year. The crowd consumes John’s shape, and then Gladstone heads down the sandy incline, disappearing from view below the chalk. The last Sherlock sees are his long ears, pricked and hungry.

Sherlock looks down at his hand, where John touched him last, and clenches it until his knuckles turn white.

He fits his arm into Redbeard’s reins and pulls on his gloves, keeping the last heat of John’s hand close to him.

There are some spectators here above the starting point, and a few racing officials in bright armbands and dreary black waistcoats, but most are quickly traveling away and down the line of the cliffs. They’re headed towards the finish line, where the height of the action will be, no doubt. People get suicidal when they’re nearing the end.

He swallows, throat tighter than before. Pricking at his waterline is some base emotion. Worry, perhaps concern. He turns his head, but cannot spot John again.

Who he can see is James Moriarty.

Standing there, an Irishman in a black coat, hands tucked into pockets but taking up an immeasurable amount of space, profiled against the cloudy-bright sky. For a half-second, Sherlock catches his eye. Another flashbulb, and the Stockyard owner is looking away again.

He’s charming some reporter that has asked from an impromptu interview, raising his chin for the cameras.

“Sherlock Holmes and his island pony! Can I get a photograph?” Says a nearby photographer. Sherlock stares at Moriarty’s profile, and the cameraman snaps and flashes his photo, anyways.

‘I want to see your face, when he dies.’

Ultimately, Moriarty’s presence is needless. Sherlock is already unsettled. It’s nothing to do with Moriarty and everything to do with John.
“Come on, Redbeard,” he murmurs softly, pulling lightly on the reins and shoving past the photographer.

Redbeard’s ears flick towards him, wondering at the flurry of activity around them. Does he know what’s to happen? He knows something has been coming, that his new feed and exercise regime has been leading to a goal, but what it was, a horse could not grasp.

Redbeard remembers the last time they were down on this beach, with the piebald. This is not the pebbly one on the other side of the island, where John Watson had first come up to them. Where John had kissed him over. This is where their last hopes rest, here, in the infinite granules of golden sand that shift and turn under Redbeard’s hooves as they stutter down the incline to the beach.

He squares his shoulders, drawing in a long breath as they hit the racing beaches. With every movement, he could be doing it for the last time. The last time coming down this hill, the last time pulling himself up into the saddle, the last time being chastised by Mrs Hudson, the last time reaching forwards to calm Redbeard’s shivers and worries.

The last time he felt John’s hand in his.

It’s colder down here, and the ocean chops at the shore, black-tipped and angry.

Nervously, Sherlock fidgets with the band of bright red along his arm. He stops himself when he realizes it’s Mrs Hudson who has made him so fussy. If his body and face is mangled by the end of this, the colors will make identification easier.

Belatedly, he hopes that Archie failed to convince Molly to let him watch the Races.

Swathes of other silken colors, purples and golds and cobalts and emeralds, glint off of the arms of other riders and from beneath the saddles of their mounts. A buckskin capall clacks brittle teeth by Redbeard’s ear as it comes down the slope behind them. Sherlock lifts the reins to draw Redbeard’s head away just in time, pulse rushing.

Redbeard heaves a breath beneath him, drawing his focus. Redbeard shudders from something entirely other than the cold. Yes, they’re alive, alive, as are the massive bodies working against each other, flashing yellow teeth and bitten shrieks, draped in bells and daisies. Riders yip and smack their mounts, working for attention, but they’re so close to the sea that it’s near impossible.

Redbeard will run straight. He won’t be distracted by the water.

As his plan, Sherlock draws the iron red horse closer to the edge of the sea, relishing in the slow meander of his gait. The water beats against Redbeard’s motionless ankles. Almost everything is ready. The race officials are clearing off the pale road of sand between ocean and cliffs. An ocean of trouble rages inside Sherlock’s gut, thrashing in time with the masked beating of drums in the crowd above.

The wind is blowing hard, brisk as the sky is bright. Redbeard’s warm body shifts beneath him, tilting him in the tight saddle. On his left is the endless stretch of open water, to his right is the ever-shifting line of capaill uisce that may all fall upon him the moment the Races begin.

They’re pushing them back with iron poles, now, commanding these restless water horses to line up. Some capailhiss when the poles touch them. The rings of bells and iron charms is ceaseless, every horse is adorned in braids and decorated breastplates, painted in sigils for speed and half-muzzled by bits of braided leather.

His hands shake on the reins, and now he cranes his neck, looking for John. Just one last glance of
teal.

The *capaill* around him are too tall, Redbeard only coming up to some of their necks at his head. Realistically, Gladstone should be the biggest, darkest spot on this beach, but Sherlock can’t find him.

Magnussen sits atop a blonde, still *capall*, cleaning his glasses on a handkerchief. Mary throws her head, bells ringing an unseemly note. She is absolutely covered in charms, but they’re useless as she strains for the water. Lestrade is nearby, tying a few last-minute braids into the mane of his *capall*, patting the horse’s shoulder with misplaced fondness. The crowd above is growing louder as the wind lapses. Sherlock hardly breathes, the ocean stealing all his air.

There’s near forty horses and equal men, and Sherlock cannot picture anyone but the riders that didn’t make it. Hope, the man John shot, the casualties in the first week, the murdered boy.

Snaps and sputters, snorts and clucks as the writhing mass of *capaill* quarrel, like a nest of eels in the coral. They’re quick bites, frantic shrieks, a preamble of what is to come.

Sand sweeps across his cheeks, and the cold numbs his hands, bites his gloves. He clenches down harder on the leather reins, grips the horn of the saddle for balance. Tries to orient himself. He could have run this race with only John; John, who he could have trusted. These are all men who would like nothing more than to thunder over his broken body in the waves, who wouldn’t mind if it meant their winning.

*Five minutes, eighteen furlongs, and this will all be over.*

A month of his life, all culminating into five minutes. Thirty years of his life, all culminating into five minutes.

John has lived these five minutes seven times over, ran them quicker than anyone. How can Sherlock be faster than the fastest thing alive? Does he *want* to be faster?

The official on the cliffs raises a pistol into the air.

Those on the sand ready the poles.

Sherlock’s heart is in his throat.

He can hold his breath for five minutes. He shoves his heels down, poised to kick. Redbeard’s belly heaves like nervous animal, but dutifully, he remains quiet, his ears pinned back, his shoulders tight and tense under Sherlock.

‘*Keep to the shoreline, as near as you can be.*’

The barrier lifts; the pistol *cracks*; the world explodes into movement.

Sherlock’s legs kick in; a horse nearby rears and throws a rider astray, and Redbeard bolts. The ocean becomes a lurching blur on one side, the shapes of water horses an ever-changing mosaic on the other.

Great shapes blow near from behind and they streak past, climbing the sand and shrieking at one another. They must untangle themselves from the scuffles of the beginning, or they’ll fall pummel to those crystalline hooves. Teeth snap by Redbeard’s hock as he kicks up, flinging sand into the snout of a *capall* moving fast on their rear. It hisses and throws itself into a horse racing alongside it, shoulders crashing against shoulder, knee to knee.
Sherlock heaves Redbeard farther inside. Saltwater sprays and the sand whips at his cheeks, magicking everything rough and red and angry. The reins are tough and hard in his grasp with hard salt crystals, and the wind rushes ceaselessly past his ears. He squints, heart hammering as a grey bodied- capall weaves by them, intent on catching up to a frantic brawl.

Ahead, a pair of battling horses recoil from the bulk of eels and charge across Sherlock’s path into the shallows of the water, hot wicked teeth clacking at each other, misting Sherlock with ocean water. The new horse barrels into the two of them, the water slashing at its legs. Its rider tries to wrench the horse away, barely succeeding to slow his mount.

Sherlock wrestles the reins to one side, throwing his elbow and hauling Redbeard closer inland as they go racing past the trio. They gallop near enough for Sherlock to see a rider go under the water, a capall sinking its teeth into his cheekbone - there is no black horse and it isn’t John. Redbeard’s stride lengthens, the ground hardening beneath them as they fly over the lapping edges of foam-touched waves.

Grains of sand prickle his thighs over his breeches, hair blown back. He crouches low over Redbeard’s back, pushing him for speed to breakaway from these horses. Redbeard’s shoulders shiver and quake - he knows where they are. High knees devour the wet sand before them in impossible strides, and the capaill are all hungry.

If he pulls closer to the water, the spot which other riders fear, John said they could have a genuine chance. Sherlock kicks, and Redbeard’s form tears across the sand. Strands of his mane whip Sherlock’s face but it is nothing compared to the bite of the cold wind. Where is John?

Weight crushes over one of Sherlock’s thighs and a shadow falls against bright clouds, he snaps a quick glance. A capall and rider have bumped into them, the giant horse rearing back its ugly mottled head, slits appearing on its wet neck, gasping for air.

Sherlock’s breath catches as the knee of the other rider digs deeply into his leg, thumping repeated bruises with the quick gait of his capall. To be knocked to the sand is to die.

The man on its back is grinning wide, and something sharp gleams long in his hand. If Sherlock pulls back, they would lose too much momentum and never catch up with the group plowing ahead. He whips the reins, hard, and the pinch of pain snaps Redbeard out of his panic. His legs lift and plummet down with ferocity.

Without thinking, Sherlock draws Redbeard fully flush to the attacker, and reaches between the massive pumping bodies to loosen the girth strap as the serpentine skull of the capall snakes back, yellow teeth baring from rotted lips. The man’s hand hits his arm, twists his fingers. Sherlock fumbles to slip the knot.

“Get off this beach, Holmes!” The rider snarls.

He slashes wildly at Sherlock and Redbeard, but he has drawn his horse too close to the water’s edge in his quest to maim Sherlock, and his saddle fails him. The capall isn’t preparing to lunge for Redbeard, Sherlock notices in the nick of time. It has only taken a heartbeat of inattention, and the capall moves fast.

The capall hisses, ears pinned and tail snapping, leaping in front of Redbeard towards the water in search of the salt in the wind. A stray hoof cannons into Redbeard’s nose, but the island horse ploughs on, made faster by fear.

Adrenaline peaks high and Sherlock’s pulse is throbbing hard in his neck. In hardly a minute of
racing, already blood is dripping from a tidy slice in his thigh, and his arm is surely bruising beneath his sleeves. His gloves crunch on the reins, heels dig into Redbeard’s belly, folding himself small and tucking in his elbows. Conserving speed for the end is no longer an option, they are into the marathon of the middle.

They’re clear - farther up the tract of sand, there are horses quarreling, and Redbeard bounds over the figure of a rider knocked to the beach. His hooves dig into the sand and they streak forward. They’re out of the biggest section of the fray and now it’s about speed and staying out of reach of other horses. Sherlock barely registers the cries of the crowd and the shrieks and wails of the *capaill*, searching wildly for John.

He should be up there, ahead, that big black shadow of Gladstone and point of stillness that no one seems to touch. But he isn’t. Dread flutters in Sherlock’s heart, his ribs ache and his thigh quakes as he strains to keep his heels down. He risks a glance to the water - far away, in the waves, a head emerges here, an ear there, or a shoulder elsewhere. The ocean, tumultuous and unpredictable.

Redbeard turns into his leg, curving away from his shin, barreling through the surf once more. Sherlock cranes his neck, wind roaring in his ears and sea misting his face, stinging sharp in the back of his nose. Among the *capaill* racing lengths ahead of him, there is no giant black horse. Apprehension grows hot in his throat and his face, choking the salt from his eyes.

A pair of dun horses snap at each other, so engrossed in tearing the riders off each other’s back that they don’t pay any mind to Redbeard sprinting ahead of them. Sherlock wretches the reins and Redbeard curves again, chest heaving and head bobbing, swiveling past the two.

They both shriek and take off anew after Redbeard. There is no slowing now.

They fly past Lestrade. True to John’s notes, his *capall* darts for the ocean.

Others who escaped the struggle at the starting line aren’t so distracted. Seasoned riders are well-practiced at this game, and are gaining ground ahead of Sherlock. From back here, he can see the leering that *capaill* do towards the ocean. Their whole bodies are angled, kept moving only by the hard press of iron stirrups against their bellies. He calculates the degree to which they lean towards the surf, and his eyes flick to the cliffs, where the sand is open.

In a moment or two the horses will be all by the ocean, hot and sweaty and hungry.

But in a moment or two, the Races will be over.

Where is John?

There is no way but forward, no escape but to continue through the sealine. Sherlock presses on, ignoring the wails of some broken horse far behind them. Redbeard’s form shivers and he quickens, breath heaving in his ribs.

John isn’t with the seasoned riders that Sherlock is gaining on. The wind throws a heavy arm inland and blasts over Sherlock’s form, pushing Redbeard, urging them farther. The *capaill* ahead catch the salt and twist like snakes under their saddles and colors, lining for the water’s edge.

Is it possible John never made it out of the fray? Sherlock’s hands twist and work the reins, but Redbeard’s will clashes his and they shoot out from beside a slowing adversary bucking to throw the rider on its back, bells shrieking high, needling into the back of Sherlock’s brain forever.

One rider in front of them tries to give his mount more rein, but the second he does, the horse streaks towards the ocean, and the rider wavers, tucking the *capall’s* neck back in check.
Where is John?

Redbeard jerks abruptly.

For one horrible moment, Sherlock pictures them tumbling to the sand and being dragged to drown, but Redbeard darts on, quick and small and steady.

Thundering alongside them is Gladstone, a black mass that blocks the cliffs from Redbeard’s view. His snake-like neck is tucked far into his chest, reins held tight by the most wonderous man Sherlock has ever seen. Gladstone’s eyes are wide and wild and his mouth is pulled back in a grin. Sea foam touches the edges of his lips, pulled back to show flat teeth.

Redbeard matches him stride for stride.

John is here. His chest squeezes, tightens, stealing his oxygen and replacing it with airy lovesickness. Redbeard stumbles, and Sherlock kicks him forward. Gladstone quickens to match them, powerful stride tearing through the surf against his every instinct, white braids whipping in the wind.

He catches John’s eyes for a heartbeat. They are lurching specks of blue and his hair is sticking out from the wind, his arms tucked close to his side and his shoulders hunched behind Gladstone’s powerful neck.

Beneath his focused gaze, John’s attention briefly flicks to Sherlock’s thigh, to Redbeard’s face. Sherlock’s saddle is slick with saltwater or blood, and he tastes them both. He tightens his thighs to keep himself rooted, pain bursting over his sliced leg, and Redbeard takes it as a command to push on.

Hope is a dangerous sentiment to feel, overwhelms the logical mind, but it’s thrumming under his skin as they overtake another rider together.

Everything he needs is at his fingertips a few furlongs away. John beside him, doubtless and strong, Redbeard throwing himself onward beneath. Supernatural muscles flex beneath Gladstone’s shivering hide, working hard to keep pace.

John whips the reins, turning forward, a wordless reminder that they have a ways to go. Sherlock’s frantic attention narrows to one point improbably far ahead.

Stragglers behind them are beginning to break through the fighting, but no one overtakes Gladstone and Redbeard. Emboldened by the capall beside him, Redbeard storms on, kicking up mist and sand.

There’s an opportunity several lengths ahead, where two winded capaill try to pull Gladstone into a brawl. Space between them and the others in the lead is just enough to slip through. In his chest, Sherlock’s heart is diving.

An enormous blonde neck slams into the other side of Gladstone.

The black horse screams, violently twisting his head to snap his teeth against Mary’s.

“John!” Sherlock’s grip loosens, terror overriding rational thought.

John’s eyes go wide and for a dreaded second he looks, open and shocked, at Sherlock. Mary snaps behind him.

John turns and sets his jaw, his fists clench. His heels push down. He jolts Gladstone’s rein and
allows him more lead, throwing his arms, more freedom to shove himself into Mary’s soaking-wet form. Her skin shimmers and her mouth tears into one of Gladstone’s ears as they run. Gladstone snatches the liberty in stride, wailing that long cry that reverberates off the chalk cliffs.

Redbeard is frightened and working harder to streak in front, but Sherlock pulls him up. They cannot leave John here alone - but if they fall any further back, the fray streaking up behind will swallow the three of them. Redbeard throws his head in alarm and his ears flare back, flicking salty sweat and pinning against his skull.

John’s arm twists as Gladstone seizes more rein, crashing his bloodied head into the side of Mary’s face - something horrible pops.

It’s the last Redbeard stands.

Without regard to Sherlock, Redbeard launches forward, surpassing Gladstone and Mary, jerking his head so far forward that the reins fly out of Sherlock’s slick grip. Sick, Sherlock takes hold of the horn of the saddle with one hand and a handful of Redbeard’s red mane in the other, fingers curling so tight that his nails bite into his palm.

Gladstone is the biggest, fastest thing on land. Mike Stamford had told him so, those weeks ago. Nothing could outpace him.

Sherlock risks a glance behind them, enough to see John’s saddle crumple and Mary’s shoulder collide with Gladstone’s. The colors beneath Magnussen’s empty saddle flutter black as Mary hurtles into Gladstone again. The harsh light gleams off a sigil on her hide drawn in sheep’s blood.

He rips his gaze away, intent on finding a grip on the reins again. He can still pull them back, still help John, and there is no planning or forethought past this singular demand of his heart. He reaches up to Redbeard’s ears, grasping where the reins have tangled with his bridle, and hauls them low to his stomach.

A capall in front of them darts closer to the water, and Redbeard sweeps past it, charging hard despite Sherlock pulling desperately on his bit that the leather might snap. White noise is hissing in his ears, the roar of the crowd.

Redbeard surmounts the last pair of hotheaded capaill.

Then the Races are over.

Redbeard barrels straight through the race officials at the end of the line, skittering the crowd. Sherlock fights hard for power, and slowly, gently, Redbeard’s breath comes back to him. The horse shakes, his ears flicking. His knees lift and he prances in place, filled with nerves, bloody lip quivering. Sherlock wrenches the reins to one side, commanding Redbeard to turn back.

More capaill filter in, nose to nose, splitting hairs for second place, then third and then fourth. Their numbers aren’t great, but they rise tall enough that Sherlock can’t see the racetrack past them.

Sherlock slips off of Redbeard’s saddle with haste. The stirrups and the seat are slick. His legs quake, straining against his wound and the cramping. Relentless, his mind refuses to acquiesce even the smallest amount of headspace to the sensation of bodily pain.

John is nowhere. He was meant to cross the finish line with Sherlock.

With the crush of bodies pressed tightly together, capaill clacking flat teeth together and flicking hot ears and hot haunches, John is nowhere. Nowhere. Neither is Mary. Sherlock's throat is tight.
From the tops of the cliffs grows the applause of spectators and island grass, the seabirds are flying in the wind high above the island, waiting for the availability of the sand, and John is nowhere.

Sherlock elbows his way past the race official that begins to give him a semblance of congratulations, dragging Redbeard by the reins back towards the finish line. His lips, cracked with salt, part, his chest heaving, frantically scanning the crowds of finished riders here.

A grey capall, a red horse, some duns. No black.

Sherlock snags someone’s arm. “Where is he?”

“Mister Holmes--” Begins the official, yellow bouquet outstretched towards him.

“Where is John Watson?” Sherlock demands. No one understands.

Other tired riders begin to laugh and find relief in each other and their survival, but Sherlock pushes by until he has a view, sicker than he was before the Races began. The noise of the crowd makes his head pound.

He shoulders his way through, not stopping short of outright shoving a few slow men that don’t get out of his way quick enough. His heart races as quick as Redbeard had, pounding in his ear as the sea hushes to him. Shhhh, shhhhh…

The ocean holds no sway over him.

There, an opening in the crowd of tall horses, and Sherlock guides Redbeard through, panic cloying horribly in his ribs, sticking his lungs together. The sand looks different from the finish line as it did from the beginning. It’s the same beach, empty now, pummeled by capaill and island magic and stained with blood and carnage in some area, but now it holds no mystery of outcome.

There’s a dead capall uisce half in the water, wet and grey, the ocean swaying over its legs and not moving it, the rise of its hide obscuring an empty saddle.

But lengths past the dead uisce is a thin and gaunt equine figure, black as the night with blazing white hair tied in flat braids, wet and pasted to its skin and bones. Gone is the heavy muscle trained so hard for; a cadaver of a horse waits in the water.

Gladstone is his namesake - a stone. He stands high and ankle-deep in the saltwater that sloshes around him, pushing foam against his cannons. His face is turned out towards the skyline where it meets the ocean - for a moment, he lifts his muzzle, and looks as though he may scream, but snaps to tuck his chin against his neck.

There’s an otherworldly gloss to his face, long and forbidding, black and haunted, painted in broken leather reins.

Slowly, his long head turns. Transformation is in progress, his legs wobble and stiffen in slightly bent arcs, flattening themselves. This isn't like Beryl, in her pitiful final moments on the beach. This is strength and power, held back by some feral will. It's incomplete, but Gladstone is changing, all the while seeming to search the company crowds at the finish line.

Against the bright clouds, his ears are pricked and alert. One of them is torn and drooping.

Drawn to the black figure, Sherlock pushes Redbeard behind in the hands of an unknown race official. His hands lift from the lead without care. He steps back past the finish line.
Where is John?

Gladstone’s shark eyes find Sherlock and hook in, and somehow, Sherlock is sprinting back out onto the racetrack. The sand shifts under his feet and his leg starts to give out, knee bending strangely, but there is no room left to care in his head.

Gladstone stands high, proud and hurt, his whole form shivering. Sherlock has never seen a water horse unchanged by the ocean. Gladstone balances the weight of one of his hind legs on the tip of a hoof. A riderless horse is stalking the edges of the land, prancing and fighting in iron chainmail, but takes no interest in Sherlock’s movement.

Underneath Gladstone is a sodden figure, slumped in the water. Near the cliffs, someone is covering another dead rider with a sheet.

The rest of the riders have disappeared, Gladstone is nothing more than a cloud above the surf, a black sky, and the crowds on the cliff sides have ceased to exist altogether. There is so much danger. Never turn your back on a water horse.

John’s hand launches out of the water, seizing a faulty stirrup. He grunts, arm shaking as he pulls himself up, soaking wet and gasping.

Sherlock collapses to John’s side, his knees hitting the firm sand by the water, splintering sharp pain up to his hips, and throws his arms around John, unable to wait and assess him for damage. John startles, unsteady and confused, letting himself be held before returning to circle and tighten back, clutching Sherlock as if his life depends on it. Sherlock’s certainly does.

The relief pricks at his waterline.

John’s hand sifts into the wind-knotted curls at the nape of Sherlock’s neck, pressing hard against his skull and hurting his hair and tucking Sherlock’s face into John’s neck. Sherlock clutches to John’s worn jacket, drinking in his comfort. Oh, god. Had they been so close to disaster?

He pulls back, holding John’s shoulders at arm’s length. Quickly, he flickers over John’s body, catching at the red smear on the side of his face. Fury rises in his mind before he recognizes that it’s Gladstone’s blood, and it’s streaked along John’s bare hands, too, but his arms clearly are working at full efficiency. With a grunt, John shifts his knee, sloshing through the surf, and they stand together.

He’s alright. He’s winded, clearly, shaken and thrown. But it’s John - and he’s here, alive. Sherlock’s wound begins to sting, sand and saltwater and blood mixed in a potent cocktail of pain.

White-hot frustration overtakes him. He clutches John by the arms again, reassessing once more. “John! You-- that - that was the most asinine--”

“Sherlock Holmes,” John’s shoulders shake, unable to stop himself. “Sherlock, I love you. I - I thought I had the unbreakable habit of loving things that couldn’t love me back, but - but.”

Sherlock blinks, stunned into silence. His ears ring, his mind draws blankly on how to respond, the world inert, the pain in his leg fading to the sudden, desperate ache in his ribs. “John.”

John touches his face, rubs his bloody thumb against Sherlock's cheek, pale tidepools staring into Sherlock’s eyes. They flicker from eye to eye, then crinkle as John smiles weakly. The smear of Gladstone’s blood makes the hair behind his left ear stick up, congealed.

“I love you.” It rushes out of Sherlock in one breath, and there’s no room inside himself to regret it, because this is something that John must know, that he must internalize. “John - I should have said it
before, so many times and in so many ways - it isn’t enough to convey any semblance of my -
emotion, but--”

John’s hand wraps around the back of his neck and tugs him down. His lips are dry and cracked and Sherlock tastes salt and gritty sand when their mouths collide, noses bumping. It’s relief, relief and reassurance that they both remain alive and unchanged. Whatever reservations John held before the Races have been kicked to the wind.

Gladstone hisses beside them. Sherlock flinches away, finding the long face swung ominously towards them. Square pupils regard them with rising fascination.

John touches Gladstone’s black skin. Gladstone shivers, beset by invisible flies. His tail sweeps to his flank, hairs brushing Sherlock’s arm.

“He stood here,” John says. His hand fists in Gladstone’s mane, and he steps out of Sherlock’s space.

Gladstone’s eye rolls back to peer at John, so close to his trembling, heavy mouth.

Gladstone’s lips wrinkle back, exposing crushing yellow teeth. John runs his hand along Gladstone’s sweaty back, sliding over the crushed saddle. He trails his hand steadily down the injured rear leg, stopping at a point up high above the hock. His face falls, and Sherlock knows the leg is broken.

“He didn’t have to stand here.” John tips his head against Gladstone’s hide, reaffirming their strange camaraderie.

After a quiet moment, Gladstone’s lip slides back over his wicked teeth, and the whites of his eyes turn to gaze out at the endless water.

Sherlock doesn’t need John to tell him that Gladstone will never run again. It doesn’t matter that John will never win Gladstone from Moriarty, because Gladstone is worthless. It doesn’t matter that John will never race Gladstone again, because Gladstone stood here when he didn’t have to. Over his shoulder, Sherlock squints against the wind and the bright cliffs that are slowly clearing of people. Moriarty’s figure is not among them, not that he sees.

There’s a commotion at the finish line, riders trying to still their mounts and officials waiting for Sherlock to return and claim his prizes and get his photograph taken. No rush. A lump rises in Sherlock’s throat, considering time that he will have to be away from John after the terrifying shock of his unexpected absence.

Unwilling to leave John’s side for any longer, Sherlock approaches the giant shivering form that Gladstone has become.

Warily, with intent, he unclasps the knot at the girth strap. His fingers shake clumsily, and Gladstone’s skin is clammy-hot and wet. Gladstone’s saddle and his teal colours splash into the water around his ankles.

John lifts from Gladstone’s salty hide and wonders at him, an enraptured expression. His eyes fill with understanding.

With care, John undoes the braids in Gladstone’s mane. They are dexterous together, Sherlock marvels, tenderly untying Gladstone from the land.

John whispers into Gladstone’s shoulder. Gladstone’s long head drops within reach, his ears, one
torn, drop lazily forward. John’s sturdy hands stutter, the slightest hesitation. He unbuckles the throatlatch of the bridle, carefully drawing the tangled reins and headpiece over Gladstone’s face. The *capall* hisses, rumbling deep in his chest as the leather grazes his damaged ear.

At last, he is untethered, free of everything physical that keeps him on the shore.

Gladstone clacks his teeth, breath rattling.

The slits on his neck widen and flex, quivering as he struggles to breathe in the air where he should not be any longer. Sherlock clasps John’s hand to drag him out of the water and away from his *capall*. John comes back to himself, clutching the bridle in one fist.

Gladstone limps into the Scorpio surf, knocking over the wet saddle John has raced him under for so many years. His large body paces itself, going slow, hip flexing taut under his black skin. The ocean sloshes around his ankles as he wades in deeper, proud and badly hurt, his great long face shaping into something new. Froth brushes against his knees, then his shoulder as the tide lures him deeper.

Gladstone’s gaunt face swings to watch John’s retreated form, and his mouth creaks open, letting out a long, keening cry. His throat quivers with the sound. *Where are you going?* Like with Beryl, the sea swells, sucking at Gladstone’s legs, dragging the long white pieces of hair on Gladstone’s tail that are hanging on the surface of the water.

*Shhhh, shhhhh,* the ocean soothes.

John’s hand squeezes Sherlock’s. Sherlock tightens fiercely, allowing John’s body to sink into his, leaning heaviness and dreaded sorrow against his arm.

Gladstone peers at the ocean, and twists to hook a hold on John again. He wails again. *Aren’t you coming?* It’s a kelpie trick, one that John does not fall for in his wisdom. In its failure, Gladstone does not lunge like any other *capall* would have done.

The wind blows against the cliffs, eroding the chalk. The gulls squawk harsh questions in the air currents above the beach. The water churns towards the shore, rippling the sand into lines, hard and firm. The whole island is slow and muted - no one exists but him and John, shoes soaked in water and blood.

The waves crest in the water, flashing a kneecap, a head, or a sea-slick shoulder, far out past the breakers and the sandbars, a testament to how close every rider on this beach had been to the unthinkable violence of the Scorpio sea.

Gladstone’s serpentine head rises above the waves, a black smack of darkness, and he disappears.

Unlike Beryl, he will never have to put the weight of his bad leg on land again. There will never be pain in his steps. In water, he will be weightless.

The whole island catches in a hush, but it’s of no consequence with John leaning into Sherlock’s side. John, who has always been sturdy, steadfast and dependable against the oppressive crowds, his own renown, and Moriarty’s influence. John, who now feels so heavy and tired. Sherlock observes a smear of red sand down the racetrack, the circling of gulls.

He swallows, appetite for real answers unmatched. Does this outcome approach anything that John can be satisfied with?

“What did you wish for?”
John stares down at the broken bridle in one hand. He nods, short and decisive like he’s come to terms, pursing his lips. His brows furrow in thought when he tilts his chin up to face the ocean. “To get what I needed.”

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There are endless formalities for winning the Races.

Endless photographs in poses that Sherlock never expects, and endless bouquets for Redbeard, whose neck hangs heavy with green garlands. Signing for the money, tending for his ruined hair.

Mrs Hudson embraces him tearfully, and he allows himself to hold her. He’s breathless, suspended in disbelief. It hasn’t hit him, the enormity of this accomplishment.

She returns his coat. “I know you like to look nice in pictures.” She winks and Sherlock forces a smile.

Sherlock refuses to let anyone touch his leg, not even to let them hide it for newspapers. “This is what the Races look like. Photograph that,” he argues, which ends the stream of people wanting to take his picture.

John doesn’t disappear after Gladstone, as Sherlock half-expects him to. He stands solid, out of frame, never allowing Sherlock from his sight. It would be normal to want time and distance after losing his companion of many years, a companion so influential on John’s life.

Wouldn’t it? It seems the most rational thing to do. Take time, take a step away. John doesn’t. Between each camera flash he closes in, touching Sherlock’s hand, his arm, his hip, his hair. Here, but quiet. Unrestrained, but somber.

It stings. If only Sherlock had looked closer, tried harder. There might have a hundred ways to have avoided the altercation with Mary, the altercation that sealed Gladstone’s fate.

The sigil that had been drawn on her blonde hide makes him realize that there weren’t.

Moriarty’s obsession with Sherlock has crossed the line into affecting John’s life, risking it. There’s no compromise. A dark, hard pit of anger blooms in Sherlock’s chest.

When Henry Knight circles around as the ceremonies are closing, it is decided. John has been briefly swallowed by some prying reporter, and so Sherlock pounces on the fleeting moment of privacy from the cameras.

“Congratulations, Mr Holmes. It was thrilling - really, it was. Different than any other year, you were truly unique--”

Moriarty will have no hold on John anymore. Gladstone is gone, and Moriarty’s reign over Thisby will end tonight. There will be retributions for taking something precious from John.

Sherlock will make certain of it.

It’s nearly finished. The Races are over but the game has yet to conclude.

“Henry,” Sherlock interrupts. He removes Moriarty’s letter from his pocket, kept tucked and secret
in his coat since his meeting in Moriarty’s office and extends his hand knowingly. “Your pen.”

“Oh, sure.”

Sherlock scrawls two lines onto the back of the short invitation, and slips it back into its envelope.

“Give this to him. Presently.”

It’s impulsive. It’s reckless. He says nothing to John when the former champion returns to him, hand brushing Sherlock’s persistently.

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The Cliffs.

Midnight.

- S.H.

-/

“He’s alright?”

John doesn’t glance up from where he’s peering into Redbeard’s mouth, hands holding the horse’s red lips apart. Redbeard snorts, shaking his head to get free. John releases him. “He’s had a front tooth knocked loose.”

Brisk air breezes through the small stable. Mrs Hudson’s screen door can be heard fluttering into the side of the house just around the corner, wooden frame clacking into panelling. Josephine grazes outside, in the fencing, wind gusting through her tail.

John wipes his hands on his trousers. “Nothing serious, just the one tooth. Definitely dead. Should remove it so it doesn’t get infected.” Redbeard licks his teeth, snorting again as John shuts him into the stall.

Sherlock nods. He spins a wayward piece of hay between his fingers, plucked from the bale he sits on, looking dejectedly down at his feet. Grains of sand are stuck in the seams of his shoes.

John’s boots step into view. Sherlock looks up from under his lashes. John crouches on his good knee, sliding a hand to rest on Sherlock’s lower thigh. He squeezes tenderly, thumb rubbing Sherlock’s patella, right where Sherlock’s leg is bandaged under his trousers.

“Sherlock.” His voice is rough, wrapped in razor wire. Concern over Sherlock’s silence. “You did it. You won.”

Sherlock shakes his head, agonized. If he speaks, it’ll be too quiet. His breath will catch. He’ll say
the wrong things, rude things like he always does, and John will retract what he said on the beach. John’s upset, he must be. Stepping around these sore points is like a ballerina spinning in a minefield.

If Sherlock hadn’t entered, John would have won Gladstone and the Races. Most definitely. If Sherlock hadn’t gotten involved, Moriarty wouldn’t have pulled the puppeteering strings on John so tightly. John’s working misery was due to Sherlock’s selfish fixation on his employer. He’s a danger to John, as long as Moriarty lives.

Now, John’s voice goes soft. The thumb keeps rubbing. Sherlock’s eyes drift shut, centering on the gentle pressure on his leg. Back and forth, back and forth. It’s the single good thing in the universe. “You did.” A pause. “It could’ve been so, so much worse.”

“It was bad enough,” Sherlock snaps. Josephine rustles the hay in her stall.

“Listen to me. No, look at me.” John touches Sherlock’s chin when he tries to glance away. “Listen. Moriarty doesn’t have a leg to stand on anymore.”

A poor joke? “Yes, he does. He owns half the island.”

“Yeah, but now he doesn’t own you. That’s the only important bit.” John glances at Redbeard.

Sherlock flinches, taken aback. Is that what John thought? That Moriarty had a hold over Sherlock?

“No, be stupid. It doesn’t matter that I won. He’ll still--”

The rubbing halts. “It matters! I--”

“No, it doesn’t! Moriarty is there, John, and he’ll make a new plan to torment you. You don’t have to work for the Yard for him to find you. He’s still thinking. Since we met, you’ve been hurt because he was obsessed with me, obsessed over the fact that I cared for you, obsessed over my intellect. In his mind we are the same. You see? He’s obsessed. Ever-thinking, always two steps ahead. It’s -brilliant.”

It’s the wrong thing to say.

A muscle jumps at the corner of John’s jaw. He retracts his shaking left hand, standing abruptly.

Tension holds his shoulders stiff and high, like Redbeard. A line deepens between the side of his nose and his lip, an angry line. His left hand flexes at his thigh like it had this morning. He looks back at Sherlock.

“I hope the two of you are very happy together.”

He snaps his jacket on, stuffing his fists into black pockets, and sweeps out of the stable. Sherlock flinches when the doors bang closed after John’s figure.

-/-

“Evening, Sherlock.”

Sherlock is not the first one to arrive on the cliffs above the racing beach.

Low tide has come and gone, and autumn has picked up. Heavy clouds rush by in the strengthening wind above, obscuring the night sky. A light rain begins to fall, pattering the earth slippery and
damp. This night after the Races oppresses Sherlock same as the morning had.

“You’re early,” Sherlock says without pretending to check a watch.

The spider steps closer, appearing from the dark. Sherlock’s vision adjusts to this lapse in light outside of Skarmouth.

They are alone, here. Moriarty wears his Stockyard suit, the red emblem emblazoned on his breast pocket. His hair is not slicked. Is this a hint? A nod to Sherlock, ‘oh, see, you’ve undone me ’? A trick, a rise?

His adversary is a dreamy silhouette, backlit by the hazy orange glow of Skarmouth far behind him. Sherlock stands with his back to the cliffs, the high ocean out beyond. The outline of his body shades Moriarty’s face until he comes closer.

Moriarty dips into his pressed suit pocket. The shoulders are dark with rainwater.

“I was afraid you’d be done with me, after your shocking win. I’d never be done with you. You can imagine my nerves,” Moriarty unfolds a paper, and holds it up between two gloved fingers, “when I got your note.”

His letter. It is two-sided, like a coin. Moriarty on one side and Sherlock on the other.

He lets it go and the wind buffets it away into the dark drizzle.

“I am glad you’re here, Sherlock. Really, I am. Using Henry Knight as a delivery system?” He blows out his lips. “A match made in heaven, we are.”

He approaches until they are a length apart. Sherlock silently clasps his hands behind his back, skin growing numb with the cold.

There’s something in his eyes tonight. Madness, such that Sherlock has only ever glimpsed before. Gilded insanity, kept secret from mainland mongers and islanders. A sane man can be trusted with power and influence. Letting Sherlock fully see him now is not strategy.

It’s truth.

One of them will not leave these cliffs tonight.

At the small of his back, Sherlock clutches his wrist.

All Moriarty’s conspiracies to capture Sherlock’s attention with murder and intrigue and finally, they are at their final dance at the limits of Thisby. The wind flings frozen rain against Sherlock’s neck as he stands, staring on an injured leg. There must be something to say.

Moriarty grins wildly, utterly pleased with himself.

It took him but a month to draw Sherlock into the center of his web. Much more time had been spent constructing the delicacies, but in the end it was the month of October that brought them both to this place.

In that long decade that John worked for Moriarty, never once did he succumb to the spider. It only took Sherlock a month to arrive with no plan, no assistance, and no John Watson.

He should have predicted that Moriarty would come with nothing to lose. How mind-numbingly boring it must have been for Moriarty to wield his power and ability with not a single worthy
adversary to challenge him. Sheep and people, all the same. Sherlock nearly sympathizes.

Stupid.

Slowly, the spider removes his gloves. He carefully plucks them off, finger by wet finger, and throws them both to his side, onto the ground. “I cut loose all those people just to get you to come out and play. A couple of murdered tourists, a stolen file, and poof.” He looks up, squinting into the dark rain. “The setting’s a shade melodramatic, don’t you think?”

“Moriarty. There’s no one here to appreciate your performance,” Sherlock says.

“You appreciate me. You do. Without me, you would have been so bored. I saved you. See? I saved you.”

Sherlock announces, straightforward, “You’re responsible for orchestrating the three October murders. You sent your man in the station to collect the files and photographs to make it harder to put you in the center of the operation.”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Moriarty tuts. “I was trying to make it easier for you to find me. It’s not my fault someone got the evidence thrown in the quay. You’re the only one who would suspect me, you’re the only one who knows what I really am.” He puffs out his cheeks. “As I’m the only one who knows what you really are. What are you here for, Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock?”

Sherlock waits a moment, letting the biting wind blow over them both. He answers, “I’m here to bring you in.”

“If you’re not here to kill me,” Moriarty asks, large and theatrical, glancing around like there’s an invisible audience watching them that Sherlock cannot see, “then what good are you?”

He shifts and stalks closer. They are but a scant foot apart.

Sherlock lets him, standing even and still with his back to the cliffs, ocean blowing in his coat from behind, rain throwing his hair.

“I tried for years to catch the attention of your feeble little mind, Sherlock. Oh, how many robberies and murders in Skarmouth or Tholla I tried to lay out for you. But that isn’t what it took you to be interested, is it?”

Moriarty circles him. The edge of his coat brushes the backs of Sherlock’s legs.

Sherlock can almost see his dorsal fin poking out of black water. He stares resolutely forward.

“No, you only cared once Johnny came your way. That’s when you got real interested, isn’t it?”

Surely meant to embarrass him, Sherlock flits his gaze to meet Moriarty’s. The rain comes down harder, in larger spurts. Moriarty’s hair is black and limp now, his eyes grey and sunken into his face, large dark bags beneath them in the storm.

Moriarty sighs again, failing to get a rise. “I should have expected as much,” he says.

Quick as a cobra, he shoves Sherlock back some steps, closer to the edge.

Regaining solid ground in a stumble, Sherlock considers. He hadn’t expected Moriarty to come looking for a physical fight, but he will work with what is given to him. At a disadvantage because of his injury from the Races, this could be disastrous.
Repressed anger for the humiliating conditions that he and John had been forced to live under until the conclusion of the Races begins to rise in his throat, and when Moriarty comes for him again, Sherlock gets in a savage jab at his neck. Moriarty swings back a fist and connects with his jaw, sending him straight to the hard ground.

He flings himself onto his back, ready to defend his vulnerable position.

Moriarty stands over him in the same way the white mare had stood over Gladstone in last year’s Races.

The lightning strikes and gives Moriarty a momentary white flash of an outline, fleetingly illuminating his wild brown eyes and the embroidered red Stockyard symbol over his trousers.

A hundred memories course through Sherlock. He hadn’t forgotten a thing, but he was too stupid, too hung up on emotions and fear and love that he couldn’t see. Blind. Right there, on Molly Hooper’s front desk. Right there, on the hide of the white mare, right there on Mary’s flank. A blooming purple flower to end horses and humans, a bleeding sigil to do just the same.

Sherlock spits rainwater and he shoves himself up, chin bleeding and leg throbbing. “It was you.”

“You’re going--” Moriarty slashes out with wild flail of his arm, fingers like claws trying to catch on Sherlock’s coat, “--to have to be more specific, darling!” He trills madly. Sherlock leans back, attempting to stay away from Moriarty’s clutches.

“The wolfsbane - theaconitine. Henry Knight didn’t know what it was when he gave it to Molly Hooper - the purple flower - but you did.” Sherlock takes a step back when Moriarty swipes again, his grin widening, ‘The wolfsbane was from you. You wanted me to know about the flowers, you wanted me to see it, to know you had it. That’s why you sent the seeds to John.”

The rain pounds harder, Moriarty’s face betrays surprised delight, water rushing all down his visage.

“You poisoned Wayne Redding with wolfsbane.”

Moriarty’s sharp nails catch on the side of Sherlock’s face, and beyond him opens up the storm, rain sheeting down. “His name! You know his name! Who have you become?”

Sherlock dodges, slamming his fist into Moriarty’s belly, met with a wheeze. “An easy target, the man didn’t matter— you just wanted attention!”

“Ah ah ah!” Moriarty exclaims, barely winded, “I wanted your attention!”

Beryl loose from her stall, mouth frothing white from poison, not rage. He continues with what he’s known since Saint Columba’s, slipping in the muddy turf.

“You poisoned Beryl, thinking she was Gladstone, and when your mistake didn’t work out quickly enough for you--” Sherlock ducks, “You slashed her legs, had John be rid of the evidence. You killed her.”

A rare mistake, thinking Beryl as a champion, but a mistake, nonetheless.

Moriarty slashes for him again, a horrible grin over his face, too-wide, like the water horses and their yellow teeth. The momentum it takes to avoid a gut-punch flings him back to the spattered ground, and Moriarty bends over him, clutching at his collar.
Sherlock locks his hands on wrists and exclaims, “You arranged to draw that sigil! This year and last! You wanted your own man to lose the Races! You tried to kill him!” But Moriarty loves the power his wealth gives him over people, how many locked doors it opens. Sherlock digs his nails in hard. “Why?”

“Because I could already see myself losing you, Sherlock,” Moriarty laughs.

As the capaill uisce are no horses, Moriarty is no man.

The facades vanish. It was never about John, or the Races, or the murder victims.

“Wrapped in that towel, wrapped in your own funny little fantasy! You’d finish your Races and you’d go off and live your life with Watson, leaving me in the dust. Can’t you see?” He’s desperately pulling at Sherlock’s front jacket, shaking him closer. “We’d be amazing together. Unbeatable. Can’t you see it?”

It was always about Sherlock.

Wealth and power but no challenger, no equal. Nothing but bleak island air and mystical killer horses, no one special to shower his attentions upon.

In Sherlock, Moriarty believes to have found his other half.

Lying at the narrow rocky edge, Sherlock risks a glance over his shoulder, the long drop of the side of the cliff. The ocean is black and frothy, beating against the sides of the great chalk walls. His body won’t break on the beach, it’ll be torn to pieces by capaill.

Water batters and roars, lunging and taking. Very much a hungry wolf. The blood from the morning Races were not enough to quell it for another year. It needs more.

High tide reaches up and hits the cliffs, eroding the white. In the water, amongst the many white caps, great shapes swim just beneath the surface, where dips in the water follow fast-moving bodies.

Hidden somewhere beneath, Mary, heavy harness of brass bells and iron nails, is a shark.

Sherlock glares back at Moriarty.

“The tourists-- Beryl was a plot device - just another turn in the story. Our story, Sherlock. Can’t you see?”

Moriarty’s face falls dramatically, a stage performance. Whatever twisted game his mind is convincing him of, he and Sherlock are the lead players.

He suddenly looks miserable. “Oh, you can’t. I see. That pet’s gotten into your mind, hasn’t he?” Moriarty reaches down, and Sherlock attempts slap him away and bend his elbow wrong - but the water’s in his eyes, he can hardly see, only registers the pain when Moriarty yanks on his hair, his scalp screaming. “You were the most interesting thing on this island and now you’re boring. What are you hoping for?”

Sherlock grimaces.

Moriarty forces Sherlock’s head up, twisting a strained hand in his curls. Sherlock’s hands fly up to grasp Moriarty’s wrist to relieve the pressure. Moriarty leans down.

“We’re very alike, you and I.” Lightning flashes against wet-slick skin and the frantic glaze of the
man above him. Long, thin shadows across his face become like the slitting nostrils of the *capaill*; the twisted ears as his wild hair. “Haven’t you ever wondered why?”

He gives a sudden, harsh tug, and Sherlock groans, scraping against Moriarty’s wrists with his nails, rain slipping into his mouth between the faults of his teeth. Tangy-copper blood slips between Sherlock’s lips. He imagines, quickly, that this might be how he dies.

“Because!” Moriarty cries. He wrests Sherlock by the hair back to the ground and Sherlock’s head snaps back, neck throbbing violently. His leg lashes out and he thrusts a foot into Sherlock’s abdomen, blooming bright warm pain. “I am you!”

Sherlock curls, ribs smashed. Moriarty kneels over him, thighs on either side of Sherlock’s, and holds his collar, throwing back his fist and landing a punch on Sherlock’s cheek, smashing his knuckles into Sherlock’s split lip. Hazy with rain and soreness, fatigue and pain and the cold, Sherlock can’t fight when Moriarty grips him by the shoulders, split knuckles running bloody-wet crimson and fastening into his coat. “No, no, no, dearest, don’t try to fight it, just *lie back*, and *lose*!”

Moriarty’s knee comes up and he collapses onto Sherlock’s fallen figure, chest-to-chest. Sherlock struggles, pushing back to get out of this crawling, seaweed-breath grasp. It’s impossible to breathe. Moriarty shoves him sideways, digging in with his elbows, and, exhausted and numb, Sherlock clings to Moriarty’s arm.

Sherlock’s bad leg, sliced from the Races this morning, gives out, unable to provide him with traction enough to extract himself. Sherlock frantically tries to knee Moriarty in the solar plexus, but the other man holds him down, seemingly aware of his weakness.

Moriarty grasps the side of his head by his ear and bends them both over the side of the cliff, edging them nearer. Hot blood rushes to his head as Moriarty presses into him, leaning them further over the wet grass, and Sherlock can hear the hungry sloshing of the tide against the cliffs below them. His back slips in the wet and his shoulders hang over the edge, an incredible, shoving mass pinning his chest.

Moriarty never meant to leave the cliffs alive.

Heat flows from Moriarty’s breath on his face, saliva and rainwater dripping onto Sherlock's cheek. Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut, twisting his head away. “Should we go down together? It *has to be together*, doesn’t it?”

He presses down, and Sherlock grits his teeth, clenching his stomach and trying to push back against the man’s weight.

Sherlock grunts, shoving harder. The waterlogged ground gives way beneath his body.

Moriarty pushes.

*Click-snap.*

Sherlock’s eyes fly open.

Skin like wet gold, smothered fury like a violent tide.

Gun oil and smoke, a heavy metal barrel pushing into Moriarty’s temple.

Moriarty’s eyes dart to one side, smile dropping. His hold loosens on Sherlock’s shoulders,
disappointed. “Oh, not now.” He crows.

Water drips from John’s face, down his nose and off his chin. Each line in his forehead is a determined imprint, his silver hair pasted to his ears by the spitting rain.

He’s beautiful, brilliant, even in the dark. He’s the sun. *Oh, oh, god, John.*

“Get off him. And back up. Slowly.”

The massive weight hesitantly pulls back from Sherlock’s chest. John has Moriarty kneel a length away in the rain, hands raised. “If you stand up, I’ll kill you. Do you understand?”

As Sherlock sits up, slipping on torn grasses and mud, his side twinges painfully. Sherlock groans, wrapping an arm around his abdomen. Something deep is fractured. He forces himself to move, to bend his knee and clutch the blades of Thisby grass by his sodden shoes. He breathes deeply through his nostrils, assessing his body. Nothing punctured. He can smell blood and spit, even in the rain.

Without removing his eyes from Moriarty, John asks, “Are you all right?”

Sherlock manages a dumb nod, eyes wet. “Yes,” he rasps when John doesn’t look to him. John is here, John is here.

The mud smears his hands as Sherlock pushes himself up, leg barely yielding. Through the rain, Moriarty stares openly at him, ignoring John’s revolver, deranged and half-mad with failure. Cautiously, Sherlock moves away from the cliff edge.

To make a point, John moves in front of Moriarty, leveling the weapon at Moriarty’s face. Only then do the spider’s eyes tick up to him. Just as fast, they flicker back to Sherlock, hardly acknowledging John's presence.

"Oh, you've brought your pet to play a role. I didn't know that was allowed."

It smarts, the disregard and dehumanization. John isn't even a pawn in Moriarty's view. He's not a player, he's nothing. A speck of dust, a loitering aggravation, an obstacle.

That's exactly where Moriarty went wrong. Where Sherlock went wrong, too.

For a moment, Sherlock worries that John, moral as he is, may consider sparing Moriarty, truly turning him in to Lestrade. Humane punishment for his unprovable crimes. The anger and grief remains, toiling at what Moriarty has done, what he tried to do to John in the Races. It crushes his mind, his lungs, and his heart.

But Moriarty’s done more to John in the process of looking for Sherlock’s attention than he’s ever done to Sherlock.

And John Watson is no saint.

“You wanted to see my face when John died.” Sherlock inflicts his voice with as much command as he can muster, his throat hoarse and ribs creaking. John glances to him. “And now you can see my face when you go over these cliffs.”

“I underestimated his horse,” Moriarty smiles, getting to his feet. Sherlock leans away, pain shooting up from his bad leg and ribs. “I won’t do it a second time.”

“No.” John thumbs back the hammer. “You won’t.”
“No,” Moriarty repeats, focused grin entirely on Sherlock. “I won’t.”

In the same instant he lunges for Sherlock, John snaps the trigger.

Moriarty crumples, momentum going wide. He lands dead at the cliff edge. There’s a black hole in the back of his head.

Sherlock’s ears ring.

John’s jaw is tight and locked, the gleam of faraway ocean moonlight spilling over his unassuming stance.

He lowers the revolver intently. His chest, what Sherlock can see of it, rises and falls evenly, undisturbed. There is nothing new in his eyes. No stunning realization, no regret.

For all the world, John looks just as he had the afternoon he shot Jefferson Hope and his companion. Unperturbed, detached. Like a civic duty has been done. John is the island as much as he is the sea, tumultuous yet rigid, balanced in his disturbance.

Still, Sherlock’s mouth pops open. He struggles, then, “The rain won’t be enough to wash the powder burns from your fingers.”

John meets his eyes, surprised. They both look at the cliffs.

Without a word, John approaches the body. One push with a disgusted shoe, and Moriarty slumps forever over the island edge. The splash doesn’t come, distant thunder covering above. Had John planned this, shooting Moriarty? How did John know where he was? Why does John care?

John glances up into the storm.

“I suppose no one will mind when he goes missing,” Sherlock says. He's desperate to get John to say something back.

“Certainly not,” John mutters to the sky.

Calmly, he flips the safety and drops his gun into the grass, turning to sweep into Sherlock. John shoves shaking hands into Sherlock’s sodden hair, drawing his face down until their lips connect messily. Crushing and taking, wet and hot.

A thrill leaps inside Sherlock’s chest, deformed and bewildered and astonished. Even in confusion, his brain rushes forward, desperate to have this last connection with John before John remembers their argument. Why, why had he come? After what Sherlock had done to him, what loss he had sparked, how could John touch him like this?

Reeling, Sherlock breaks away, gasping. Why is John doing this? It's all so sudden. His voice cracks. “But - he’s gone.”

John grips his upper arms. “I know, Moriarty-- I know--”

"Gladstone, John,” Sherlock chokes. “It was me.”

I am the reason everything went wrong.

John’s eyes widen. He's near enough in the dark that Sherlock can track a rivulet running between his brows. Slowly, John shakes his head.
An unexpected sob wretches itself from deep in Sherlock’s chest, and he covers his face with a hand shamefully. He’s the reason it all went wrong. It’s him. There were so many opportunities John could have taken Gladstone through the fray and across the finish line, and he wouldn’t do it, because he harbored this terrible, deep feeling for Sherlock. Sherlock forced his hand, and it all went wrong.

John grasps Sherlock’s wrist, pulls it from his face. The bruises inflicted by Moriarty on his skin hum with island magic.

“No, it wasn’t you. Sherlock, look at me.” John waits until Sherlock sniffs and looks up. The rain batters them, tracking water and tears down Sherlock’s cheek. “He didn’t have to stand there. Sherlock, Gladstone kept me alive. But that’s all - he was a placeholder. I was waiting for you.”

“Don’t lie,” Sherlock accuses, tongue angry and whip-sharp. “I can tell when you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying! I was afraid Moriarty would do something to him, and I loved him, and I didn’t want anything to happen to him. And I was right, look at Beryl,” John exclaims, “She is just as gone as he is. But you’re here - you’re all that I wanted at the end. You’re all that I needed - you are every wish I could make.”

Delirious with exhaustion, Sherlock sniffs again, unable to speak. His bottom lip trembles.

John’s face has gone soft. His island focus flickers around Sherlock’s expression, stuttering at his bloody lip and brow. He tugs Sherlock's hand, wavering when Sherlock cringes painfully, his ribs grinding in the wrong ways. Sherlock’s trousers are entirely soaked with mud and rain. “Please. Let’s get out of this weather.”

Sherlock smears hot liquid from his lip away, glancing at his hand. Rain is washing away the blood from his face, staining his clothing. Everything aches.

John leads them back towards town, supporting Sherlock’s weight with an arm under Sherlock's. His leg refuses to comply, strained more from his tussle with Moriarty than the actual wound from the Races this morning. They stop underneath the shallow overhang of an empty tourist shop. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, true to Thisby weather. All of Skarmouth is dark and shuttered away. John wants to talk, Sherlock doesn’t. He wants to curl up for a week and hide.

Gripping his ribs tightly, Sherlock leans into the brick wall. The rest of his body heat leeches away into the stone through his coat.

In this temporary respite from the rain, he shivers. Cold air and wet skin don’t mix well. It’s as bad as the night he jumped into the quay. At least his skin is not sticky with salt. Not anywhere but his face.

John reaches for him, gentling over the cut on Sherlock’s lip with his thumb. Like he’s remembered, he pulls away, returning with a handkerchief from his jacket pocket. The revolver gleams at his waistband when he moves, shiny with rain. He dabs carefully through Sherlock’s winces. Sherlock hardly blinks, terrified to miss any micro-expression or imperceptible, nonverbal cue. John's whole form is shining from the street lights somewhere down the next alleyway. His blue eyes glint steel, and his damp hair glistens white.

“I can do it myself,” Sherlock says.

“Do you want to?”

The pressure shifts to his cheek, a tender swipe where Moriarty had clawed. Almost as if John
kissed him. The scratches sting. “No.”

John tends to his cuts best he can. Sherlock hopes they keep bleeding. If they do, John won’t step away. He’ll feel helpful, needed, wanted, and it will delay the inevitable.

Gentle pressure settles over his lip again, and Sherlock parts them. Does he need stitches anywhere? He can’t bear to have anyone but John touch him. It’s this thought that forces him to open his mouth with intent.

“I - I wanted to get him. For you.”

John’s hand stills. “It was conditional on my winning, Sherlock. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You won’t understand.”

John’s expression darkens. His brow twinges involuntarily, a vein twitching at his forehead, prominently gleaming in the street lights. Oh, he’s thinking now, and not pleased. “I’m happy to act a fool for you, Sherlock. But don’t think that I am one.”

Sherlock swallows.

“I lied to you.” He comes out with it. “After Hope died on the beach, when I spoke with Moriarty, I told him I would not back out of the Races if he allowed you to buy Gladstone from him when you won.”

John’s hand snaps away from Sherlock’s face as if burned, wringing the bloody-wet handkerchief.

“I didn’t say any of this, because I didn’t want you to know. You would’ve questioned why I’d done such a thing.”

The vein on John’s head tics. He’s angry, now. His whole body angles away from Sherlock. “Why did you do such a thing? You nearly got yourself killed a hundred times today! And, and, you forced yourself to do this? When you wanted to back out? Did you want to stop?”

“No. I was in love with you. John, I saw Moriarty at his core. He didn’t care about you or your horse. He cared about what owning Gladstone meant to you, and me, and everyone on the island. I was in love with you, and,” he wavers, “and I didn’t want you to know. Not yet.”

Sherlock had told John several times that he hadn’t lied, that he’d given the whole truth. The confession triggers a surge of honesty, guilt squeezing his conscious.

“That’s… why he changed his mind. Fuck, that’s why he changed his mind.” John’s feet track on the pavement beneath the overhang. A few steps away. A few steps back. Angry pacing.

“I am the island Freak, John. You had spent so much time with me, I thought I was confused. I wasn’t. I told him if he cut a deal with you, I would race, I wouldn’t withdraw at any point. He wanted to see my face when you were killed. He thought you weren’t important, but you are John.”

“You couldn’t have been willing to give that up, Sherlock. Christ, you didn’t have to—” John breaks off, pinching the bridge of his nose tightly, as if coming down with a migraine. Rain dripping from the overhang patters onto the leather patches on his jacket’s shoulders. He throws up his hands,
lost. Sherlock stays resolutely still. “Christ, it doesn’t even matter. It doesn’t matter.”

Grief obstructs logical thought. “You’re angry.”

“Yes. Yeah, yes, I’m angry.”

Sherlock tilts his face down again, shutting his eyes. He slumps more heavily into the wall, cringing. It occurs to him that his wrists are shaking. Stop. Distance yourself. “I could not prevent him from getting hurt.”

John’s brisk, irritated pacing halts. John’s mouth pinches, a dot of shadow on the dip over his upper lip. “Who?”

“Gladstone.”

“What’re you— of course you couldn’t, no one could have. Mary came out of nowhere.”

Sherlock grinds his teeth. “She had the sigil drawn on her flank. Same as the mare from last year, the one that ran into you, caused Gladstone to bite. Moriarty arranged to have them both drawn to goad the mares into attacking you. You were - boring him. He was tired of you and wanted my attention. It’s my fault he’s...”

Gone.

A questioning lull. John will say it soon. He’ll have to mentally prepare. I don’t mean what I said on the beach anymore. I take it back. I was wrong. You’re horrible. Not brilliant. You’re everything wrong with this damn island. You’re a freak. You ruined it, you ruined my chance, you ruined my horse.

Oh, he hasn’t said a thing, and Sherlock’s gouged with fear. His chest is flayed. His heart is tattered, torn in two.

“Sherlock Holmes, I don’t care that Gladstone is gone.”

Sherlock jerks up.

John’s foot comes between Sherlock’s. Sherlock follows his bend forwards, watching stiffly as John raises a hand. It hovers in the air between them, a stroke away. “You keep... acting as though he was the end-all-be-all. You’re the most amazing thing to ever happen to me. I’ve never met someone like you, and I’ve met a lot of people.” John hates all the people at the Stockyard. Sherlock’s mouth quirks belatedly up at the corner.

Hesitantly, John sets his fist on Sherlock’s chest. He taps it lightly on Sherlock’s sternum. This feels better than the cloth on his face, intimate where the handkerchief was brusque. John rasps, “I care. I cared about him. I didn’t want him gone, I didn’t want him hurt, hm? But I would rather have you. Every time. I - want you to know that.”

His hand splays, covering the creases in Sherlock’s shirt.

John’s eyes are downcast, not looking to Sherlock’s face. Why isn’t he looking? Panic clogs his mind. John had been so close to forgiving him, although Sherlock hardly apologized and it’s not nearly enough, and John could never be satisfied with him, not after he acted so abhorrently, not after he left John out of the plan--

“It’s always you,” John says.
His fingers draw together, clenching around the shirt material. Sherlock’s heart pounds fast, trying to burst into John’s hand. As if feeling it, John presses firmly. It causes Sherlock’s injured ribs to ache terribly but Sherlock can’t care at all.

John embraces him, shoulder bumping up into Sherlock’s chin. Rationally, Sherlock is aware that he should only move one arm as to not overexert his obliques and ribcage. Disregarding that entirely, Sherlock apprehensively curves his entirety to John, overcome. His nose fits into John’s hair, dripping wet. Familiar, dancing scents greet him: John, the island, woodsmoke, sand, salt, a dash of his own blood. Obviously it’s John; it’s always and only been John.

John, who raced for seven years, an icon of Thisby, and the capaill uisce miracle worker. An enigma of a man, soft and firm, modest and renowned. Troubled, like the seething ocean.

It’s nothing like their time together before the Races. Not John’s one-sided hug, not John’s lips on his. Sherlock returns the hold with inexact enthusiasm, frantic. He categorizes John’s hands turning to fists in his hair and coat, drawing him flush; John’s face at his throat; the way his jacket clings to him same as Sherlock. An interlude of tension and danger between devastated men. He doesn’t follow John’s train of thought, his process, how he possibly forgave Sherlock so quickly, how he ever doubted Sherlock’s wholehearted devotion.

John tightens his hold, clutching the back of Sherlock’s coat and jostling Sherlock’s injuries the wrong way. Sherlock hisses.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." John sounds muffled, not releasing. Perhaps John needed this reassurance just the same as Sherlock.


“Oh,” John relaxes in Sherlock’s arms. Finally, he pulls away, keeping Sherlock near. Face to face, Sherlock watches John with nervous fascination. “Oh, I do. Is that-- you thought? I do. I meant it. Sherlock, I knew something was wrong. I couldn’t get what I’d said out of my head. When I came back to your house, you’d gone.”

“Why did you pick the cliffs? How did you know it was here?”

John’s thumb sweeps Sherlock’s cheekbone, swiping over cold skin and salt. John leans away to see better. The knee-jerk urge to turn away rises in Sherlock’s chest. There’s nowhere to hide from John now, not even in the shadows of the Skarmouth buildings surrounding them. Has there ever been a place to hide from John? Not even lies could keep John from him. “It was that or that Yard, and I’d come from there. Moriarty was gone as well. I know you. And him. You’re dramatic.”

This surprises a chuckle of disbelief out of Sherlock.

“Also, your landlady told me you’d been cryptic and said something about the Races. And that you’d kissed her before going. And then I saw you, and I thought I was too late.”

Sherlock thinks. “I suppose that bit was dramatic.”

John smiles. It lights him up, unfolding something tentative in Sherlock’s chest.

“You’ll - you’ll be bored, John. I can’t, I’m not the Races.” Sherlock can’t offer that. He can’t watch John find another capall and nearly die again.

“I don’t want to Races. I want you. I think I’ve always wanted you.”
Fazed, Sherlock narrows his eyes. Emotion clouds his vision, and when he blinks, it spills over his cheeks again. “I’ve - wanted you, too.”

“You’ll get tired of me.”

Does the tide tire of ebbing? Does the ocean tire of the salt? Sherlock Holmes could never tire of John Watson, not when John Watson is exactly what Sherlock Holmes has always needed. A conductor of light to call him brilliant, the man with the broken watch and scarred shoulder and bad leg. Someone who never truly came back out of the suicide caves the same as when he ventured into them.

John Watson seemed so devastatingly ordinary when Sherlock first saw him. An expert with dangerous horses, a champion racer, but ordinary beneath that. John Watson is more than that, lethal and tender all the same.

“Never,” Sherlock says.

John laughs a little. It’s enough. He leans their foreheads together, Sherlock stooping uncomfortably low to steady himself. Warmth tips over from John’s skin, seeping into Sherlock’s skull. Perhaps, like this, John could read his thoughts. I love you.

Sherlock closes his eyes, listening to the drizzle on the stones around them, and suppressing shudders.

After a moment, John tips his face and presses a kiss to Sherlock’s chin where he can reach.

When he speaks, he’s quiet, hushing against Sherlock’s neck. “Do you really think I’ll get into trouble for Moriarty?”

“I won’t breathe a word.”

“You don’t mind?”

Why would he? He very nearly murdered John. Sherlock mumbles into John’s hair, “Not at all. It’s impressive.” And, if he’s honest, a bit arousing. The thought makes his face flush hot.

“He was your admirer. I was under the impression he was infatuated with you.”

“With my mind, maybe. Not me. That’s you, John.”

“Yeah,” John shrugs off his jacket, then peels Sherlock’s coat off with some difficulty, ridding them of clinging cold. Sherlock cringes when he has to bend his elbow to free his arm from its sleeve. Grimy mud and bits of Thisby grass from his struggle with Moriarty cling to the soaked woolen fibers. Mrs Hudson will have a hell of a time washing that. “That is me.”

He’s got a reserved smile on his face, as if that’s the only way they could ever end up - in love.

-/-

Truthfully, no one had minded Moriarty’s disappearance. It was almost expected. Even those on his payroll transferred wonderfully to the new manager of the Stockyard, William Murray (“I don’t even have to change the name, the ‘M Stockyard’ my arse!”), who purchased the assets upon the
discovery that Moriarty had left no plan for his death. Apparently, he never thought he’d die, or he wanted utter chaos following said death.

Sherlock had bet it was a healthy case of both.

Upon hearing Murray’s name, Klemp the stablehand blanched. “Bill? Bill? Oh, no, no, John, you can’t leave us lot with him!”

John had put his hands up, helpless. Out of my reach. “Sorry, mate. He bought it out from the island. I’ve hit retirement age.”

“You’re forty-one!”

Following, Sherlock took a trip to the officer’s station and easily pointed out the man who’d stolen the evidence to Wayne Redding’s poisoning. He was arrested on conspiracy and theft charges. The Haverford father sneered when Sherlock twisted his key into the thief’s cell. They and Hank, the butcher's son, might make an interesting trio of sorts.

John was impressed, which Sherlock quite liked.

Moriarty had brought Sherlock’s invitation to the cliffs with him, resolving the nasty situation should it have been discovered in his office.

His office, which Lestrade did not order a search of.

Lestrade stands at Sherlock’s side outside the Yard’s white fencing, arms crossed. He fixes John with a meaningful look. “Mainland bloke like that, most of them pack up when they’re done here. Go back.”

None of the three of them say anything about the fact that Moriarty was very much not done, if the many island ponies and capaill on the property have anything to do with it. One such bay mare comes up quietly behind where Lestrade leans on the fencing and spooks the inspector.

“Not all of them,” John says, squinting at the inspector in the sun.

“Suppose not. Got his will?”

“Didn’t leave one.”

“Right,” Lestrade says. He waves a hand, signalling to his lot of officers meandering uselessly around the stables. “Gone back to the mainland.” He turns back to Sherlock for a hope of confirmation. There’s a knowing lilt in his brow. “Right?”

Sherlock imagines pieces of Moriarty at the bottom of the ocean trenches. He shrugs. “Something like that.”

John laughs inappropriately.

Lestrade doesn’t mention it at all.

However, he does cough awkwardly and walk off when Sherlock smiles snidely and says, “Say hello to Molly from us.”
"Let me take it off."

"No-- no! Let it alone, Sherlock!"

Sherlock scratches the corner of the compression bandage at his ribs. "It itches." It itches worse than the scratchy armchair he's sitting in. Not even the fire in the hearth beside him provides any comfort. And John, his torturer, certainly doesn't.

"It doesn't, you're imagining it."

"How would you know? You can't feel it."

John stands idly back, watching Sherlock's turmoil. How could John leave him like this? "If you leave it be until Saturday, you'll be free of physical leave. You'll be able to march into the station and bother Anderson without Lestrade yelling at you." John bends to Sherlock's height. "How's that sound?"

Sherlock frowns, petulant. In a minute, he jerks his shirt back down and mutters, "Fine."

John slumps into the armchair across from Sherlock's. After a moment, he gets up, circles around to the back of it, and shoves it closer to Sherlock's.

He sits back down, their socked feet touching. Huffs a breath of laughter through his nose. "How quickly the adoration fades."

"It's only faded until you let me take it off."

John winks. "I've got 'till Saturday, then."

-/-

The wooden floorboards groan under Sherlock’s weight.

Going by the frequency of creaks as Sherlock strides into the foyer, no one has lived in this house for well over forty years. Dust tickles his nose, floating in streams of light pouring in through the dirty windows, and the faded wallpaper is peeling into curls by the corners of the floor.

"Why would you buy such an old house?" Sherlock asks, surveying the high ceiling and noting the stains from a roof leak dripping somewhere above onto the upper floor.

John steps in behind him, hauling two crates filled with odds and ends. Old books and journals from the Ford parked outside, packed with remnants of two individual lives converging into one. The blue notebook sits at the top as John drops the crates onto the floor beside the rusted set of fireplace pokers in the sitting room. He taps the set in curiosity and it gives a loud squeal, toppling over loudly.

John sighs. His biceps bulge beautifully beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his red flannel. "I thought I’d be old by the time I used it, too. We would have been a matching pair, the house and I."

"You would have been too old to do repairs." Sherlock touches the wall. Some paint chips. Disinterested, he brushes it off his fingers.
“Well, clearly I’m young and fit enough to do it now, so it’s not a worry any longer.”

“You’re old.”

“You don’t have to stay,” John teases him.

“Stop trying to be rid of me, you’re doing terribly thus far.”

“Please. I’ve found my matching pair and it isn’t the house.” John steps to Sherlock, laying a warm touch on Sherlock’s waist and grinning broadly.

“Unhand me.”

John’s house has sat unused and unvisited for decades. Compact and faded blue, it blends in to the light-washed Thisby sky around it. There is a small stable out back, just off the unbeaten road. It’s quiet, out here, but at night Skarmouth’s glow is visible against the dark.

Sherlock investigates the empty house, John shadowing him like a nervous estate agent. John hangs Gladstone’s broken bridle over the mantle, unwashed and smelling of saltwater.

The stairs to the upper level are dingy but solid, and the wallpaper in the hall here is peeling like the rest of the house. John makes a few comments about replacing it, about fixing the railing on the stairwell, about painting.

“It’ll be a bit of a project,” John says, watching Sherlock run a finger through the dust on a windowsill. “But worth it in the end.”

It is not difficult to imagine the house as someplace nice. Sherlock gestures to an empty wall. “Some bookshelves here,” he says. Where to keep his microscope and books? They could all go downstairs, but John would complain about him cluttering the kitchen.

John smiles at him, content to be allowed into Sherlock’s thoughts. John’s hands fidget by his thigh for a moment, and then he reaches to take Sherlock’s.

“Was afraid you wouldn’t like it.”

Sherlock leans closer to John. Being anywhere with John would be enough. “It has a certain charm.”

His whole being shifts when they retreat downstairs and step onto a sagging porch, surveying the backyard.

Sherlock’s mouth pops open. He spends a minute visually raking over the overgrown acre of open land and tired, chipped fencing, unable to comprehend the little dilapidated white boxes sticking out from all the weeds. “John,” he says, “you have hives.”

John settles his hands on his hips, peering out from the porch. “Empty ones. I think. You’re not allergic?”

Sherlock is already running the numbers on the sizes of the hives, wondering how many colonies should coexist without issue. They’ll have to get honey bees, of course, and by the models he can see in the yard, which must be as old as the house, there are removable combs inside. How much wood has been rotted away by Thisby’s salted wind? How much work has to be done to repair these hives?
“Sherlock?”

“No. No, no, not allergic.”

“You alright?”

“I love bees,” he blurts out.

John’s eyebrows raise into his wind-blown fringe. He grins. “Bees,” he repeats, slowly, like Sherlock can be coaxed into divulging more heartfelt secrets.

The heat of a flush rises over Sherlock’s cheekbones, more insistent than the cold air. He turns away. “I’ve always loved them. Honey bees especially.”

John blows out a breath, now surveying the land like Sherlock, squinting against the bright day and the cold. Nods, as if he’s decided something. “We’ll get some honey bees in the spring.”

-/

Animals do not follow man-made rules. The capaill uisce are no different, turning over the breakers in fast-formed herds that dissolve as quickly as the waves.

The Races are over, but they remain a human tradition. A tradition that is short, a mere modern blip in the view of the Scorpio Sea. As such, the water horses churn out of the water, dredged up like bloated corpses at night.

Some islanders say that the horses are all ghosts, after the Races. Seeking the land and finding no trouble, no hopeless men to drag away.

They are mere flashes of themselves far off in the water.

A shoulder here. An ear there. Half of a foreleg; part of a nose. As if the waves rob their physical forms, recasting them in sea foam.

Out on the cliffs with Redbeard, sans one broken tooth, Sherlock sees no black or blonde head.

-/

John slips into bed beside him, twisting Sherlock in his arms to settle in for the night. He smells like drywall dust and carpet fibers, like outside wind and sand.

Sherlock doesn’t bother to pretend he’s annoyed at having been woken up. Doesn’t even act begrudgingly when John tips his head up for a kiss.

-/-
"How did it go?"

John slaps his reeking notebook down onto the coffee table. "Treating man-eating monsters with indigestion goes about as well as you'd expect."

Sherlock hums, sticking his nose back in his novel.

-/-

“Oh, but I’ve brought a housewarming gift!”

“Mrs Hudson, no. ”

Mrs Hudson holds Musgrave in her arms, tucked under the cat’s forelegs. “But she misses you.”

Sherlock stares pointedly at the cat with no tail, holding the door frame to prevent his former landlady from walking inside. The cat seems to scowl in return. Sherlock’s frown deepens. “No, she does not. She is incapable of courtesy and of missing people.”

“Is that Mrs Hudson?” John calls from another room.

Sherlock glares at her in the doorway.

Mrs Hudson waves him away, too accustomed to his moods. “Oh, pop off. I’ll come in and get her settled. Hello, John!”

“Hi, Mrs H.”

Everyone in this house is out to get him. Including the cat.

-/-

“I was thinking of inviting Molly and Lestrade to dinner.”

John glances over from his armchair, setting his newspaper down. He squints at Sherlock, then the chemistry equipment on the dining table, then the general clutter of their very private house. He goes back to his reading, a knowing smile on his lips.

“No, you weren’t.”

Sherlock snorts.

-/-
“Sherlock,” John says one afternoon, stepping through the front door. He pauses on the sitting room rug, the wonderfully-adorable wrinkle present between his drawn brows. Shopping in one hand, scrutinizing a white envelope in the other. “I’ve got a letter for you from Skarmouth.”

“I get no shortage of letters. If it’s another case from town, it’s probably boring.”

“Says, ‘M.H.’ on the return postage…?”

Sherlock snaps up from his lounging on the sofa. It’s been a long day of repairs, which means John has been ripping up the moldy carpet upstairs and Sherlock has been furiously working on a murder for Lestrade. Sherlock’s dressing gown slips over one shoulder in his haste as he rises to snatch the letter from John’s hand. “Mycroft.”

“Your - your brother?”

“Anderson must have done something right.” Sherlock tears open the envelope.

_Congratulations are in order for your win, Sherlock._

_Do stop that pesky notary from poking his unseemly nose into my business. I am in a nasty undercover situation in South Africa, where, if discovered, the British government will deny any and all knowledge of who I am. The radicals follow a regular paper route and his notices are becoming quite bothersome._

_Not to worry. Though, evidently, that has not stopped you._

_I had hoped stopping the cheques would encourage you to find a paying job, or even demand that inspector pay for your detective services._

_Now I understand that you needed to take the most dramatic of routes and race, in lieu. And then found yourself a rich companion._

_Bid that John Watson a fond greeting for me._

_I will be in touch._

- _M.H._

Sherlock purses his lips.

Anger nearly crests over him. Whatever did he enter the Races for, if Mycroft’s disappearance was self-administered all along?

But John steps up behind him, hands locking over Sherlock’s hips, chin tapping Sherlock’s arm to peer at the letter, and Sherlock reminds himself that Mycroft wasn’t ever his only goal. His nerves flutter smooth.

Mrs Hudson’s house will remain on the east end of Thisby, with its motherly occupant intact and
decorating ornate cups, saucers, and teapots, for years to come. She’ll keep trying to make Sherlock
take Musgrave, and he’ll keep refusing, which means she’ll keep visiting. Her screen doors will
continue getting blown in.

Thisby and the world will continue to spin, unencumbered by the relentless boredom of a man built
for evil intention. The tides will change, the chalk will erode, and Thisby will drop into a lull. But the
Races will come again in eleven months, and again, and again, and with them, the wind will carry
the backhanded intrigue of murder and foiled mystery.

The tide will bring the water horses and the men of the island will try to capture them. The terns
will nest in the sheer rocks, and Redbeard will ride moorland trails instead of a beach. The ocean will
hush shhhhh, shhhhh, but Sherlock will never believe her.

And, as it does now, John’s breath will warm the skin of Sherlock’s arm, his own tucked around
Sherlock's middle. John's the most important bit of it all. Once thought unremarkable proven
inexplicably extraordinary.

John reads over his shoulder. “What an arse.”

Sherlock smiles.

It was well worth it.

/-/

Sometimes, in the endless waves that batter the offshore sandbars, the November currents dredge up
forgotten things.

It was a fragment of a capall bone one summer when Sherlock was nine, a man’s femur the same
year, bleached by the sun - old crab carcasses picked apart by gulls after Thisby storms. It was dried
kelp pasted to the rocks in droves when he was thirteen, and an aimless John Watson by a tourist
ferry later. Pieces of rider's breeches, a barnacle-crusted leather glove missing three fingers. Broken
oyster halves. Remnants of discarded human charms, harnesses and single rusted bells, whose
wearers have long since been reclaimed by the water.

At the end of December, amidst the billows of icy flurries and salted snow, the Scorpio Sea pulls
ashore a black head framed by long white hair, snout leering low to snuff at the shells on the
shoreline by his hooves.

The ocean steals many things.

But sometimes it gives them back.

Chapter End Notes

All I can say is... wow.
Over THREE YEARS! since I began this giant fic! It has been such a ride! The thing
that kept me going was your support and comments -- plus, I had to prove to myself that
I can finish huge projects like this. Thank you so so much for reading, and if you've been following the story for years, thank you especially. :) While writing this, I reread the book several times. Several scenes involved in this fic were inspired from the book, but after the initial set up, the fic sort of breaks away. After all, Sherlock Holmes is Sherlock Holmes, which means murder follows.

Maybe one day I will write more in this universe, as I have some ideas for little sequels. I think the boys have been left in the perfect spot. Thank you so much! :) I hope you enjoyed my deeply overblown, purple prose for almost 200k words, because magic/fantasy is my one true love and I will be writing more of that.

I've done the math and it'll take approximately 23 hours to read this whole fic, HA. (as per the original novel, WHICH YOU SHOULD READ, if only to find fun similarities and differences, the racers don't wear helmets in the actual Races - but if you ride a horse, please don't crack yr egg)

If you're on tumblr and liked this, consider reblogging my post about this fic!
https://fourthvvall.tumblr.com/post/185256123834/show-chapter-archive

End Notes

A Scorpio Races AU! I think I've loved this book since the beginning of time. Unbeta'ed, but def let me know if you'd like to help me out with that! Let me know what you think, and follow me on tumblr for my general woes - fourthvvall.tumblr.com

(the title is a lyric from the song Misty Mountains!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!